



DELUCCAS

AFTER *Dark*

Savagery meets sweet seduction in this limited edition collection of Savage Bloodline holiday-inspired short stories.

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SAVAGE
Bloodline

L. Loren

Melverna McFarlane

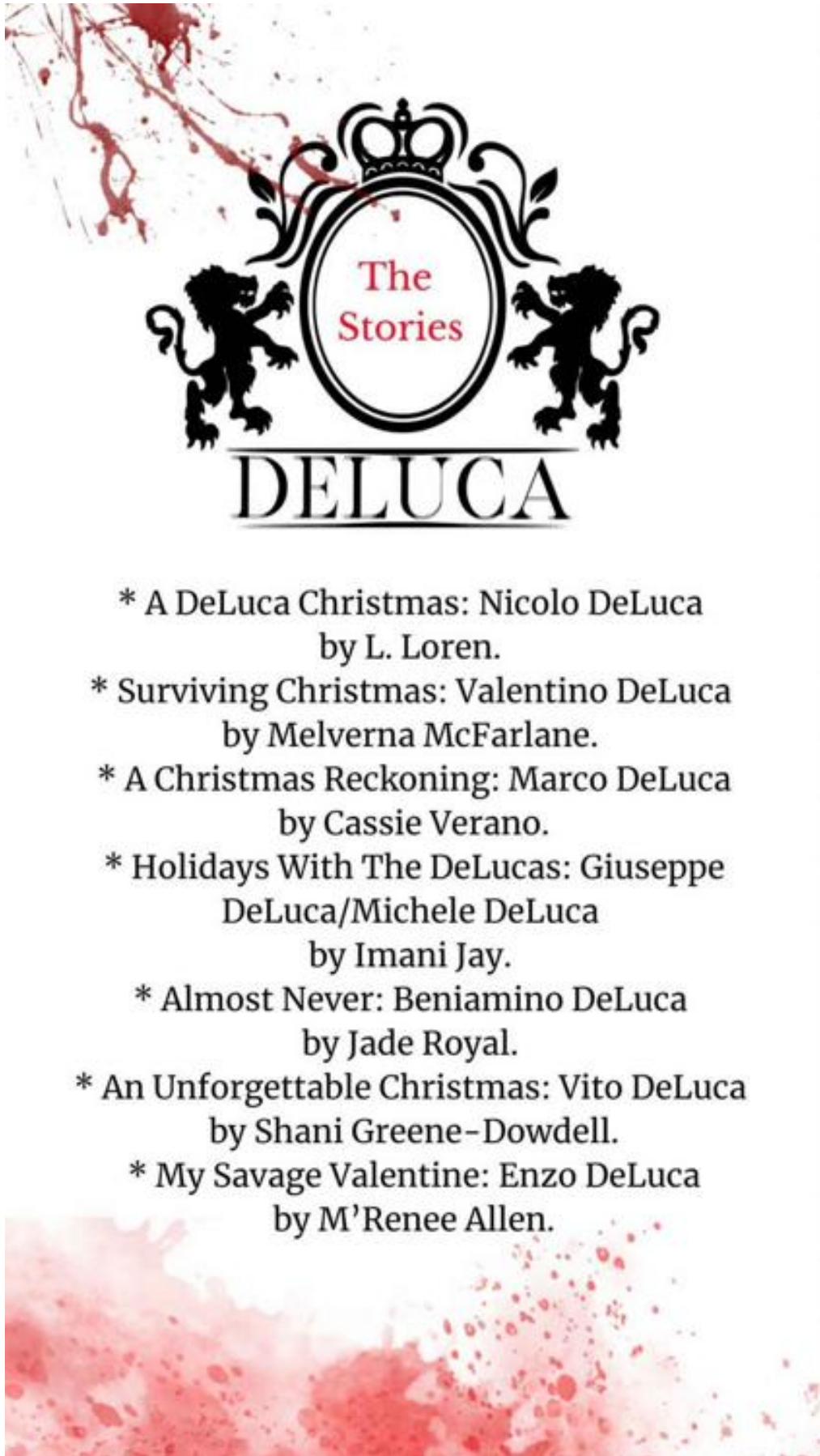
Cassie Verano

Imani Jay

Jade Royal

Shani Greene-Dowdell

M'Renee Allen



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by L. Loren.

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**ABOUT A DELUCA CHRISTMAS:
THE REVENGE OF JOHNNY LIP
BY L. LOREN**



ABOUT A DELUCA CHRISTMAS



Nicolo DeLuca has made the worst enemy of his life. He should beware of the danger lurking in the shadows. Johnny Lip is plotting his revenge, and he wants nothing more than to destroy his rival.

When the opportunity presents itself, in the form of Nicolo's cousin-in-law, Sheree, Johnny can not resist. Little does he know, he is being watched. Nicolo is no fool. With a wife and new baby to protect, he has been vigilant in tracking down his arch enemy, so he can eliminate the threat.

Only time will tell who will come out on top in this exciting Christmas thriller.



NICOLO

“Fuck, Brazen! What the fuck has gotten into you?”

My wife was trying to kill me. I don't know what I had done to deserve this, but damn. She was determined to get the job done.

“Move that glorious ass for me, baby. That's it right there. Oh, do that again. Hold on, let me get this on video.”

I grabbed my phone and tapped the app to record. I needed to be able to relive this shit. She was riding my cock with her back to me, providing a beautiful view of her slit taking me in and out of her. The way she rolled her hips in a circle was driving me crazy.

She moved slowly at first, as she lifted to the tip of my dick. Before it could pop out, she sucked me back in with her Kegels and then sat back down until her ass was bouncing on my balls.

“Fuck, baby. You should see this. You're so fucking sexy.”

I couldn't decide which part of that combo was more pleasurable. Maybe it was the culmination of all the moves together with the visual. Whatever it was, the woman was fucking me within an inch of my life. I never wanted it to end. She was amazing. Had been since the first time I saw her.

“Oh my God, Nico! I'm about to come all over this big dick! Hoo-hoo-hooooo!!!”

There it was again, her signature call of the wild that happened whenever she came. I knew one thing, if she woke the baby, I was going to be pissed.

“Quiet, Brazen. Don't disturb our son. You know he's a light sleeper and I'm not stopping. I've been waiting all day for this pussy.”

“Sorry, babe. It's just so good.”

My baby kept fucking me as her juices gushed from her pretty pussy. I couldn't get enough of her. She must have thought her name was Meg the Stallion because she started moving her hips like she was spelling her name. *That did it!* I grabbed her hips and slammed into her from underneath. Just as my balls were in a vice, my phone chimed with an incoming video call from none other than my cousin, Enzo.

"Fuck! Babe, I have to take this call."

"No, the fuck you don't! Nicolo, I swear..."

"He's the Don, babe. Either I take his call, or your man will be without balls. You choose."

"Fine, but I'm not stopping."

"I never asked you to. Just keep it down. Pronto."

The image of my cousin came on screen just as I remembered the camera on my phone was pointing at my wife's ass, instead of my face. Before I could flip it, Enzo got a shocking view of Brazen's juicy pussy bobbing on my cock.

"What the fuck, Nicolo? Didn't mean to interrupt."

"What is it cousin? I mean, how can I be of assistance, Don Enzo?"

Enzo chuckled at my misstep. He knew I was still getting used to greeting him as the Don. We had grown up together and it wasn't easy to make the transition. Thankfully, he wasn't an evil Don.

"Since I can see how busy you are, I'll make it quick. We had a line on your boy, but he gave our man the slip. We think he is hiding in Naples. I'll leave it up to you how to handle it. Make your decision and let me know. Whatever you need, I have your back."

My hands shook with rage and my cock deflated at the mention of that asshole. Simone was looking at me with concern because I never lost my erection when she was in the vicinity. She knew something was wrong.

Enzo ended the call, leaving me to brood about the asshole who I wanted dead. The man was a menace and needed to be

eliminated before he could cause anymore turmoil in the lives of my family. Word around the underground was he was trying to make moves against me and Simone. Now that we had little Nicolo, there was no way I was taking any chances. I was stuck in my thoughts, when I heard Simone call out to me.

“Nico, what’s wrong? You never lose your hard-on for me. What did Enzo say?”

“I’m sorry, baby. I’ve got some work to take care of.”

“Right now? I wasn’t finished, babe.”

The way she looked at me usually made me go rock hard, but all I could think about was that asshole. I loved my wife and child more than anything on this earth. As their protector I needed to eliminate the threat to them. If that meant forgoing getting my nut, then so be it. I would make it up to my wife later.

“Yes, right now. I’m sorry, Simone. I have to take care of this.”

Pushing up from the bed I cursed myself for leaving. The disappointment on her face almost broke me, until I remembered what happened the last time, I didn’t tie up loose ends. My wife and I almost died at the hands of a maniac. That would not happen this time.

“Nicolo, don’t you walk out this room without talking to me. Stop walking, turn the fuck around and talk to me. What is wrong?”

“I need to keep you and the baby safe, Simone. That is more important than anything, right now.”

“Keep us safe from who?”

“Fucking Johnny Lip! That’s who.”

“Shh! Don’t wake the baby.”



SIMONE

Too late. When Nicolo screamed the man's name who we needed protection from, I froze. Just like I thought, my husband's namesake started screaming from the nursery. He was awake and hungry. I jumped up from the bed, threw on my robe and headed to my child to see if he was alright.

Now, I had heard the name Johnny Lip before, but was never given any details. All I knew was Nicolo wanted him gone, as in his name being stricken from the book of life. He wanted the man erased from reality, as if he never existed. I didn't know what this Johnny Lip dude did, but it had to be bad if he was now posing a threat to our family.

One thing for sure, he would be a fool to come after my child. I may be new to this parent thing but trust me, my Mama Bear instincts kicked in as soon as I heard him cry in the delivery room. Hell, I almost told Nicolo to off the doctor for slapping Jr's butt.

"It's okay, little one. Mommy's here. Are you hungry?"

I sat in the custom rocking chair that Nicolo had made specifically for his son. I held Jr close, as he latched onto my breast. He immediately calmed down and began squeezing his little hands together as he ate. I rubbed his curls as I rocked him back and forth. My son loved it when I sang to him, so I began singing one of his favorites.

He had very specific tastes in music. When he was feeding, he liked Anita Baker. When he was tired and cranky, only Michael Jackson would do. Janet Jackson was his go-to when he was in a playful mood. Nicolo blamed it on me, saying I had the same listening tastes when I was pregnant. He was right, I did play all those artists for Jr when he was still baking.

However, Nicolo forgets he was the one who played Lil Kim, Meg the Stallion, some Biggie, and Tupac too. Jr only

liked to listen to those when his father was around. I think he felt the switch in energy when Nico was in the room. It didn't matter to me, as long as my child was happy.

As I sat there nursing my three-month-old, his father appeared in the doorway. Nicolo loved to watch me feed his son. He was a great father, pitching in to change diapers and play with his child. The one thing he hated was feeding Jr. When I asked why, he gave the best answer ever.

“Babe, I have no problem getting up and taking care of my son. However, it brings me so much pleasure to watch you feed him. I don't know what it is about you nursing him that warms my heart, but it does. I could watch you with him for hours.”

After that, I never asked him to feed the baby again. But you can bet, every time I had to get up at an ungodly hour to nurse the baby, Nicolo was there lurching in the doorway. Sometimes he would come and sit at my feet and lay his head on my lap. I had to admit I loved it when he did that. It made me feel cherished.

By the time I got to the chorus of Sweet Love, Jr's favorite Anita Baker song, my baby had sucked down his fill and was whining to be burped. Once he burped and his diaper was changed, I placed him back in his crib for another nap. He was a good baby. He only fussed when he was hungry or needed changing. Otherwise, he was cooing and laughing.

“You're so good with him, Simone. I couldn't have asked for a better mother for my son.”

Nicolo walked over and kissed me on the forehead before heading down the hall to his office. I began to get a little worried about him. Nicolo wasn't the most talkative man, but he usually spent more time with me after the baby was down. This Johnny Lip thing had him distracted.

“Hey, baby, is there anything I can do to help with this thing you're dealing with?”

“No, Simone. I just need to think for a minute. I'll let you know if I need you.”

He called to me over his shoulder but kept walking away from me. I knew he needed to take care of the situation himself, but it drove me bonkers not to be able to help. Knowing how to pick my battles, I would let it go for now. However, if I noticed him getting consumed with this mess, I would step in and insist he allow me to assist. I didn't need my man all stressed out.

“By the way, Sheree is coming by in a little while. She wants to see the baby. I'm going to make lunch. Will you eat with us? There's something we want to discuss with you.”

“Can I let you know? I need to work on this thing, Simone.”

“Babe, you have to eat.”

“Fine, but you know how Sheree can get. I don't have all day for her twenty-one questions.”

“I will keep her under control. I promise.”

As if she heard me calling her name, I heard the doorbell ring. I knew it couldn't be anyone other than Sheree. I could hear her mouth before I saw her. The housekeeper had let her in, and she was making her way to my room.

“Moni, where are you? I know you're not still in bed!”

“Could you be any louder? You know the baby is asleep. Be quiet before you wake him.”

“My bad! Dang, you don't have to be so hostile.”

“Sheree, you know it is crazy trying to get that boy back to sleep when his nap is interrupted. Lower your voice or I will do it for you.”

She looked at me with shock on her face and then laughed. Shaking her head, she whispered at me.

“You sure got that mom thing down. I thought I was looking at Auntie Michelle for a minute.”

“Jr is finally on a schedule, and I won't have his sleep pattern interrupted.”

“Eww, you were much more fun before your husband knocked you up. Can we go back to Moni instead of Mommy?”

“Shut the fuck up! You’ll see when you have a little one.”

“No, the hell I won’t! I am going to be one of those childless adults. I don’t need the headache.”

“Bitch, my son isn’t a headache.”

“I didn’t say he was. I said I didn’t need one. You know I love little Nicolo, but 2 AM feedings are not my jam.”

She snapped her fingers and started strutting her ass down the hall toward the kitchen. It was my favorite part of the new house Nicolo purchased for us, when he learned I was pregnant. Once she realized there was no food simmering on the stove, she stopped, turned to me with an attitude, and looked at me expectantly.

“Am I crazy, or did you say you were making lunch today? I mean, here I am ready to get my eat on, and there you stand in your bath robe and no food cooking. I just can’t.”

“Listen... I had to feed my babies first. You come in a close third when it comes to satisfying my family’s hunger.”

“Moni, you only have one baby, last I counted.”

“You know good and well I’m talking about Nico. I had to *feed* my man this morning.”

Sheree tuned her face up like she smelled something foul.

“TMI, bitch. Imma need your nasty ass to go take a shower before you touch my food. Just gross.”

“You’re the one who showed up an hour early. Don’t be mad at me for getting some, this fine morning.”

“That’s just nasty. You and Nicolo are parents, now. You can’t be exposing my little cousin to that mess. He’s gonna have a complex.”

“Girl, he’s three months old. Besides he was in his crib, not in the bed with us. You really watch too much ratchet

television. Ain't nobody in here screwing with the baby in the bed next to them."

"Whatever. Go get in the shower while I see what's in the fridge."

"Fine, just don't eat my grapes, and if you see Nicolo, don't bother him with a ton of questions. He's not in the mood."

I rushed to the master en suite and jumped into the shower. After dressing, I checked on the baby, before grabbing his monitor, and making my way back to the kitchen where I made quick work of making a beautiful lunch. On the menu was pan seared garlic butter lamb chops, with some mashed sweet potatoes and roasted Brussel sprouts, that I threw in the air fryer. It was one of Nicolo's favorite meals.

I had gotten used to making big meals for lunch on the weekends. We usually had family and friends over because they loved to dote on the baby, but today there was only Sheree. She had talked me into making a proposition to Nicolo for her new business idea.

As I was placing the food on the table, the doorbell chimed. This brought Nicolo from his office to answer the door. I heard him greeting someone but couldn't hear who. I didn't have to wait long to find out who it was. Nicolo entered the dining room with his friend following close behind.

"Babe, you remember Mario. He'll be joining us for lunch."

I turned to greet my husband's friend, but before I could welcome him, Sheree jumped up like her ass was on fire. The chair she was sitting in toppled over, and her face looked all flushed. What in the world was her problem?

My cousin's eyes went wide, and she licked her lips as she stared at Mario. That's when it kicked in. Sheree was in heat and poor Mario was her target. I laughed at the expression on her face, as Mario bent down to pick up her chair. The odd thing was, Sheree was silent. In my entire life, I had never known a time when she was not flapping her gums.

“Girl, close your mouth before a fly goes in there.”

I took the opportunity to push her bottom jaw up to reach her top one. Sheree just stood there, frozen. Looking over at Mario, he seemed to be just as affected by my cousin. *Well, well, well.*



NICOLO

Something was wrong with Simone's cousin. The woman never shut up, but when Mario entered the room, she went mute. Mario was no better. He stared at Sheree like they were at the Renaissance Tour while Bey was performing Energy. It was so quiet in there you could hear a pin drop. The man was totally mesmerized.

I had never really looked at Simone's cousin before. She was always around, but there was no reason for me to take notice of her. The way Mario was eating her up made me curious. I really took a look at her and found her to be pleasing to the eye. She was no Brazen, but there was only one of my baby. The only resemblance I saw between the cousins was they both had very high cheek bones and they both carried a little weight in the middle. Attractive features, as far as I was concerned.

"Sheree, I would like to introduce you to my good friend, Mario. Mario, this is Simone's cousin, Sheree."

I had to nudge Mario to wake him from his stupor. What the hell? My friend was never this speechless, especially not over a woman. I needed him to have his head in the game if we were going to work on this Johnny Lip crisis. The last thing I needed was for him to catch feelings for a woman before he left on his mission to find that thorn in my side. He didn't need the distraction.

"Apologies, Sheree. I didn't mean to stare. It's just that you are a very beautiful woman. I could not help myself. It is very nice to meet you."

Mario reached out and took the hand that Sheree offered. The slick bastard leaned over and kissed the back of her hand, instead of shaking it. That was one of my moves he picked up over the years. He knew only to use it if he wanted the woman to be interested in him. I cleared my throat and ushered them to the dining room to sit. This lunch meeting was starting off

all wrong. I never expected Mario to catch feelings for my cousin-in-law.

“Let’s sit down for lunch. My baby has made a feast, and it smells delicious.”

As we sat for the meal Simone prepared, it appeared the ice had been broken between Sheree and Mario. He pulled out her chair for her and then sat next to her. I assumed he would be taking the chair across the table from her because that is where the place setting was. Simone waved me off before I could protest. She quickly rearranged the table so Mario would have dishes and silverware at his chosen seat.

I watched as the two of them started chatting in low whispers. I strained to hear what they were saying, but my hearing failed me. What the hell could they possibly be talking about? When I made eye contact with my wife, she smiled and silently communicated that she was happy. Simone liked Mario and apparently, she approved of him getting to know her cousin.

Just as I was getting agitated, a loud cry rang out from the baby monitor. Jr had a set of lungs on him to be such a little boy. Immediately, Simone stood and went to check on our son.

“Listen, Nicolo, while Simone is feeding Jr, I wanted to talk to you about a business proposition.”

Sheree gave me this shit eating grin that she always shot at me when she wanted something, but knew I would say no. She even tried to give me those damn puppy dog eyes that could get her anything she wanted from my wife. Well, I wasn’t my wife. Whatever she wanted couldn’t be good. I had made up my mind to say no before she got the next word out of her mouth.

“Oh, yeah? Why does it have to be when Simone is out of the room? You know I don’t keep secrets from my wife.”

“I already ran it by her. She is on board but told me I would have to ask you before she would say yes. Something about being a unified front. Whatever that means.”

I grinned at her comment. My wife was a push over when it came to her favorite cousin's whims. However, she was loyal as fuck to me and would never give her consent without discussing things with me. I had a feeling she insisted that Sheree ask me herself, instead of Simone bringing it to me. My wife knew I would never say no to her, so this must be something interesting.

"It's something I hope you have one day when you get married, Sheree. My wife and I don't make big decisions without discussing it with each other first. Now, what is it you want, and how much is it going to cost me?"

"Dang! Why do you have to say it like that?"

I shook my head at Sheree. The woman was always coming up with these so-called life-changing schemes. They usually were half thought out plans, with no facts or figures to back them up. But she always needed financial support from us.

"Sheree, really?"

"Okay, I know I have had some failed adventures in the past, but this one is well thought out, and I have a whole business plan this time. Simone helped me with the proposal, and I really think it could be something I could do for a career. I promise this time I'm serious."

"Fine. I believe you. Now give me the details."

"Okay, I'll just put it on the table. I want to be a travel blogger. The plan is to tour Italy and show people what it's like for a Plus Size black woman traveling alone."

"That sounds interesting. What do you need from me?"

"I need you to be my sugar daddy!"

"Are you crazy? I'm married to your cousin. Does Simone know about this? Simone, get in here!"

"Calm down, Nicolo. I didn't mean it like that. You need to get a sense of humor. It sounds worse than it is. Maybe it was a poor choice of words."

"What happened?"

Simone came rushing into the room, buttoning up the top of her dress, giving me a flash of her swollen breast. She must have been feeding our son. I hate I missed his feeding time. It was one of the most enjoyable times of the day. I couldn't resist watching her feed my child. There was something primal about it.

“Are you aware that your cousin wants me to be her sugar daddy?”

“Say what, now?”

My wife glared at Sheree like she wanted to choke the life out of her. Sheree held up her hands in submission and shook her head. She was no fool. Simone had a temper, especially when it came to women being flirty with me.

“Moni, calm down. It's not like that. I was trying to be funny, and he didn't get my humor.”

“Yea, Simone, Nicolo took it out of context. She was just playing.”

I was shocked to hear Mario speak up. He finally got his head out of his ass. But why was he defending a stranger over me?

“Care to re-word what you said?” Simone chimed.

She was still looking at her cousin with death in her eyes. I was positive Sheree spoke out of turn, but I wasn't taking any chances. I loved my wife and there would be hell to pay if I didn't tell her immediately. It wasn't like I was afraid of her, per say. I just like living in a peaceful home.

“Cool. Nicolo, I was just trying to ask if you would be willing to fund my little Italian adventure. You know, dig in those pockets. Simone, we talked about this.”

“We discussed you making a business proposition, not you propositioning my man. There's a difference. Next time do better.”

With that issue solved, I dug into my meal with fervor. The lamb chops were tender and cooked perfectly. The flavor was incredible. I closed my eyes savoring my meal. *Damn!* My

wife was an amazing cook. The fact that she enjoyed making large meals on the weekend for me and our family endeared me to her even more. She was a busy wife and mother and still managed to put in a fifty-hour work week at the law office. With all that on her plate, she insisted on giving our chef the weekends off so she could cook for us. There was no other woman on earth that could hold a candle to my Brazen.

In my mind I was doing a little happy dance because the food was so good. When I opened my eyes, there were three pairs of eyes on me. What the hell?

“Umm, Honey, are you okay? Does the food taste alright?”

“It’s delicious, babe. Thank you for cooking.”

I smiled at my wife who was now looking at our guests with a twinkle in her eye. What was going on?

“Why are you being weird, Simone?”

“I’m not the one who’s being weird, Nicolo. You’re the one over there chair dancing and moaning like you’re starring in a porno.”

“Yeah, Nicolo,” Mario chimed in. “I’ve never seen you act like this before. What’s up with you, man?”

“Can’t a man enjoy his meal without getting stared at? Damn!”

Everyone at the table burst into a fit of laughter. What the fuck? They were getting on my damn nerve. So, what if I enjoyed the food my wife prepared for me. It was one of my favorite dishes and she cooked it perfectly. They could all kiss my ass.

“So, Nicolo, are you gonna help a sista out?”

“I’m not sure yet, Sheree. Is that your proposal next to your plate?”

She nodded, suddenly no longer able to speak. I held my hand out to her across the table.

“Let me take a look at the numbers and I’ll get back with you later this week. For now, let’s just enjoy this fabulous

meal my wife slaved over.”



SHEREE

“Ciao, bitches! It’s your girl Sheree, the Lux Bag Lady coming to you all the way from the beautiful Island of Capri. That’s in the Bay of Naples for all my geography challenged followers out there. And we ain’t talking Florida. I’m in Italy baby!

“I have gotten so many questions about how I was able to fund my trips to Europe. Everybody all up in my business. Well, if you must know, my best friend slash, cousin is married to a very rich man, which makes her a very rich bitch. Only she’s not stingy with hers. My girl, Simone, and her hubby Nicolo, have no problem sharing their good fortune with their favorite cousin. Shout out to Mr. and Mrs. DeLuca! Hey...”

I sat in my makeshift studio, watching the footage I filmed earlier in the day. I was editing the recording to make sure it gave the correct vibe for my brand. Fun and flirty with just a bit of spice. Nicolo and Simone were the best and I wanted to acknowledge them in my post. Afterall, if it wasn’t for their generosity, I wouldn’t be sitting in this fancy house eating fruits and cheeses that I had never even heard of before.

It was quite generous of Nicolo to not only pay for my expenses, but to put me on payroll, as well. He even allowed me to use his family home, so I could be comfortable. I was beginning to see that my cousin-in-law was a very giving man. I also knew he only agreed to fund my venture because he loved Simone so much. He would do anything to please her. I needed that kind of love in my life. For me to find it, I needed to get out and explore the world.

After finishing my work, I decided to venture out into the city. I was a bit hungry, and I was not about to cook. I mean, who wants to cook when they can go out to eat authentic Italian cuisine? It would be sacrilegious. Plus, the housekeeper was off today so I was on my own for meals. There was this place not too far away that I heard about and wanted to try. I

didn't even care about the food. What I wanted to experience was the ambiance.

According to the article I read, this place had a garden area full of lemon trees. They had tables set up patio style, where patrons dined under said trees with twinkling lights. That was some real shit everyone needed to experience at least once in their lives.

The hostess greeted me in Italian, but soon recognized there was a break in communication. Though I loved the country, I had yet to master the language. I knew a couple few words but couldn't string together a sentence to save my life. We did the universal dance of I don't know what you're saying. It made me laugh because there was no way for us to know what the other was saying. That was until I heard the muffled voice of a man behind me.

"She's asking your seating preference," he squeaked out from a clinched jaw.

I turned to find a somewhat handsome man with a scar on the side of his face. He was speaking to the hostess in Italian, but never took his eyes from me. I didn't know if I should be afraid or flattered. When he asked to join me for dinner, the choice was made for me. You only live once, right?

"I asked the hostess to seat you in the garden. You must experience dining under the lemon trees."

"Thank you. That's what I was trying to tell her," I chuckled.

The way the man looked at me was almost predatory. My Spidey senses started tingling, but I decided to ignore them. The man was just being nice. Besides, he just translated for me. It wasn't like I was dating him or something.

"May I join you for dinner?"

Okay, so maybe we would be dating. At least sharing a meal. What harm could it do? I was lonely out here by myself. I needed human interaction. Since I didn't speak the language, it was difficult to meet people. Giving him my cute smile, I agreed to his request.

“Well, I guess I kind of owe you for the translation, so I guess that would be alright.”

He gave me a wry smile. It looked as if it hurt his face to use those twenty-six muscles. He was better off frowning. It may take more muscles, but Lord knows it would be less painful. He allowed me to walk into the garden ahead of him. The breath went right out of my lungs as I took in the scene before me. The garden was so picturesque. It was like I walked into a movie. This couldn't be my life.

“Are you alright?” the strange man asked.

“Yes. It's just so beautiful. I never thought I would see something like this in real life.”

“Oh, yeah? Well, you picked the right time to come to this restaurant. It will be closing for the off season at the end of this month and won't re-open until spring.”

“Really?”

“You'll find that to be true with most of the restaurants on the island. Only a few that cater to locals, stay open during the winter.”

“That's great to know. I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name.”

“My apologies. Giorgio Gallo at your service, signora. And your name, please?”

“I'm Sheree Raymond.”

“It's nice to know you, Sheree. I hear your American accent. Where do you live?”

“I'm from North Carolina. What about you?”

“Oh, I'm from Roma, but I have a place here in Capri.”

The more he talked, the more I noticed he was moving his mouth a little funny. I didn't want to be rude, so I tried not to stare, but it was hard not to. He spoke with an accent. His limited jaw mobility made it a bit difficult to understand him. My curiosity got the better of me.

“Giorgio, don’t take this the wrong way, but I noticed a little umm...”

“You’re talking about my jaw? It’s okay. I am not offended. I was in an accident a few months back and broke my jaw as a result. I was delayed in getting to the hospital, so there was some permanent damage to my nerves that cause my speech impediment.”

The look that appeared in his eyes down right scared me. He wasn’t angry, he was furious! Then as quickly as it came, it disappeared. He gave me a little smile that allowed me to relax a bit. However, I wasn’t naïve enough to think he didn’t have some demons lingering in the back of his head.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to pry.”

The subject quickly changed to both of our relief. We chatted about my job and why I was in Italy. He pretended to be fascinated with my adventures, but I could see his eyes gloss over. It didn’t really matter to me if he was disinterested in my newfound career. Hell, when he started telling me about being an accountant and rambling on about figures, I had to place my hand under my chin to keep it from hitting the table. *Boring!*

By the end of our dinner, I wasn’t sure that I wanted to see this guy again. I needed more excitement from my men. This guy was giving me stiff and stuffy. That was until he pulled me in his arms and kissed me goodbye. Woo!

Baby, when I say instant waterfall in the panties, I mean it. Who would have thought this guy with the dangerous eyes, and boring personality could make a girl swoon? To my surprise I forked over my number when he asked, without hesitation. I was such a sucker for a good kisser.



JOHNNY LIP

That fat bitch had some nerve asking about my jaw. I wanted to smash her stupid face in, so we would have matching injuries. It took everything in me not to reveal my true identity. This Sheree chick was just a means to an end. I needed to get close to her, so I could infiltrate Nicolo's family.

The plan was to get invited to his house and avoid meeting him. Once there, I would wait until nobody was looking and then grab his baby. I'm sure the kid would cry, and if he didn't, I'd make him. When Nicolo's wife came to check on the child, I would kidnap her, as well. Then I would make that bastard, Nicolo DeLuca, pay.

Until then, I had to play nice with his cousin-in-law. She was a silly twit, posting videos on social media and calling it a career. Where I was from, people like her were targets. We ate them for dinner. She was way too trusting, which is something I counted on. American women were always easy to manipulate. I had done a great job of that to get to where I was.

After that asshole, Nicolo, destroyed my life and his cousin, Enzo excommunicated me, I was homeless and had no money. I spent weeks on the street until a rich American lady took pity on me. Marilyn saw my broken jaw and couldn't resist making me her pet project. At first, I thought she was doing it out of pity, but soon found there was a price to pay for her kindness.

The woman made me her gigolo. I was tasked to service her anytime the urge hit her, which was quite often. It was a daunting task, as she was a whale of a woman. My cock would not respond, so I had to resort to taking those blue pills. Much to my agony, Marilyn never tired and neither did those damn pills. Most days I escaped with a raw dick and an empty soul.

Eventually, I killed her out of humiliation. Adding a bit of hemlock in her tea solved all my problems. Since she had no

living relatives and she was a foreigner, it was easy to pay people to forge papers stating that I was her sole heir. Her entire fortune was handed over to me without question.

Since then, I have been traveling and plotting my revenge. When I saw Sheree online going on and on about her travel journey, I knew my luck was changing for the better. Finally, a way to infiltrate the DeLuca family had presented itself. I immediately hit the road heading to Capri.

It would require me to use my charm to get what I wanted. I could pretend I liked being with her for a little while. This time around, however, I was going to take charge. The first thing I needed to do was convince this woman that I was interested. I could see the apprehension in her eyes at dinner. Things changed a bit after I kissed her.

Damn it all to hell. I should never have kissed that woman. She would expect things to escalate. There was only one way to rectify this, and I would be happy to do it. I needed Sheree to have a certain idea about me. I needed to be the charming, but a boring guy, not the sexed up Alpha male. She needed to maintain enough attraction to me to keep going out with me, but not enough that she would want sex. I was going to fix this. Picking up my phone I dialed her number.

“Hello.”

“Ciao, Sheree. This is Giorgio.”

“Wow, we just left each other, less than an hour ago. Do you miss me already?”

“No, nothing like that. I mean, I am not stalking you or anything. Sorry, I am saying everything wrong. I just wanted to apologize for coming on so strong earlier. I don’t want you to think I am a creeper. I just couldn’t help myself. But I want you to know from now on, I will be the perfect gentleman.”

“Oh, really? Well, I guess I accept your apology. I don’t go around kissing strange men often.”

“That’s good to know. Listen I won’t keep you long. I just wanted to say sorry, and to see if you would allow me to prove myself to you.”

“Oh? And just how would you do that?”

“Let me take you out on a proper date. I will pick you up and everything. What do you say?”

There was an eerie silence on the other end of the phone. I could hear her breathing and could almost see her thinking. She was still apprehensive about me. *Come on... take the bait.*

“Sheree? I promise to be on my best behavior.”

“Well, I guess it would be fine. Where would we go?”

“You leave it all up to me. I will text you the date and time once I finalize everything.”

“Fine.”

“Okay, I will chat with you soon. Arrivederci!”

There was no question where I would take her. The island was famous for this sea cave excursion called Blue Grotto, that all the tourists liked. It was only accessible by small boats, like a canoe. If you like nature, it was the ideal outing. I hated the outdoors but could endure doing touristy things, if it would get me one step closer to my goal.

I needed to make Sheree fall in love with me as quickly as possible. This little date would give her the impression that I liked her a lot. It was adventurous, as well as romantic. This wasn't a place you took someone you just met. It was a thing for couples or families. I would have her wrapped around my little finger in no time.

Making my way back to my hotel, I decided to sit out by the pool, so I could think and plot my revenge. I couldn't wait until I felt the warm blood of Nicolo's wife and son sticking to my hands. What a glorious sight it would be. The best part would be the look on the asshole's face, when he realized it was me who took his life from him, just like he did me.

Just the thought of giving that fool what he deserved made my dick hard. It had been a while since I was really satisfied. The woman who had forced me was not my type at all. She was so horny that I never had the opportunity to cheat on her.

It was time I sought some female companionship to take the edge off.

I glanced around the pool area looking for an easy mark. There was a skinny brunette woman in a plain one-piece swimsuit across the way. She had a decent pair of tits that caused a bit of a stirring in my shorts. That is until a rugrat about two years old ran up to her squawking about a snack. Ugggh! I hated kids. They made my skin crawl.

Further down there was a portly woman who looked like she needed a good fucking, but she repulsed me. Someone had told her it was a good idea to wear a bikini and it showed every roll she had. She needed to cover up.

Then I saw the perfect victim. Her long blonde hair hung just past her shoulders. Her bikini bottom was painted on her slim hips and those delectable breasts were barely covered. They were no doubt surgically enhanced, and I didn't give one damn. I sat there imagining how her lips would feel wrapped around my cock and that was all the confirmation I needed. She would do nicely.

Raising my hand, I hailed the waiter to get his attention. I ordered expensive champagne to be delivered to the vixen. Then I sat back and waited for the prey to come my way. She did not disappoint. You could always tell the easy ones. They had this lonely look in their eyes that just craved attention. Less than thirty seconds after the drink was delivered to her, she collected her things and came over to where I was pretending to ignore her.

“Hi! My name is Shelly. Thanks for the drink.”

I looked up and frowned at her. These silly girls needed to feel important. If I acted like I wasn't that into her, she would be putty in my hands. I bet I could get anal on the first try. This made my excitement ramp up.

“Shelly, was it? You're blocking my light. Either sit down or go away. Your choice.”

“I'm confused. The waiter said you sent me this drink.”

She held up the glass of champagne for me to see. I barely glanced up before huffing like she was annoying me.

“He made a mistake. That was meant for someone else.”

“Oh.”

The sadness in her voice told me I had her right where I wanted her. Her insecurities clicked in as she looked around the pool for her competition. Her choices were between the two ladies I mentioned earlier and a very hairy man. She quirked her eyes at me and cleared her throat.

“Surely, I can be better company than whoever this was meant for. Let me prove it to you.”

“Just how would you prove that to me, Shelly?”

“Where’s your room? I can show you better than I can tell you.”

And just like that, I had secured a warm body to relieve my stress. Shelly followed me to my suite, and before I could close the door and lock it, she was pulling at the string that held up my swim trunks. She dropped to her knees and wrapped her cherry red painted lips around my cock. Fucking hell, I knew how to pick them.

Shelly was the blow-up doll who didn’t need assembly. She commenced to suck me dry. The woman was truly trying to prove to me why I should have chosen her. Too bad she didn’t realize, she was just a pawn, to get what I wanted. The blow job was very good, but I needed to have control in the situation.

Grabbing her long tresses in one hand, I forcefully tilted her head back and began fucking her mouth. It was one thing for a woman to get on her knees for me, but the only way I could get off was if I was rough. The moan that escaped Shelly’s mouth told me she was enjoying herself, but I didn’t care. This wasn’t about her.

I yanked her off my manhood and pushed her back onto the carpet. The shocked look on her face was soon replaced with a smile. This chick liked rough play in the bedroom. Well, she was about to be in heaven.

“Get naked, Shelly. Do it quickly.”

While she peeled off her swimsuit, I made my way to the other side of the bed and retrieved a few condoms from the drawer. One thing about me, I never fucked without protection. Especially not some bitch that I just met at the pool who was about to spread her legs for the price of a glass of bubbly.

My cock was aching for relief causing me to move quickly. I sheathed myself and moved to the bed where Shelly was spread open for me. I pushed her legs up against her chest so she wouldn't be able to move and plunged into her without warning.

“Oh, God!” she yelled.

“Shut up and take this dick, Shelly. You love it, don't you?”

“Yes, baby. Please don't stop.”

“I'm not your baby.”

Fuck! I didn't mean for that to slip out. I hated it when women called me baby. It was way to affectionate a name for someone, I had only known ten minutes, to call me. Wiping those thoughts from my mind, I concentrated on fucking.

I plunged in and out of Shelly's pussy like a maniac. She was tight and wet and felt so damn good. Hell, Shelly may just get to be my fuck buddy while I date Sheree. There was no way I could sleep with Sheree, and my dick was not going to wait to fuck. I just hope Shelly didn't catch any feelings. She was the type to fall in love after her first orgasm, which was happening right fucking now.

“Oh, my god, baby! I'm coming!”

I growled my disappointment in her using that name again but continued to fuck her into the mattress. Her thin body writhed underneath mine, as I pounded into her. The cries that came from her mouth turned me on. It sounded like I was hurting her, but she was wet as fuck and begging for more. The whole thing spoke to my inner demon.

“Get on your hands and knees.”

I growled at her as I pulled out. I was careful to make sure the condom was intact before I plunged back into her dripping pussy from behind.

“Fuck me with that big dick!”

Shelly needed to shut the fuck up. I didn't like it when women got loud during sex. I roughly grabbed her hips and began fucking the shit out of her. I showed no mercy as she screamed and thrashed her head about. Her wild hair was flying everywhere. That annoyed me, so I gathered it and wrapped it tightly around my fist.

Using her hair as leverage, I thrust more forcefully, until the girl collapsed on the bed. I would have felt bad for her, but it wasn't in me to be compassionate. She asked for this and I was going to have my fill. I fucked Shelly until my dick was raw. We must have gone for hours. I had that much pent-up frustration.

When I was done using her body, I stood, located her swimsuit, and tossed it at her. She was still panting and looked exhausted, but I didn't care. I was done with her and didn't want her catching feelings. She needed to go right now!

“Thanks for the fuck. Your pussy isn't half bad.”

“Wait? What? You want me to leave?”

“Take the hint, Shelly. Don't embarrass yourself.”

“You're an asshole!”

“That's what they tell me. Have a good life.”

I waited for her to leave before locking the door behind her. I made my way to the bathroom to remove the condom and jumped into the shower. I needed to wash the smell of Shelly's cheap perfume from my body. The scent was starting to make me sick. When I finished dressing, I called down to the front desk and requested housekeeping to come and change the sheets. There was no way I could sleep in that bed after all the nasty shit I did to that woman.

Besides, I had a week's worth of dates to plan for me and Sheree. This was the part I couldn't mess up. It was imperative that she fall head over heels for me. I would date her for a month or two before proposing. Marilyn had the perfect engagement ring in her jewelry collection. Good thing I had held onto several of her pieces for a rainy day.



SHEREE

That Giorgio was one thoughtful man. He knew I was in the country doing my travel blog so he decided to take me on a tour of the island so I could get the best places to visit on film. I had to admit, I was a little apprehensive about going in a sea cave via boat with a man I barely knew.

What if he wanted to drown me? It was dark in caves, wasn't it? But then I looked it up online and found there were underwater lights that allowed for great visibility. Also, the tours were guided, so we would not be alone. It was the end of tourist season, so we practically had the place to ourselves.

Now, I am not the girl who enjoys caves and shit, but it was actually nice. The place was majestic and made you think. Of course, I got some footage while there, but I didn't want to be too rude by being on my phone the whole time. The good thing about Giorgio was he didn't seem to mind. His only stipulation was that he didn't want to appear in any of my pictures or videos.

That little request had me shooting him the side eye. It also made me defy him and take his picture on the sly. Usually, when a man refuses to be photographed, it's because he has a wife and family somewhere. I decided to let it go for now, but you know your girl did not forget. I was moving carefully with this dude. These men are slick as snot, and he was not getting over on me. I knew right then that he would not be getting in my panties.

“Sheree, did you enjoy the caves? It was beautiful, no?”

“I had the best time today, Giorgio. Thank you for bringing me. I got some great footage for my blog, but even better, I had fun with you.”

He smiled at me, and I wanted to swoon. I had to remind myself about the red flags he was throwing up. I was about to tell him that I didn't think we should see each other anymore, but he surprised me by inviting me out again.

“I’m glad you enjoyed yourself. That means you would be willing to come out with me later this week.”

I hesitated, but before I could say anything he placed his finger against my lips. Usually, a man would draw back a knob, but I was in a different country and didn’t want to end up as Big Bertha’s bitch, in a foreign prison.

“Giorgio...”

“Don’t say no, Sheree. I don’t think I can handle that. You have captivated me. I think about you whenever we are apart. I need to be near you. Please say that you will spend the rest of your time here with me.”

Well, damn. I still wasn’t sure of his sincerity, but it sounded good. Plus, he was a decent tour guide. It was safer for me to travel around the island escorted by a native who spoke the language. If nothing else, I may get a few free meals out of him. What harm could it do?

“I won’t promise I will spend the entire time with you, but I will agree to go out with you one more time.”

“That’s a start. I’ll take it.”



One additional date turned into three. Before I knew it, Giorgio and I were spending time together every day. He was funny and charming. If he did indeed have a wife, she was very stupid. The man spent a shit ton of time with me. There was no way my man could be away from me that long without me being suspicious.

I would have all kinds of questions. Where are you? What are you doing? Who are you with? Oh, he would be sick of me. There would be no way he could get away with having another family. He had to be single. No way any woman would put up with his long absences. Since I couldn’t be sure that he was being honest, I decided to ask the one person in the world who always told me the truth.

“Hello.”

“Moni, what’s good, cousin?”

“Sheree! Girl, when are you coming home? I miss you.”

I laughed at her excitement. One thing I could always count on was my cousin showing me love. There was never a doubt in my mind that she loved me fiercely.

“Wait a minute. Is this the same woman who bitched and complained that I was getting on her last nerve, before I left the US?”

“Girl, you know that’s how we show love in our family.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Well, to answer your question, I won’t be coming back for a hot minute. I met a man.”

You could have heard a pin drop. In fact, I think I could hear her blinking. It made me smile because I knew she was in shock. I never had an issue finding men, it was wanting them to stay around that was my problem. So, Simone knew if I was telling her about a man, it was more than a fling.

“Cuz, I am so happy for you. Spill all the tea. What’s his name? What does he look like? Oh, and more importantly, how big is that thang?”

“His name is Giorgio Gallo, and he looks like a hot nerd. Of course, he’s Italian and as far as his thang, I wouldn’t know.”

“Bitch, what? How long have you been seeing him?”

“Since the beginning of October. He’s been showing me around the island and helping me with my posts.”

“Wait, why haven’t you put him in your videos? It’s not like you not to show your man off.”

I took a deep breath and let it out. This was the reason I needed to talk to Moni. She always asked the right questions.

“He doesn’t like to be seen on social media. Is that weird?”

“Hell, yes that’s weird. I’m just going to use the words you gave me when I first met Nicolo... RED FLAG!”

“Okay, you got me. Deep down, I knew it was odd, but I let it slide. He hasn’t asked for money. In fact, he pays for everything. I think he is pretty well off in that area. He has been nothing but a gentleman. We have fun together and I don’t have to worry about him pressuring me for sex.”

“Are you sure he likes women? I mean, you’ve been together for over a month, and he hasn’t even tried to get in those yams?”

“Yams, really? You are so stupid! But for real, I am pretty sure he likes women. It does make me wonder if he has someone else, though.”

“What, like you think he’s got a whole wife somewhere?”

“I don’t know, Moni. That’s why I called you. What do you think?”

“One thing I know, and two for sure, always trust your instincts. If you are getting a vibe that something is wrong, go with that.”

“But, how can I be sure?”

“Hmm... let me think. Well, first and foremost, send me a picture of this guy. I need to know what he looks like in case he turns out to be a serial killer.”

“Girl don’t say that. You’re gonna have me looking at that man sideways.”

“Listen, don’t worry about a thing. I will get Nicolo on this. You know he doesn’t play when it comes to keeping his family safe. He will look into it, and I’ll get back to you. Just be sure you send me that picture.”

“I’m sending it now. Thanks, Moni. Tell Nicolo I said thanks too. Kiss Nicolo Jr. for me. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Alright, cuz. Take care of yourself and keep an eye on that man. Make sure you have some mace or a knife on you, at all times.”

“I will. Love you, Moni.”

“Love you, more.”



MARIO

When Nicolo contacted me to ask that I drop everything and head over to Capri, I knew something was severely wrong. He never asked me to neglect my duties as the head of security for DeLuca Law Offices, LLC. When he showed me the picture of the man who was dating his wife's cousin, I understood the assignment.

Johnny Fucking Lip! The bastard was pretending to be someone named Giorgio. A cold chill ran down my spine at the thought of what he was planning to do to the unsuspecting woman. Sheree was a nice lady. I knew I had to get her away from that asshole. She deserved better, and I was all too happy to show her how much better it could get.

"Nicolo, we need to act quickly on this. There's no telling what that maniac has planned."

"I agree, Mario. The last thing I want to do is tell my wife her favorite cousin has been injured or killed. She would never recover. I need you on the next flight out. The family's private jet will be waiting for you at the airstrip within the hour."

It was a good thing he was taking this situation as seriously as I was. There is nothing more dangerous than a maniac who has a violent streak and an axe to grind. Everyone knew he hated Nicolo, even before he broke the fucker's jaw. We had been looking for him for the longest time, but now it seemed he was ready to make his move.

"What do you want me to do when I get there? Should I take him out?"

"No, don't eliminate him unless it is absolutely necessary. I want to see where he is going with his trickery. Just watch him from a distance, but not too far. I need you to be ready at the drop of a dime to take him out if he hurts Sheree."

"What about Sheree? Can I reveal myself to her?"

"I think it wise not to let her know you're there. No need to reveal yourself to her unless you have to. I don't want to

frighten her. Stay in the shadows and do your best to protect her. I will book a nice suite for you at the same hotel where Johnny Lip is staying. Since he has never met you, he won't be suspicious if he runs into you."

"Sounds like a plan. I'll head home now to pack and then head over to the airstrip."

"Be careful, Mario. I want you and Sheree back in one piece. That fucker is unhinged. There's no telling what he might do if he feels threatened. Just try not to kill him. I want to be present when his soul leaves his body."

"No worries. I will be like a ghost. He won't even know I am there unless he fucks up. Don't worry, Nicolo. I will not let any harm come to Sheree."

After speaking with Nicolo, I got myself together and boarded the plane. The ride was surprisingly quick, and I left the plane energized. It may have been my anticipation of seeing Sheree again. She and I shared a spark when we first met, that never went away. I could see myself staking claim to that woman.

There was something special about her that made me want to pursue her like I never have with anyone before. I swore to the heavens, and anyone else who was listening, that I would send Johnny Lip to hell if he touched one hair on her lovely head. It was going to take everything in me to see him taking her out on dates. If he tried to sleep with her, I would rip him limb from limb.

By the time I arrived at the hotel I was exhausted. The choice not to sleep on the flight was proving to be a bad one. I couldn't help myself. I was consumed with the idea of being close to Sheree again. I had an unexplainable need to protect her. It was different from the usual feeling I had when I was on a job. My protectees were my main focus, always.

However, with Sheree, it felt more personal. That was something I mulled over on the way to Italy. I determined that I liked the woman and wanted her for myself. I would have to wait to bring that to fruition. There was no way for me to keep

my head on straight if I was involved with her. I would simply have to play the long game.

After checking into my room, I snagged an espresso and a snack from the hotel gift shop. Then it was all about waiting. Once in my room, I hacked into the hotel computer system to locate Johnny Lip's room. He was one floor below me.

This assignment wasn't going to be easy, but it would be gratifying. He wasn't a very likeable guy. Every man in the DeLuca family hated him. Though I wasn't a member of the family, I still had a personal vendetta against Johnny Lip. He had wronged my friend and was now threatening, not only Nicolo's family, but my future woman.



Over the next couple of weeks, I spent my days and nights consumed with all things Sheree. It was all I could do to keep myself from strolling up to Nicolo's house and ringing the doorbell. I wanted to see her smile up at me like she had done the first day we met. She was so beautiful when she let her guard down.

Instead of making myself known, I lurked in the shadows watching over her. On the surface, it seemed she and Johnny Lip were getting serious. They spent time together daily. However, to the trained eye, this relationship was nothing but a ruse. After every date he took Sheree on, Johnny Lip made his way back to the hotel and spent time in the bar picking up random women.

Every night there was a different girl that went back to his room with him. According to the surveillance videos, from the cameras I had an associate install while he was away, they were not playing monopoly.

It made me sick to my stomach to see him playing with Sheree like that. However, I was there to do a job, so I held my tongue. That was until I saw the asshole get down on his knee and propose to my girl. Shockingly, she said yes. That was the last fucking straw. I called Nicolo to insist we move now!

“Mario, this isn’t our normal check in time. Is everything alright?”

“No, everything is not fucking alright! Do you have any idea what that bastard just did? You couldn’t possibly, so I will tell you. That slack jawed mother fucker had the nerve to propose marriage to Sheree. Can you fucking believe that?”

I needed to calm the fuck down. I sounded like an unhinged person. I just couldn’t help it. There was no way I would let this happen. Before Nicolo could respond, I continued my rant.

“Nicolo, I won’t allow this! She will not marry that man. I will end him first.”

“What did Sheree say?”

“What the fuck do you think? I wouldn’t be this upset if she turned him down. I am about to lose my mind here.”

My friend, the man who I was closest to on this earth, started laughing. He knew that I was crazy about Sheree without me even telling him. He also knew my threat to end Johnny Lip wasn’t idle.

“Okay, okay. Give me a second to think. Now, there’s no way she will get married without Simone’s opinion. She will call to inform my wife of her so-called good news. When she does that, I will insist on her having the wedding here. They will come to the States and then he will be at our mercy. It’s perfect.”

I wasn’t convinced at this being the perfect plan. I wasn’t going to allow that man to marry my woman.

“Are you sure about this, Nicolo? I don’t think he will return to Charlotte.”

“Sheree will not say no. She is big on family and won’t walk down the aisle without her parents and favorite cousin there. Besides, his plan has to be to get to me. There’s no way he will resist this. He thinks he has won because he has no idea that we know what he’s up to.”

“Fine, but I won’t keep her in the dark. She will end up getting hurt. Let me go to her and show her the footage of him with the other women. Then I will explain what’s really going on and convince her to play the game.”

“I’ll leave that up to you if you think she can handle it. Just make sure she doesn’t expose us. It may be our only time to get ahead of this bastard.”

“I’m on it.”



SHEREE

I couldn't believe my ears or my eyes. Did this man really just get down on one knee, in the very restaurant where we first met, and propose marriage to me? What the hell was going on? I should be happy, over the moon, but I wasn't. The first thing I thought was 'Is this fool serious?'

At first, I just stood there. I am sure I looked like a big ass deer in the headlights of a Mack truck. My heart was racing, and I had this stupidly cheesy grin on my face. I couldn't bear to break his heart, so I fixed my mouth and said the one word that I didn't want to.

"Yes."

Oh, God! What have I done? What was wrong with me? Red flags were flying out of this man's ears and here I was tying myself to him for life. LIFE! What would make this man after only a couple of months of knowing me ask me to spend the rest of my life with him?

Something wasn't adding up. Seriously, we hadn't even felt each other up yet. I had no idea how big he was. Oh, hell no! This was a terrible idea. There was no way I could marry this man without sampling the goods first. I needed to call Moni for some good old-fashioned girl talk.

"You have made me the happiest man on earth," Giorgio said, but the smile on his face didn't reach his eyes.

Quick! Say something so he doesn't try to kiss you.

"I need to call my family! They are going to be so happy! My mother is going to lose her mind. This is the day she has dreamed of since I was born."

"Can't that wait? I want to spend time with my fiancé."

"Really Giorgio? This is important. I need to call my mom."

"If you call her, she's going to want to see me. I'm not ready to meet the parents, just yet."

This was getting on my nerves. The man was flat out refusing to speak with my mom on the day he asked me to marry him. Either he thought I was an idiot, or he actually was one. No matter, I was about to put a stop to this mess.

“Giorgio don’t play me for a fool. You can tell me the truth. Do you have a wife posted up somewhere? Is that why you won’t let me take your picture or show you in my videos?”

The look on his face told me he was thinking of a lie to tell me. He wasn’t expecting me to ask that question. Well, too fucking bad. I knew a thing or two about a thing or two, and he was not getting one over on me.

“Wwww...what would make you say a thing like that?”

Oh, he was nervous. Stuttering and shit. My hand was itching to slap the mess out of him. One thing I hated was a liar.

“Because that is the signature of every man that is hiding something. I’m just trying to figure out what it is you’re not telling me. If you’re not married, then what is it?”

“I promise you, Sheree, I am not hiding anything. I am just shy about the scar along my jaw. I’m still not used to it, and I don’t want to be judged.”

So, he was playing in my face. He wasn’t going to admit to whatever it was he was hiding. I had no more time to worry about it. The truth would come to light eventually. Until then, I would bide my time. It wasn’t like I was in love with this guy.

“Whatever, Giorgio. Let’s just finish eating and then I need to go home and call my mom.”

After he dropped me off at Nicolo’s family home, I went inside and called my bestie. I needed her to pep me up before I had the draining conversation with my mother. She was going to ask a million questions. God forbid, my Auntie Michell was over there when I called. I would never be able to answer all the questions they had for me.

“Ciao, Sheree! How’s it hanging cousin?”

“Bitch, I’m fucking engaged!”

“What? I know you’re fuckin’ lying. You’ve only been seeing this guy for a month. What’s going on? I need the who, what, when, where, and how! Girl, tell me everything, and I mean now.”

My cousin Simone was just the salve I needed to heal my psyche. She was a spitfire who would tell me the truth and put me in my place. I really wished she was here in Italy with me. FaceTime™ would have to do.

“Moni, don’t be mad. It happened so quickly I didn’t have time to process it. Truthfully, I don’t even know why I said yes. He was just looking at me with those big expectant eyes, and I couldn’t say no.”

“So, you agree you’re moving too fast?”

“Yes, girl. I am getting all these warning signals from him, and I’m just not sure I should go through with this. I mean, why would he propose to me out of nowhere after knowing me such a short amount of time?”

“Well, you know you got those good Raymond genes. You’re damn near irresistible. You must have put it on that man so good he went right out and bought a ring.”

“See, now that’s the issue. We haven’t slept together.”

“Still? Oh, hell no! Something is not right here. Does he need citizenship to the US or something?”

“I’m not sure, but he’s lying to me about something. I can feel it. He just won’t cop to it.”

“Well, what are you going to tell your mom? You know she is going to act a pure tee fool. Then she’s going to start planning the wedding of the century.”

“I’m not too worried about Mama. She will ask a ton of questions and then get lost in the fantasy of wedding planning. Her and Auntie Michell are going to go hog wild with this one because they never thought I would get married.”

“Well, one thing I will tell you, don’t let him talk you into eloping. Convince him you need to get married in the church

you grew up in. You need to bring that man home so we can meet him. I know my dad, your brother and my husband are going to want a word with him, too. Don't you dare say I do until I have a chance to analyze this dude."

"I promise you that. I just hate that you're not here with me."

"You know I can't leave my baby so soon after having him. Besides you need to bring your ass home. The holidays are coming up. Do you know when you want to have this wedding?"

"We just got engaged tonight, but at dinner he was talking about making it official soon."

"Okay then. We'd better get your mom on three way and let her in on the news."

"You'd stay on the line with me while I tell her?"

"Of course, I will. No way I'm letting you face her alone."



SHEREE

It was an hour later, when I finally got off the phone explaining to my mom how I met, dated, and was now marrying a man in less than two months. At first, she thought I was insane, but with Simone's help, Mama finally came around.

After convincing my mom that I wasn't pregnant and that nobody was forcing me into the marriage, she finally showed signs of excitement. She went from 'are you sure about this' to 'have you chosen a date?'. By the time I was off the phone, I had a date, a theme, and my color scheme for the wedding, that I still wasn't sure I wanted.

I have to say my family was so supportive. Here I was springing a wedding and a man, who none of them had ever met, on them and they took it in stride. As I was jotting down some thoughts from my conversation with my family, I heard a knock on the front door. Please don't let that be Giorgio.

When I looked out of the peep hole, I got the shock of my life. *Mario!* What was he doing here? Oh, this was bad. The way I wanted this man should be illegal and he just so happened to show up on my doorstep on the night I got engaged. *Lord, is this a sign?* I'm listening. I opened the door and couldn't help the smile that came on my face.

"Mario! What are you doing here?"

"Hello, Sheree. May I come in?"

"Of course. Where are my manners? Please..."

I stood back and allowed the sexy man to enter the house. He looked delicious in his black cargo pants and matching tee. He looked like a cop. The only thing missing was a bullet proof vest with SWAT across the chest. This had to be a test. Here I was newly engaged, horny as fuck, and here comes the sexiest man I knew, looking at me like I was a snack.

"I'm sorry to just drop in on you, but I was in town and Nicolo asked me to stop in and check on you."

“Really? That’s so sweet. How long have you been here in Capri?”

He paused and I thought I saw a flicker of something in his eyes. It dissipated and then he cleared his throat. Damn, even that made me want to jump his bones. I should not be feeling like this for a man who I barely knew.

“Sheree, can we have a seat? I will tell you how long I’ve been here, but there is a long story behind it. I need you to hear the entire story, so you’ll understand what I have to show you.”

“Wait, stop being cryptic. I hate that.”

“I don’t mean to be. Sorry, can you please just sit down? I promise you’ll understand soon enough.”

I sat my happy ass down and he began spilling the most delicious tea I have ever tasted. If it hadn’t been about me, I would have been kee-keeing and laughing my ass off. However, since it was the sad story of my love life, it hit differently. I was angry instead of being amused.

“That motherfucker! I knew he was lying his ass off. Thank God I never slept with him. I am so going to fuck him up! Nobody tries to play Sheree Raymond and gets away with it.”

I reached for my phone, but Mario came over and took it from my hand. He ended the call but didn’t return the phone to me.

“That’s not a good idea, Sheree. I know you’re angry, but I need you to keep your wits about you. How do you feel about revenge?”

“Didn’t you know, revenge is my middle name? Now, what’s the plan?”

A vindictive smile graced his handsome face as he sat on the couch next to me. He handed my phone back to me and leaned in to explain what he had in mind. I couldn’t wait to see what was in store for that lying piece of shit. I knew he was too good to be true.

“So, this is what Nicolo and I have in mind. We want you to move forward with the wedding. Continue to go out with him and pretend to be the blushing bride. Nicolo has offered to host the nuptials at his home, so we need you to insist on this. Don’t take no for an answer. If you need to turn into a bride-enstein then do that.”

“Turn into a what?”

“A bride-enstein. You know, the combination of a bride and Frankenstein’s monster. It’s a thing.”

I laughed my ass off. He actually said that with his whole chest. Lawdamercy, he was such a cutie. Once I caught my breath, I replied to him.

“Do you mean a bridezilla?”

“That’s what I said. Anyway, we need you to make sure that bastard gets his ass to Nicolo’s house for the wedding. We’ll handle it from there.”

“Am I expected to marry this butthead?”

He chuckled at my outburst. Mario had the best smile.

“Don’t worry. You will never walk down the aisle to him. I would never let that happen.”

“That’s all well and good, but what do I do in the meantime? You want me to continue seeing this deranged man. I don’t feel comfortable doing that. What if he tries to hurt me?”

“That will never happen. I have been watching over you since I arrived, and I will continue to do so. If I get even the slightest sense that something is off, I will intervene. You can trust me to keep you safe.”

And somehow, I did trust him. I had only met the man once before, but I felt safer with him than anyone else I knew. There was just a protective vibe that emanated from him. Giorgio, Johnny Lip or whoever this psycho’s name was, wouldn’t get a chance to harm me. Not with Mario watching over me like an avenging angel.

The next few weeks were filled with me ripping and running all over the island getting inspiration for the wedding. I decided for the reception, we should recreate the patio from the restaurant where Giorgio and I first met. Since it would be in the middle of winter in Charlotte, we would erect one of those very expensive tents, complete with heaters.

“Giorgio, honey, I need your credit card to pay for this tent.”

“Here you are, sweetheart. What else do you have planned for today?”

“I am busy, busy, busy! Next, I have my final fitting for the wedding dress. I am video chatting with my mom, auntie, and cousin. Then I need to finalize the flowers and make sure they will be able to fly them to Charlotte in time for the ceremony.

“Later tonight, I’ll be doing another video chat with my family so they can choose the menu for the reception, and the cake flavor. Do you have a preference? If you don’t, I was going to go with limoncello cake with raspberry filling and buttercream icing.”

“That all sounds insane. I will go with whatever you choose.”

“That’s great. I may as well hold onto this card because I need to make payments as soon as the choices are made. Thanks, babe.”

Giorgio looked like he wanted to growl, but he plastered on a fake ass smile, and agreed to anything I said. He must really hate Nicolo to put up with my shenanigans. I ordered the most expensive shit for this wedding. I mean I was getting stuff I did not need. And since everything was on a rush order, he was being charged extra.

Was it wrong that I was getting so much pleasure from spending his money on a wedding I knew would never happen? I didn’t care one bit. That’s what he got for plotting to hurt my family and using me to do it.



JOHNNY LIP

Sheree was getting out of control with her spending. I was well off, but I didn't want to waste my money on a fake wedding. It was as if the bridezilla gene kicked in and suddenly the sweet girl I was used to disappeared. In her place was a greedy, money spending harpy who didn't know the meaning of the word budget.

It was ridiculous to spend thousands of dollars on lemon trees that would only be used for one day. And they couldn't be just any lemon trees. Oh no, they had to be purchased from the same farm that sold the trees to the restaurant where we met. Who the fuck cared? It was a fucking lemon!

And if I had to answer one more question about which shade of yellow, I liked the best, I was going to scratch my eyes out of my own head. For fuck's sake, aren't they all the same? What man in their right mind would willingly go through this and expect to get a happily ever after in the end?

My fantasy of choking the shit out of her was interrupted when she touched my arm. Those big brown eyes would make a normal man melt. I said normal. I wasn't that. The only thing those eyes made me want to do was commit a violent crime. I smiled as sweetly as I could and looked down at her.

"I want to charter a private jet for our flight back to the States."

This bitch has lost her ever-loving mind. There was no way I would pay for a private plane. At this point, I thought she was just wasting money. They say it happens to people who have never had privileges of the wealthy. As soon as they get a little glimpse of what is available, they go hog wild.

"Absolutely not! I've let you have your way with the wedding because it's your dream, but I draw the line with private planes. You can fly commercially, or you can take a slow boat. Your choice."

She pouted a bit but logged onto the website and booked two international flights. Don't think I missed that she chose business class instead of coach. I would let her have that. We were in the thick of the holiday season, so we were lucky to find two available seats on the same plane. Somehow, Sheree was able to finagle two pods even though they weren't right next to each other. That was fine with me.

"Sheree, hurry up. You know it takes an hour to get to Naples on the ferry. If we miss it, we'll have to reschedule our flight."

"I'm coming! Just double checking that I have everything, since I won't be coming back to this house. Can you please grab my dress? It's on the couch in the living room."

What the hell was I, the concierge? I rolled my eyes and snagged the heavy ass dress from the couch. This was going to be a bitch to travel with. There was no way Sheree would allow it to be checked. That meant I would be schlepping it throughout the airports.

I was thankful to find that we had been separated on the plane. For the next thirteen hours, I would be free from the talk about the wedding, bridal showers, vows, and anything else that she droned on about.

"Oh, Giorgio did you see we aren't sitting together? I am so upset."

"Don't worry, my love. I'll just be across the way. Have a good flight and I'll see you when we land."

I acted disappointed, but inside I was doing a happy dance. Being around her was starting to drive me insane. The separation would do me good. I could plot my revenge on Nicolo without any interruption from Sheree.

Something really changed with her since we got engaged. She became overwhelmingly annoying. We went from seeing each other every day to three times a week. Even that was a stretch for me. It must be a thing with women. Too bad for her that the wedding she meticulously planned would never happen.

Her cousins would be dead soon. I would love to see her stupid face when she realized that I was the culprit. The amount of guilt she would feel would probably cause her to kill herself. I relaxed in my pod and dreamed of the way I was going to destroy the DeLucas.

When we landed at Charlotte Douglas Airport, I could hardly contain myself. This was really happening. I would soon have my hands around the throat of Simone DeLuca and see Nicolo's head explode while he watched. Just the thought made my cock hard. This was going to be the best Christmas ever.

I needed to be careful being back in the States. No doubt the family's security would be ramped up. For this reason, I needed to send Sheree to her cousin's home alone.

"Sheree, I just checked my messages and there is some urgent business I need to take care of."

"Are you serious? We just got here. My family is expecting to meet you face to face."

"I'm sorry, sweetheart, but this can't wait. You take the driver to your family's home and when I am finished, I will meet you there."

"Alright but you have to make all of the important events. You are scheduled for your tuxedo fitting at 1PM and then the guys want to take you out for a get to know you lunch. You're supposed to meet at Simone and Nicolo's house. The rehearsal dinner is at 7PM sharp. Don't be late!"

"I will be there."

"Alright, Giorgio. I'll send you a reminder text. I even put the appointments on your calendar with all the addresses and a contact number for Nicolo. He is so excited to meet you."

"No problem. I'll reach out to him. Have fun with your family. I won't be long."

Since we were supposed to get married tomorrow, I had to make my move tonight. I needed to do a little recon before showing my face at Nicolo's home. It seems he had moved since the last time I was here, and I needed to study the layout

of his new house. This would be the last time Sheree saw her beloved Giorgio. Johnny Lip was making his appearance from this point forward.



When I arrived at Nicolo's estate later that night, things were in full swing. There were vendors everywhere setting up for the ceremony the following day. Bundles of yellow and blue flowers assaulted me as I strolled through the front door. Nobody even looked at me twice. The security around this place was lax as fuck.

Instead of looking for Sheree, I headed up the stairs to the room designated as the nursery on the blueprints. I had been to the county recorder's office and obtained a copy of the details of the house, so I could study it. There was no stone left unturned, as I infiltrated the house of DeLuca.

I slid into the baby's room. As soon as I saw the little bastard lying in the crib, my heart jumped with glee. I was going to hurt Nicolo to his soul. He would never recover from this pain.

Reaching into the crib to pick up the devil's spawn, I let a chuckle slip from my mouth. Shit! I needed to be careful. There was a baby monitor next to the crib. What if someone heard me? No matter. I was here and I had them right where I wanted them.

I shook the baby to get him to cry, but he didn't wake up. I needed this kid to make some noise so his mother would come check on him. I unwrapped him and pinched his leg to coax him into crying. That didn't work either. What was wrong with this kid?

After tearing the blanket away, I figured out the problem. What the fuck was going on? There was a baby in my hands. It looked so life-like. But this baby was a very elaborately made doll. It was a setup!

Before I could toss the doll and run, I heard a maniacal laugh behind me. Oh fuck! Nicolo and a few men, who I

didn't recognize, were surrounding me in the nursery. There was only one way out and it was behind them.

“You fucking coward. I should slit your throat right where you stand. Who goes after an innocent baby?” Nicolo growled.

There was nothing I could say. I hated this bastard more than anyone on earth, but even I couldn't justify attacking a child. I was searching the depths of my mind, trying to find a snappy comeback, when I heard a sound that I hadn't heard in over twenty years. It couldn't be, but, yet, it was. In walked my living nightmare, Fausto DeLuca. When the hell did he get out of prison?

“You slimy bastard. How dare you break into my nephew's home and try to harm his newborn child? We have ways of dealing with snakes like you.”

My legs almost gave out. Fausto DeLuca was the evilest of the DeLuca clan. His reputation for killing in the most painful way was legendary. No fucking way did I want to deal with him. I was done for.



JOHNNY LIP

N icolo's goons dragged me out of the nursery and down a back set of stairs, that wasn't listed in the blueprints. I should have known the sneaky bastard would have a hidden room in his house. All mafia families did. My mistake was thinking, because he was a lawyer, that Nicolo was less lethal.

The corridor was dark, illuminated by red lights that didn't allow you to see more than a foot in front of you. I thought about yelling for help, but then realized I was behind enemy lines. No one would be coming to my aid. If I was going to get out of this alive, I would have to kill them all.

If I recalled, there were at least five of them. All heavily armed. Nicolo was leading the way, while two men escorted me on either side. Another man walked behind me and then the monster himself, brought up the rear.

I could probably take out two, maybe three, but Nicolo and Fausto would not be so easy. I struggled to get out of the men's hold, but they were holding onto me like the heels on a fat lady's shoes.

"Stop struggling. There's no use. Your fate has been sealed."

"Let me go! I didn't do anything. Nicolo, please don't let Fausto handle me."

"You've got to be joking. We just caught you trying to hurt my six-month-old son. My Fucking SON! There's no way in hell you're getting out of here alive. Have some pride. Stop begging and take your punishment like a man."

The bastard growled in my face. His spittle peppered my cheek, making me want to gag. Pure fear crawled up my back and settled in the base of my brain as they dragged me to the steel operating table. It had built-in straps to secure my arms and legs. This room was obviously made for torture, with the low lighting and the wall of sharp instruments.

I thought perhaps I might get a reprieve when Nicolo's phone rang, and he answered it. From the sounds of it, his wife was looking for him and he needed to leave. That relief was short-lived.

"Uncle Fausto, I need to go see about my wife. She is panicking about something, and no one can reason with her except me. I'll be right back."

"Don't worry, nephew. I will take care of the trash. By the time you return, it will all be wrapped up in a pretty bow."

Fuck! Nicolo actually left me down here with this psycho killer. I really hated that asshole. I almost shit myself when Fausto leaned over me and laughed.

"It's been a long time since I had one of these sessions. Lucky for you, the Don wants this done expeditiously. Unfortunately, that means I can't torture you for days like I want to. This will be quick, but don't get too happy. It's going to be very painful."

He had the men remove my shoes, and then I saw him retrieve a lighter from his pocket. I was about to find out if the rumors about this man were true. I wish I had never met this stupid family. I was about to die in this dark basement at the hands of one of the most notorious enforcers any syndicate had ever seen.

"You never should have come here, Johnny Lip. You were always a stupid asshole. Always running your mouth and never knowing your place. I bet you wish you would have just walked away. Now you will never walk again."

With that the man took the lighter and ran the fire that sprang from it along the bottom of my feet. The heat on my right foot was searing. He just kept running it up and down my foot. The pain was so severe that I couldn't cry anymore. Continuing his pattern, I felt like I was about to pass out, when he switched to my left foot, and it caught on fire.

One of the guards stepped in and put the flames out but whatever he used felt even worse than the fire. I could literally smell my own flesh burning. It was nauseating. This was

something I never anticipated. Who knew Nicolo would be expecting me? Fausto was right, I should have just walked away.

“Don’t worry, this will be over soon. There are way too many people waiting for me to make an appearance at my welcome home party.”

He once again chuckled at the shocked look on my face. I thought those people were preparing for my fake wedding.

“Oh, you thought that party was for you? You really do think a lot of yourself. That sweet girl you were trying to take advantage of knew all about your plan. She spent all your stolen money on this little celebration just for me. Thank you for your generosity. I promise to dance with her tonight to show my appreciation.”

“Sheree? She knew?”

He didn’t answer me. He just kept messing with a container on the tray next to the table that I was strapped to. What the hell was he doing? I would soon regret asking.

“Have you ever heard of bullet ants? They are fascinating creatures. They say their bite feels like getting shot by a gun, hence the name. You’ll let me know, won’t you? Mario, remove his pants and underwear if he has any,” Fausto commanded.

Before I could protest, he shook the jar he was holding, picked up a pair of tweezers and pulled one of those wretched bugs out of the container.

“No, please! Anywhere but there.”

The words hadn’t left my lips good when I felt the most intense pain ever in life. My nuts felt like they were exploding. The bastard placed several of those angry insects on my cock and balls. They certainly earned their names. It felt like someone had an assault rifle pointed at my nether region and emptied the clip.

“Nooo! God help me! Get them off! Get them off! Please, I can’t take it.”

The monster stood over me laughing, along with the other men in the room. I was nothing but entertainment to those fuckers. At least Nicolo wasn't here to gloat. It was the one thing that kept me sane in the moment. When my body started convulsing, I wished for death. I wanted it to come fast. I just wanted the pain to go away.

My mind quickly changed when I saw what Fausto had in his hands. In one hand he had a scalpel, like a surgeon would use. In the other, there was a rib spreader. I had seen one on my favorite television show centered around doctors by that lady Shonda Rhimes.

I watched in horror as Fausto raised his hand in the air and came down to my, now bare chest, with the blade. I was able to see the blood spurting up out of my body. The pain I felt when he inserted the rib spreader was on a pain level I didn't know existed.

Each slice of his blade was felt as I realized what the man was doing. He couldn't be! Fausto wasn't notorious for nothing. When he removed his hand from my chest holding my still beating heart, I knew it was over. A few seconds later I lost consciousness. I welcomed the eternal darkness.



FAUSTO DELUCA

I watched as the light extinguished in Johnny Lips eyes. He had always been a thorn in the side of the DeLuca family. I was happy to be the one Don Enzo called to permanently remove it.

After my nephew, Nicolo, told me of Johnny Lip's deception and how he was using the young girl, Sheree, to exact his revenge, I knew I needed to make his demise as painful as possible.

When I was away, a Brazilian friend told me stories about a very painful ant, they used back home, to make people talk. I was going to have to send him a case of Cuban cigars after this. He was right on the money.

Once I was sure the bastard would never take another breath, I laughed. The men in the room joined me in my amusement. They had all heard the tall tales that circulated around the family about my methods. I am sure they would be more than happy to add to my legend when the wine started flowing later.

“Mario, bring me that box on the shelf, would you?”

“What, this Christmas box?”

“That's the one.”

I placed the warm organ, that was no longer beating, into the satin lined box and had Mario place the top on it. I walked over to the sink and cleaned the blood from my hands. One good thing about snatching a heart from a man's chest is that there is low blood splatter. There is nothing to pump the blood out of his body.

After making sure I didn't miss any blood, I dried my hands and rolled my shirtsleeves down. Once I fastened my cufflinks, I put on my jacket and snagged the box from the table where Mario placed it.

“You boys get this mess cleaned up. Do whatever it is you do to destroy the body these days. When you’re finished, come join us out back at the party. We have a lot to celebrate. Fausto is home, at last!”

When I entered the tent that had been erected in the back yard for the celebration, I immediately looked for Nicolo. He was standing near the bar talking to a few members of the family. I walked over to him, waving and nodding at the people who greeted me along the way.

“Uncle Fausto?”

Nicolo asked the question with his eyes. I smiled at him and then nodded once. He got the meaning. I extended the box I held out to him. He reached out, taking the box and giving me a curious look.

“Merry Christmas, from your Don. Open it in private.”

With that, my job was done for the night. I looked around the room and located the young lady who had been a victim of Johnny Lip’s stupidity. I moved in her direction, wanting to keep my word. I would have one dance with this girl to let her know things were fine.

“Dance with me.”

It was not a request. Sheree understood my body language. She took my proffered hand and joined me on the wooden dance floor. We swayed to the music as I informed her that the bastard was gone, and she didn’t have to worry about him again. I escorted her back to her friends and bowed my head at the ladies.

The DJ started playing this upbeat song that had my feet moving on their own. It had been so long since I danced, that I decided to stay out on the floor, and show these young people how things were done. I raised my hand and beckoned for my nephews to join me on the floor.

They all surrounded me, and we began doing a family dance that went back to the early 1900s. As the rapper sang about blowing a whistle, my nephews and I paraded around that floor having the time of our lives. Since it was my

welcome home party, I decided to act like it. I was known in the world of organized crime as a notorious killer, but to my nephews, I was the fun uncle. I wasn't about to let them down.

The boys circled around me moving clockwise as I showed them how it was done. Before long, all the men at the party had joined in. I laughed as the boys started chanting my name and egging me on. It was the most fun I had had in a long time. It was good to be home.

I made my way over to the bar and when I looked up, Mario was grinning at me. Apparently, he had left the other men to clean up duty. I soon saw why. He started chatting up the beautiful Sheree. She would be good for him. From the look of things, they were going to be together for the long haul. The boy looked like he was head over heels for that woman. She looked just as gone for him.

I was happy for Mario. That little scene made me nostalgic for my woman. The one who I refused to see for over twenty years, because I couldn't bear her seeing me locked up like an animal. Now, I wished I hadn't pushed her away.

My eyes must have been playing tricks on me. It couldn't be the drink because I hadn't even taken a sip yet. My mind must have been manifesting my greatest wish. All I wanted was to see Marguerite again.

“Welcome home, Fausto.”

Fuck, I wasn't hallucinating. She was really here. I smiled the biggest smile, as she stood there looking like a goddess.

“Marguerite, is that really you?”

“It really is. Maybe if you hadn't refused to see me over the last two decades, you would know what I looked like, now.”

“Oh, baby, I could never forget you. I see you in my dreams every night.”

She rolled her eyes like she was annoyed, but I didn't miss the smile that grew on her face. The fact that she was here, at my party, told me everything I needed to know. Marguerite

was mine and I couldn't wait to make up the last twenty years to her. Merry Christmas to me! I've been such a naughty boy.

The End

Enjoyed this story? Be sure to leave a review! You can also preorder Fausto DeLuca [My Book](#) And don't forget to download Nicolo DeLuca [My Book](#) to pick up another prequel story in this series!



USA Today Bestselling Author, L. Loren, holds a Business Management Degree from the University of Mount Olive. As a former call center supervisor, her desire to write lay dormant for years, until she found the courage to live her dream. She is currently based in North Carolina with her loving and supportive husband.

Follow her on social media:

<http://llorenwriter.com>



SURVIVING CHRISTMAS
VALENTINO DELUCA 1.5
BY MELVERNA MCFARLANE



ABOUT SURVIVING CHRISTMAS



A simple favor lands Sloane, Tácito, and Valentino in Bari, but simplicity ends at the plane ride. Thrust in a deadly dance, secrets begin to unfold, testing the strength of their love. The three must work together to survive and reestablish the bonds that drew them together.



VALENTINO

A tense air permeates my brother's household. His guards wave me into the penthouse suite and immediately lose interest in me. Their stiff posture and pinched lips speak to being on high alert.

As I traverse the halls, there are more signs that my brother's home is in crisis from the domestic staff's shifty glances to the guards' hushed voices.

"He's in the office," the housekeeper says on my approach.

I nod and turn down the hall where Sansone holds his formal meetings. The closer I get to the door, the clearer his voice becomes. He isn't yelling, but there is a barely leashed viciousness in his tone as he upbraids his men.

"If you've swept this place as thoroughly as you said, why am I still receiving these picture?"

Silence meets his question.

With a disgusted scoff, Sansone directs them to leave. I watch as five men file out. One wipes the sweat from his brow with a handkerchief while the others shuffle nervously away.

"Fratello, I know you're out there. Come in and shut the door behind you."

"Am I allowed to ask what that was about, and will I need to run interference?" I walk over to the sitting area Sansone points me to and wait for him to join me.

He gathers the papers on his desk into a folder and meets me. "I have a security breach." He hands me the file. "You probably wouldn't have noticed since you just returned from your second honeymoon, but this is the second time I've moved since your wedding."

I frown at him before opening the folder. Inside, a lot of photos stare back at me. The images capture him on the streets of Douglas, but more concerning are the pictures of him in

Giulio's mansion, another home that looks familiar, and here. They're all candid shots, and close range.

"What the fuck?"

"Yeah, tell me about it." Sansone retrieves a golf club he uses when he needs to think things through. Although he doesn't partake in the sport, he says swinging it helps relieve his mental blockage and loosens his muscles.

"There's someone fucking with me, and they're doing it at the worst time. No one seems able to find where the photos are coming from or where the fucking cameras are."

"So did you ask me here to get my security to look into things for you?"

"No, actually. But I will take you up on lending Ethan to me if you were going to offer."

"Of course, you know I won't let anyone fuck with you anymore than with Tácito or Sloane." I continue rifling through the pictures, wondering if I'll spot something that will help. "But if it isn't Ethan you wanted to ask for, why'd you call me here?"

Sansone sits at the edge of the table before me and lowers his voice. "Have you heard of Pierangelo?"

I lean back and fold my arms.

"He's part of the Bari arm of the organization."

"Sorry, I'm not familiar with him. You know I have limited contact with our distant cousins since I've stepped away from the business. The only Bari DeLuca I recognize is Enzo and Stefano. They're the only ones that can sanction my 'permanent' retirement or pull me back into the game at any time."

"Enzo would never put a hit out on you. You're too loyal, and your role as the mayor gives us a fuckton of privileges we would have to pay a fortune for."

"So you're saying I'm cheap? Maybe we should renegotiate my compensation." I grin, making Sansone fake an

attack with his golf iron. I raise my hands in mock fear and share in the laughing reprieve.

When Sansone settles down and all humor disappears from his face. “I need a favor, and it’s big.”

I throw the file of photos on the table. They fan out to touch Sansone’s hip.

“I’m listening.”

“I need you to represent me in Bari over Christmas.”

“Sansone...”

“I know! You and Sloane have a ton of festivities to oversee as Douglas’ mayor and First Lady, but I have to end this shit now.” Sansone points to the file I discarded. “Whoever this person stalking me is can get to me despite my security. Right now, I don’t believe they’re working with our enemies, but if they get wind of the situation and find them before I do...”

“Sloane’s pregnant.”

“What?”

“Yeah.”

Neither of us mention the child he has yet to meet. After receiving the mysterious text from an untraceable phone, Sansone hasn’t found the child’s mother. The last time I brought up the topic, he lashed out, angry and frustrated by the situation and his powerlessness. Even now, I’m not sure how he’ll take my news.

“Well, fuck! Congratulations Val! I’m going to be an uncle.” Sansone says with awe, completely forgetting the conversation at hand.

I release the breath I’ve been holding. “Yes, she’s going to be a mom, and I’m not willing to travel to Bari without her.”

“Why would you? She’s pregnant, not on her death bed. Unless her doctor found something?”

I pinch my lips and clench my teeth. “I have to trust Sloane’s word that the doctor hasn’t.”

“Are she and Tácito keeping secrets from you?”

“As if Tácito would keep something this big between them.” I scoff at the thought. “She refuses to let me or Tácito meet her doctor, and she won’t let us attend the appointments.”

“But you have a way around her.”

“She’s pregnant,” I grit.

“What about Ethan?”

“She’s pregnant,” I say more viciously than the last time.

“What the hell does that have to do with you staying on top of her and the baby’s health?”

“I... can’t fucking say no to her.” I hang my head, not wanting to see my brother’s response. “When I voice my very reasonable objections, she rubs her belly and I become a pussy.”

“I hate to break it to you, man. She’s always had that ability, and you’ve always been a pussy for her.”

I glare at my brother for exposing the secret only I should know.

“That’s why it took so long for the two of you to lock her down.”

“Yeah, but it’s different now. Tácito bending to her every desire isn’t new. He would let Sloane get away with murder for a smile. Not me. She had to work harder for it and was unsure about her power over me. Not anymore.”

“It was bound to happen.”

“But why now? You know the woman demanded that we promise not to force Ethan’s staff to disclose anything about her appointments or her doctor to us? And she did it with the confidence of a dictator.”

Sansone shakes his head. “Sloane is usually so level-headed. This is a big moment for the family. Why doesn’t she want you at her appointments.”

I glare at my brother, hating that he'll find out what lengths I've gone to in the past. "She says she likes her OBGYN and doesn't want to find out they've met in some freak or unfortunate accident one day."

"Still not following."

"She's gotten it into her head that I'll kill anyone whose seen her naked."

"Except for Tácito, of course." Sansone covers his mouth, but unholy amusement shines from his eyes.

"Of course."

"And I'm sure this is a product of pregnancy brain and she has nothing to worry about."

I avert my gaze and study the Douglas skyline. From this vantage, I can see the Luxe Locations headquarters.

My silence prompts Sansone to needle me some more. "But she probably has a woman doctor, so no man is looking where he shouldn't."

I clear my throat and search the office for a bar. Because Sansone hasn't lived here long enough, my search comes up empty. "I may have told her I don't care what gender her doctor is. Once they've seen heaven, they must die."

"Val!"

"You'll understand when you find your woman." I glare at my brother who is enjoying this way too much.

"You're hopeless."

I shrug as another idea comes to me. "I guess I could compromise and blind the doctor after the baby comes."

"You're never stepping foot into a doctor's office with her." Sansone doubles over and tears pour from his eyes.

"But you see why I can't leave? If Sloane gets into her head that she needs to protect me and Tácito from bad news about the pregnancy, being a continent away could spell disaster. No matter how 'safe' people like to frame it, my wife's life is in constant danger as she grows our family, and

I'm powerless to protect her. Don't ask me to leave under these circumstances."

Sansone rises and paces his office.

"What about your number two guy, Donato? He's been to Bari a couple times under Giulio and understands what it means to get called home."

"True, but he's in the hospital. Some new group thought they could take him out. Before he went down, Donato got every last one of them." Sansone spins around, snapping his fingers. "We're fucking idiots."

"Speak for yourself. *I'm* a fucking genius myself."

"No, stronzo. Just take Sloane with you. When you're not dealing with Pierangelo, treat it like another vacation."

"That could work, but I'll have to talk it over with Tácito. His surgical calendar has been pretty full these days."

The truth is, he hasn't been handling Sloane's demands well. I frown, remembering his arrival after an all-night shift; his fourth this week.

Since Sloane's refusal to let us share in her pregnancy milestones, Tácito uses work to distract himself. When Sloane remarks on it because he's hardly home, he cuts back. But that only lasts until her next doctor's appointment. He's in a cycle and I don't know how to get him out of it.

Then again, maybe a trip to Bari is what the good doctor needs.



TÁCITO

The mayoral mansion beckons me as I drive through the gates. It stands against the brightening blue sky as the last vestiges of the night slink away.

Home is a welcome sight after the long day I've had. As I guide the car toward the entrance, exhaustion drags my eye lids down. For a second, I lose control of the car and swerve, but quickly gain command of the steering. At times like these, I wish I could benefit from hearing music blasting to keep me alert, but the feeling is fleeting. My life is full regardless of my disability. With a vigorous head shake, I clear the sleep from my mind. It should last until I park the car.

Another welcoming sight greets me as I pass the front door of the house. The vision of Sloane, bathed in the light of the sconces and wrapped in a heavy fall coat, sipping from a steaming mug, reenergizes me and pushes me to meet her and get her out of the cold.

Before I utter a word, she leans up and presses her lips against mine. I open, inviting her in. Fresh spearmint from the tea in her cup tempts my tastebuds and I seek more of her flavor. The long, languorous kiss fills my heart with warmth.

“Good morning,” I say.

“Welcome home. Here.” She hands me an insulated mug.

I breathe in the aroma of my favorite Chiapas blend and take a long sip of the hot liquid.

Sloane wraps her arms around my waist, prompting me to open my eyes that I inadvertently closed. “Come inside before you drop.”

“Lead the way.” I lean on her and drain the mug.

Inside, she helps me hang my coat and I do the same for her. Then we make our way upstairs.

“Did you stay up all night?” I frown at the lingerie she's wearing, a sign that she left the warmth of our bed to welcome

me home.

“I slept.” She rolls her eyes. “Valentino insisted, putting me to bed as if I were a child.”

A weak grin graces my lips at her disgruntled tone. “So he fucked you until you couldn’t keep your eyes open.”

“He tucked me in after. It still counts.”

As we walk toward the bedroom door, I lean more of my weight on her, unable to keep standing under my own steam.

“Here, let’s get you in the bathroom. Valentino is still asleep, so don’t wake him.” She leads me to the toilet and closes the door. Then she runs the bath and returns to help me undress. “You’re in no condition for a shower. Why are you working yourself so hard?” Concern darkens her burnt-umber eyes.

I shrug, recognizing the futility in telling her. My fears stem from a secret I’ve kept from her and Valentino for the past five years. How can I tell them the nightmares from the last time I operated on her visit me almost daily?

She doesn’t know about our loss. That she’s pregnant with our second child because I had to remove the first to save her life. And I can’t ever tell her. Not even when her refusal to include me in her doctor’s visits spark my worry that something will go wrong and I’ll have to step in again.

I swallow the bitter pill every day. It’s yet another price I must pay for the decisions I made.

Once I stand naked, I head to the tub. The bubbling surface invites me to enter its steamy depths. As the water laps at my body and the underwater jets pulse against my spine, the tension in my melts into nothingness, relaxing me until I close my weary eyes.

A soothing massage to my scalp gently wakes me. I’m now seated in front of Sloane without knowing how she moved me. She has her legs wrapped around my torso and her fingers gently massage shampoo into my hair. Her breasts press against my back in another type of rubbing.

I push out a breath, and with it tension moves from my neck to pool in my groin. “I should be pampering you,” I say on a groan as the stimulation to my scalp sharpens the awakening of cock.

She removes her hands from my hair to sign. “You deserve a little spoiling, too. Just shut up and let me do my thing for a little while.” She presses her lips against my shoulder, and I send up a silent prayer that she’ll forgive me for ruining her plans.

“You only have yourself to blame for this,” I say as I pull free of her embrace and dunk my head under the water until my hair is free of suds.

When I stand and face her, her mouth opens in appreciation at the sight of my readiness before she snaps it close and frowns. “And what do you think you’re going to do with that? You could barely walk unassisted a minute ago.”

“Thank the rejuvenating powers of your touch.”

As she stands, water sluices down her brown skin, making her glimmer under the bathroom light. Sloane pulls me to the edge of the tub, a smile flirting with her lips. “Even in this, I know how to spoil my man.” She spins us around and nudges me to sit on the rim of the jacuzzi bath.

Then she spreads my legs. I sit there, still, open, at her mercy; my usual state. When she walks between my knees, I’m ready to feel her touch. My flesh calls for hers. My mouth waters to taste her. With our eyes focused on each other, she leans forward. I ready myself for another Sloane kiss, to fulfill the need I always have for her. Then she dips her head and bypasses my mouth to suck on my earlobe.

I gasp and instinctively grab onto her hips. Delightful shocks travel through my body, replacing the disappointment of not having her tongue in my mouth. “Sloane...”

She hums against my neck and licks the skin as she explores my body. The scent of her desire surrounds me, enshrouding me in a decadent cocoon. My skin is sensitive to

every shift in her body as I wait for the next area she deems worthy of her attention.

Sloane pauses at my nipple and I steel myself for what's to come. Has there ever been a more perfect woman? Her breath is my reason for living, her sighs drive my desire to please, and when she nibbles on me with those greedy moans, I want only to satisfy her every need.

I tunnel my fingers into her hair, encouraging her to feast on my body. She sucks until there is a bite of pain to go with the heat from her mouth and the shocks traveling through me. In this as in all things, I belong to Sloane.

While she toys with my nipples, alternating between each, her hand creeps up my thigh until she has my cock in her hand.

“Kiss me,” I demand, needing another taste of her air.

With a popping sound, she releases my sensitive bud to give me what I need. This is no coaxing kiss, but one to claim. I open to her, offering everything I have. And she takes it, greedily twirling her tongue with mine to suck on it before plundering my mouth.

I match her while breath remains in my lungs. I'll match her even after there's no air. Even as her strokes along my cock shatter me, I submit to her. Slowly, she leaves me with one last lingering kiss, panting against my lips.

“I want to suck on you like my favorite lollipop until you come in my mouth.”

I gently caress her cheek as I study her swollen lips and the deep desire in her eyes. “You should know, mi amor, I'm yours. Haz conmigo lo que quieras.”

She lowers her head to lick under my chin. This time, her journey to my cock takes no detours, yet the fiery path she licks to get there is a purgatory of its own. My thighs tighten in anticipation, while she edges me with the quick and fast strokes of her hand.

“I know I said I would take care of you, but I can't help being greedy,” she says before engulfing me into the hot

cavern of her mouth.

My toes curl and I barely contain my shout as Sloane puts her mouth and hands to good use. She takes nearly all of me with her first downstroke, suctioning me as if her life depends on getting me to come hard.

From the earlier scalp massage and nipple play, I can't hold out. I tap her shoulders in warning, and she sucks even harder.

“Sloane, I'm coming!” I gasp as cum explodes from my dick.

A never-ending stream flows out of me, and my wife moans her appreciation while swallowing every drop. The vibration from her throat sends aftershocks down my spine and weakening me. I clutch her hair to keep from falling over the rim of the tub because I can't push her away. Her mouth destroys then remakes me in the next breath.

I have no will of my own.

I have always been putty to Sloane's whims, and in her hands, she makes me into a masterpiece. I blink my eyes open to see her pull up from my cock and suck my balls. A glossy sheen highlights the golden specks in her eyes. She releases my sac with a pop and beams at me. Her deep affection and pride for taking care of me is a salve to my hidden scars.

My heart overflows with love for her. “Let me take care of you now.”

She shakes her head and shies out of reach. “You need sleep.” Sloane leaves the tub to return with a giant towel to dry and wrap around me.

I follow her, sated, docile, and on the verge of passing out. Cielo peers at me from the foot of the bed before deciding our entrance is not worth the effort to greet us.

As Sloane literally puts me to bed, she murmurs, “Who did you think you could take care of? You were more likely to fall asleep mid-stroke than finish me off.”

“That would have been fine. I can always take over where he leaves off.” The message on my wrist alerts me that we’ve woken Valentino.

Sloane and I look in his direction.

He yawns and sits up, becoming more alert as the seconds pass. “Tácito, do you have another shift today?”

I shake my head. “I have the day off.”

Sloane makes herself at home by crawling between us.

“Good, make sure you rest. Later, stop by my office. I have something to discuss.”

“Should I stop by as well? Sounds like this should be a family discussion.”

“Based on what?” he asks.

Sloane shrugs. “A feeling.”

“You realize Valentino and I discuss things that don’t always involve you.” I kiss her shoulder to take the sting out of my comment.

“You wish.” She rolls her eyes with a huff. “Fine, keep your secrets. I’ll find out eventually.”

Valentino takes her hand in his and raises it to his lips. “You need more sleep, principessa. Since you have no engagements until this afternoon, keep Tácito company.”

A yawn interrupts my glaring at Valentino, dampening the heat of my stare. I know he’s using Sloane to ensure I rest. I glance at our wife. She’s blinking a little too fast for someone who is alert and ready to start her day. Seems like Valentino is using me for the same reason.

“Fine, but I’m not doing so because I’m tired. With Tácito working such long hours, I’ll take every extra second I get.” Sloane cuddles beside me, taking my arm to wrap around her waist.

Like a magnet, the gentle swelling of her belly attracts my hold. I cup her firm roundness, feeling more deeply connected to her now that she and our unborn child rest easy within my

arms. As exhaustion wins the battle it has raged all night, I slip into sleep wondering if Valentino will subject me to another lecture on my extra shifts.



City Hall bustles with aides running through the halls, tour guides ushering visitors, and everyday people doing their jobs. The energy thrums against me, attacking the blariness I woke up with and am still fighting off. After eight hours of sleep, I should be alert instead of feeling like I've been hit by a hi-speed train.

I rush as best as I can to Valentino's office.

His secretary, who's on the phone, nods me. "I'm sending him in now."

Inside, Trevor stands and closes a portfolio folder. "I'll get right on this and compile a list of potential candidates who can cover the Christmas festivities on such short notice."

"Thanks, Trevor. I should know by this afternoon if we'll need to reach out to anyone." Valentino presses against his chair and folds his hands over his stomach until Trevor leaves, closing the door behind him.

I drop into the chair opposite Valentino's desk and tilt my head up to the ceiling with an audible breath. "I'm here. What is it you want me to keep from Sloane?"

Valentino's glare bores into me, but we're beyond me pretending for his pride's sake. Still, I sit up to give him the attention he needs.

"We're not keeping shit from Sloane, asshole."

"Then what do you call the reason I'm here, pendejo?"

"Coordinating schedules." Valentino rises from his chair and rounds his desk to sit before me. "Sansone asked me to represent his interests in Bari over Christmas."

"Sloane will be devastated."

Valentino folds his arms and frowns. “I don’t intend to go alone. That’s why you’re here.”

“Me?”

“We need to discuss your schedule. Specifically, this need you’ve developed to take on every shift that keeps you from home at night.”

From the way Valentino bites off each word, he’s held his opinion to himself for some time. I glance away to school my features. When he’s on a mission, he sees too much, and I can’t afford for him to see what’s driving me. I face him once more, assured I won’t give him reason to probe too deeply.

“How long are you expecting to stay?”

“That depends on what this favor entails. Sansone hasn’t shared a lot of details, but he knows I won’t go anywhere with how fragile our family is right now.”

I nod, understanding his reasons. “Sansone is family, too. If he’s in a lurch we should help him. God knows he saved our lives when your father was out to ruin us, and he’s never asked for anything. It’s the least we can do.”

“Thanks, I appreciate how quickly you’re on board.” He unfolds his arms and pats me on the shoulder.

“I’ll make whatever arrangements I have to if it will show Sansone my appreciation.”

“He already knows. Sansone protects you because he considers you another brother.”

“It never hurts to let him know.”

“What?” Valentino asks as a question pops into my mind.

“How do we tell Sloane without her giving us that I-told-you-so glare?”

“Last time I checked, she still likes surprises. As long as we coach it that way, she can’t accuse us of keeping secrets or ganging up on her.”

“Sometimes I hate your knack for twisting things, but it will come in handy in this respect.” I rub my chin, mulling

over how to stage everything to minimize the questions. “When do you want us to tell her? With enough time, I can make it special.”

“Two days. Her staff will need to make arrangements to bow out of her existing commitments. While I don’t mind looking like an asshole for bowing out of the holiday engagements, I won’t allow bad publicity to mar Douglas’ First Lady.” A fierce light enters Valentino’s eyes. It’s a regular reaction whenever he thinks someone in some way might disrespect our wife.

I don’t pity the person who causes that look. It’s probably better if Valentino handles them. No one wants to go up against me when I have zero fucks left to give. And I find that when it comes to Sloane’s feelings getting hurt, I don’t have many fucks to begin with.

“Two days, got it. I’ll put together something that will bring the smile to her face.”

“Now about these shifts of yours...”

I stand, putting an end to the conversation.

“Going to avoid the other problem?”

“There isn’t another problem.” I stride toward the door.

“Tácito,” he warns on my wrist device since my back is turned. “You know I am a man of limited patience. What you’re doing is affecting all of us. You’re hurting yourself and forcing us to watch.”

“That’s not what this is, I swear.” I spin around to see the worry bracketing his mouth.

Sometimes I forget how well Valentino takes on our problems. It’s frustrating and comforting to know he will always have our backs even when we don’t see how. Right now, I need to quash his tendency to go behind me and solve my problems. He won’t be able to hide his heartache from Sloane.

An image of her on my table rises in my head. I try to shake it, but it’s embedded in my memory. I don’t want to

imagine how she'll react if she ever learns of everything we lost because of Giulio.

“Valentino, what I'm dealing with isn't something you can strategize away, you can't stab or shoot it, and you definitely can't make it better. Only I can. And I'm doing my best.”

I leave before he can say something else to keep me. As my foot meets the pavement outside City Hall, my device pulses against my wrist. “You're wrong. I can be the ear to lighten the burden you carry.”

Pendejo.

I stifle the sob and cover my mouth while I flee to a safe corner where I can let my feelings out in private.



SLOANE

*M*y husbands are up to something.

The thought pops up as I pull Ethan and roll before tossing him over my head.

“This isn’t fair. I didn’t sign up to be a self-defense dummy,” Ethan says as he rises from the padded gym floor and brushes himself off. “We’re supposed to be sparring, but if I can’t properly exchange blows, this is just you beating me up.”

“That isn’t my doing. I’m more than willing to dust off those rusty skills of yours and teach you some new moves. Right now, you ain’t saying shit. Even this little DeLuca can kick your ass.” I pat my belly, knowing that even without Valentino’s restrictions, Ethan would keep all hits above the waist.

“Big talk coming from somebody who knows her husband will straight up murder me if he finds a bruise on your body that he didn’t put there.”

“Hey! That was a misunderstanding. I don’t know why you keep bringing that up since I explained it all to him. You act like you aren’t still standing.” I glare at him. “And with all your limbs attached.”

Ethan won’t let the past go. It was one little incident where Valentino held a gun to his head while choking him out because my husband forgot about the previous night’s rope play. That bruise was hard-earned and well worth the torturous lead up to one of my biggest climaxes. I pat my belly knowing that I won’t get a repeat any time soon.

“Why did I know I’d find you down here?” Tácito says with an put-upon smile. “Ethan, I free you from whatever abuse she’s dishing today. And you” —he points at me —“Valentino and I have a surprise for you, but you’ll want to wear something else. I can’t guarantee he won’t take exception to your outfit and kibosh the surprise.”

“The hell he will.” I pass Ethan with a sneak punch to his shoulder. “I needed a shower anyway.”

Tácito’s eyes drop to half-mast and he bites his bottom lip.

I snap my fingers. “Time for that later. Where do I meet you for my surprise?” I hustle him out of the gym.

Tácito clears his throat. “Meet us in his office.”

I nod as we make our way upstairs. At the door to our room, he puts a hand on my arm. “Is everything good? You’re feeling well?”

I pause and pull back from entering the bedroom to take him in. Tácito tries to clear the worry from his face which causes a guilty pang to resonate in my chest. Keeping Tácito and Valentino away from my doctors isn’t meant to be a punishment, but I’m not blind to their longing. I share my progress and everything I learn with them, but I know it isn’t the same as standing beside me and experiencing everything together.

“I’m fine. Promise.” I pat his arm before entering the room.

I would have less qualms about things if I didn’t have to worry about my doctor’s safety. Worse, Tácito, my gentle, loving Tácito can’t be trusted not to pull a Valentino. I remember all too well the look in his eyes when I ran to him about the men who died at Valentino’s hands. If one of my husbands could control their jealous tendencies then I wouldn’t have to do solo visits for my check-ups.

After a quick shower, I change into thigh-high socks and a cowl-neck-sweater dress that kisses the top of my socks. I brush my hair and do a mirror check before going in search of my surprise. Excitement propels me forward. Tácito gave me no clues, but he and Valentino never disappoint. I can usually tell whose handiwork is at play depending on the surprise. When Valentino plans, he employs professionals to execute his vision, whereas Tácito has a personal touch the experts lack. I appreciate both of their styles.

The door to Valentino's office is closed, amping my anticipation until my heartbeat runs wild. I open the door and I enter a new world. Gauzy white fabric hangs from the ceiling to the floor, blocking the masculine furniture I'm used to seeing. Instead, soft pillows and blankets take up the floor's surface. In the middle of the floor, candles float in decorative glass bowls. Their flickering lights shine on a cooler and basket.

From the floor, Valentino and Tácito beckon me.

"Okay, I'm intrigued. Am I supposed to guess the surprise?"

Since I haven't moved from the door, Tácito comes to me. A cloth in his hand raises my suspicions.

"Yes, we'll give you clues and you'll have to figure out what you're getting." He walks behind me and places the cloth over my eyes. "No peeking," he says before kissing my neck.

He takes my hand and leads me to the setup on the blanket, or I assume he does since I'm not allowed to look.

"Your clues involve a gastronomic element." Valentino's voice comes from my left.

Soon two pairs of hands help me to the floor. Once I settle, something smooth touches my lip. Instinctively, I open my mouth and silky chocolate melts on my tongue. Sweet peppermint chases the luxurious flavor.

"Mmm, tastes like Christmas." I smile.

A hand cradles my nape and tilts my head up. When a mouth presses against mine, I open and accept the gentle glide of Tácito's tongue. I melt into the kiss, into the almost reverent way Tácito caresses me and worships me with his lips.

When we separate, I follow his heat, wanting another taste.

"She's right. Tastes like Christmas." Banked desire and amusement fill Tácito's voice and causes my nipples to bead.

"Is that my reward for guessing correctly?"

“In a manner of speaking.” Valentino says as he rubs a thumb against my bottom lip.

“What happens if I guess wrong?”

“Don’t.” This time Valentino’s warm breath caresses my ear. The dark intent in his voice sends delicious shivers through my body.

“Then your clues better be easy.” I stick out my tongue, but Valentino captures it, sucking it into his mouth.

Whereas Tácito is reverent when he kisses me, Valentino is domineering. Demanding. Devouring. I gasp and he takes advantage, commanding my submission while he feeds from me. Even at his gentlest, Valentino dominates, and I can’t help but to love the different ways in which my husbands adore me with their bodies.

To think I once thought to run from them. Thought I never deserved their devotion. I was such a fool. Thank God for my husbands’ persistence.

“Are we putting a hold on the surprise? If so, I’m game.” Tácito’s hand creeps up my thigh.

I pull away from Valentino’s kiss and grasp Tácito’s hand to stop him from discovering *my* little surprise. “Bring on the next clue.”

Although I want to get what they’ve promised, they’ve also sparked my desire. The thick sweater I’m wearing teases my hardened nipples and my pussy plays the opening notes of Floetry’s *Say Yes*.

I swallow the words that would have them forego their plans to fuck me. If they tag team now, I’ll be comatose before I get my mystery gift.

The air fills with their suspicion, and Tácito has yet to retract his hand from my leg.

“Well?”

My prompt causes the air around me to shift. The next thing I know, something cool presses against my lips. I open my mouth and food is gently slipped in. Without being able to

see, I concentrate on the textures and flavors. There is a familiar fresh but slightly bitter flavor that isn't unpleasant. Paired with the chewy texture of what I think is pasta, it tastes really good the longer I chew.

Unfortunately, I'm not sure what I'm supposed to be guessing with this clue. I can tell it's Italian, but we eat Italian all the time. Between Tácito's Mexican heritage, Valentino's Italian background, and my African American ancestry, our house is a literal melting pot of cultural foods.

"I think you've stumped her with this one, Tácito."

"Umm, can it be as simple as I think it is?"

"That depends, what do you think it is?" Tácito asks.

"Well... It's Italian food, but there must be more to it than that."

A brief pause follows my guess. I suspect they're signing to each other. I open my mouth to protest but...

"We'll accept your response." Valentino's minty breath fanning against my face is my only warning before he takes my mouth.

I raise my hands to hold onto him as he swallows my moans and deepens the kiss until I don't know where I begin and he ends. He takes my hands and interlaces our fingers before propelling me backward.

With my hands pinned above my head, I'm defenseless to Valentino's seduction. My body burns, reignited by the fire of his passion. I writhe beneath him, rubbing my thighs together. I need to be touched so bad.

Another pair of lips kisses the sliver of exposed skin between my socks and dress.

Tácito.

He inches slowly upward, bunching my dress as he goes. I'm too mindless to remember why it's a bad idea for him to do what he's doing when it feels so good. He licks a path up my thighs until cool air brushes against my pussy.

I gasp and Valentino swallows that as he's done with every other noise I've made. Gently but determinedly, Tácito pulls my knees apart.

“Madre de Dios, gracias por este bendicion.”

Too late, I realize what their earlier pause was about. I try to twist out of Valentino's hypnotic kiss before I can't stop what's about to happen.

I free my mouth in time to groan, “Fuck,” as Tácito closes his lips around my clit and sucks.

He pins my knees to the floor, while his greedy moans send shockwaves through my body.

“You know what happens when you hide things from us, principessa.”

“I wasn't hiding, I swear.” I gasp as Tácito hits a sensitive nerve. “I thought to thank you after everything was said and done.”

“Hmm.”

“Valentino...” his name comes out on a tortured moan, while I writhe beneath my husbands.

“Yes, principessa?”

“I need you to touch me. Pleeeaaase...”

Valentino releases my hands. For endless seconds, only Tácito's mouth is on me, driving me wild. For a moment, Tácito seems distracted before his hair tickles my thighs, denoting a nod, and resumes with his former gusto.

“For distracting us, you'll pay the price,” Valentino says. He pushes my dress up and over my head, leaving me in my socks. He releases an appreciative sigh. “Unwrapping you is always a revelation.” He skims his hand over my pregnant belly and the scars from my former life as an assassin. His touch is a reverent caress, reminding me that he loves everything about me. He journeys onward until he reaches my swollen breasts.

With a flick of his finger on my nipple, my body seizes. There are too many sensations bombarding me, all delicious, all overwhelming. Then Valentino closes his mouth around my other nipple and I try to pull away.

“No, principessa, this is your punishment. Take it,” he says while continuing to torture me.

The beginning signs of an orgasm creep up from my toes, causing my thighs to tremble. On the point of coming, Valentino and Tácito release me. A frustrated scream escapes from me and I remove the blindfold to glare at my husbands.

“You shouldn’t have done that, Sloane.” Tácito shakes his head as if he is the sexually frustrated one.

“You two need to stop toying with me. Now either fuck me or give me my surprise because I swear you won’t like what I do if you keep playing with me.”

The men glance at each other. “The gelato is probably completely melted by now,” Tácito says.

“And the Sgagliozze’s lost its crunch by now.”

“Should we tell her, anyway?”

“You two—”

“We’re taking you to Italy for Christmas,” they speak as one.

“But we have the tree lighting and the orphanage and the shelters. Then there’s the—”

Valentino presses a finger to my lips. “Our staff will make the necessary arrangements.”

“And the food was supposed to clue me in?”

“They’re all foods eaten in Bari during winter,” Tácito replies, to which I roll my eyes.

“We eat Italian all the time. This wasn’t your best attempt, my guy.” I smile to take the sting out of my criticism. How can I not when excitement begins to build inside me for our upcoming trip. But...everything seems too sudden. “There’s a

catch, isn't there?" I glance from one man to the other. "This trip isn't for me, is it?"

"It can't happen without you," Valentino says.

"I hear a caveat. Tácito?" I bore my gaze into his, knowing with the right kind of pressure, he'll fold and tell me everything.

"There's no need to manipulate Tácito. Sansone requested that I stand in for him at a meeting. Because it takes place over Christmas, the only way I would agree is if we all went."

"Okay, I guess you guys still deserve a thank you."

"Principessa, we were going to get one regardless."

I eye Valentino in his button-down shirt and dress pants with an arched brow. "Not the way you're dressed, you're not." Then I face Tácito and bring my finger to my clit. "And after the way you left me hanging—"

"He will make amends now. Tácito?" The commanding tone in Valentino's voice is the one he uses to direct our bed play, breathing new life to my banked arousal.

My pussy pulses and moisture seeps onto my thighs while my nipples harden and my skin prickles in anticipation.

Tácito rushes to undress and settle himself against a pile of cushions.

"Principessa, straddle Tácito but face me."

All my tough talk fades and I hurry to comply. I want the orgasm they denied me, and the dark intent in Valentino's blue eyes promises I will get what I want and then some.

I take Tácito in my hand to the sound of his delighted hiss, and stroke his velvety hardness. Maybe I can get a taste before

"Put him inside you. Slow. Tease him to make up for what he did to you."

"Cabrón, I only did what you told me to do."

"And when her wet heat engulfs you, you'll thank me for it."

I twist my head to wink at Tácito as I sink onto his dick until the head is inside me. Then I stop and flex my internal muscles, gripping and easing around him until he groans.

He grips my hips and rests his head against my back. “Ten compasión, mi corazón.”

I repeat my slow torture, though it is a double-edged sword, cutting me with its sharp edge. Tácito and I groan together every time I welcome a little more of him into my pussy.

Once he’s fully inside me, we sigh in partial relief. Because he can’t see my reaction to being filled by him, I lean my head back and grab his hair to pull him until our mouths meet. While our tongues silently speak our love to each other, I wind my waist, unable to sit still with Tácito’s dick filling me.

Tácito responds, slowly thrusting into me. Always tender. Always loving. Always what I need.

Valentino loosens my grip on Tácito’s hair to demand from him, “How does she feel?”

Tácito releases my mouth to answer, “She is the sweetest fire that not even heaven or hell can replicate.”

“And you, principessa? How do you feel?”

I glare at him, knowing my passion overflows my eyes. “Incomplete without you.”

He inhales a harsh breath then stands over me. “If you want my cock, take me out and make me cum with your mouth.”

Saliva pools inside my mouth. Eager to taste him because it’s been too long since the last time I had him on my tongue, I unzip his pants and fish him out. Suddenly, he takes my hands hostage.

“No hands.”

I nod, although I’m not a fan of this new command. Valentino is large in length and girth, and I love feeling his

strength as I challenge myself with how much of him I can take.

Pre-cum copiously leaks from his dick, and my previous contention fizzles under my need to taste him. I lean forward in time for another thrust from Tácito to propel me into Valentino's groin.

His scent envelopes me, dark, musky, and all mine. He cages my head and feeds me his dick while holding my gaze captive. Within the glittery depths of his blue eyes, is his steely control. Control I want to undermine.

He slowly pushes in and out of my mouth, nothing like the beast he proclaimed to be before I announced my pregnancy. No matter how many times I tell Valentino that I don't need him to be gentle, he withholds himself from me. I'm healthy, I follow my doctor's orders, and I refuse to let my husbands fuck me with kid gloves.

I pull back from Valentino and nuzzle his sack, lulling him into a state of complacent enjoyment for the moment I lightly press down with my teeth.

"Fuck!" Valentino surges away.

I flip my hair and glare. "If I can't use my hands, you can't treat me like porcelain. Fuck my mouth the way I like, or watch from the chair as Tácito makes me come on his dick."

"Sloane..." he says in that dark voice that tells me I'm pushing his buttons.

Of course, Tácito ruins my image by pinching my nipple and thrusting inside me, causing me to gasp and close my eyes. When I open them again, Valentino reaches out to grab my face.

"Don't say you didn't ask for this."

"I won't." I offer him a triumphant smile. "When do I ever regret getting what I ask for?"

A bark of laughter escapes him and he caresses my cheek. "Point taken."

"Please don't forget again. Now, give me what I want."

“Yes, principessa.”

I open my mouth and he pushes inside me. No longer gentle. He is the lover he needs to be with me. Pushing his length until I gag, until I can't escape being filled by him. As if he's been holding out for this moment, Tácito begins to fuck me in earnest. His grip on my hips tighten, and his slow glide picks up speed.

Between my husbands, where one worships through gentle touches and the other through beastly possession, I am where I am meant to be. Their scents, their groans, the differences in their touch...I luxuriate in it all. And right now, I want their cum.

“Rub your clit until you come and show me how much you love having your mouth and pussy full and your men's cocks.”

Valentino's demand is easy to follow. I suck on Valentino, giving him the sloppiest head since I'm not permitted to use my hands to control my movements. But I control how hard I draw on him and slurp his pre-cum down. I am greedy to get every last drop from him while he tries his best to get his entire length down my throat, stretching my mouth wide and knocking my tonsils with each entry and exit.

And I don't leave my beloved Tácito neglected. As he gifts my pussy with his sweet treatment, I clamp around his dick, causing him to moan and beg for more. The little she-devil in me also slips my fingers from my clit and the piercing I use to enhance my pleasure to caress Tácito's shaft as he slides in and out of me. Sweat drips down my body, and our breaths paint the air with our efforts.

Valentino's grimace tells me he is close. Tácito is too based on the way he wraps his arms around my waist and shortens his thrusts. Fuck, I'm about to blow as well with the way my pussy convulses and my thighs tremble and shocks race from my clit to my nipples.

I double my efforts because what I won't accept is to come by myself when nothing surpasses coming together. I moan around Valentino, and his fingers dig deeper into my scalp.

The first splash of cum hits my tongue as a powerful wave crashes over me.

Around me, Tácito and Valentino yell, pouring their cum inside me. And me? The pleasure is so intense, I black out. When I come to, Valentino and Tácito's concerned frowns greet me.

I smile sleepily up at them. "Can we do this again tomorrow?"



VALENTINO

“**S**ì, ho capito...Ciao.” Sansone slams the phone on the coffee table. “Che testa di cazzo.”

We’re in the den of another DeLuca safehouse. This one has more amenities than the penthouse where we last met, including a bar.

I make a beeline to it now and pour two glasses of grappa. I hand him one before sitting across him on a leather sofa. “And who put the scowl on your face today?”

“Pierangelo,” he says before taking a sip then going quiet.

In the ensuing silence, I study my brother. Despite Giulio’s influence, Sansone sits on the throne as if it is made for him. Although I would have done my best to support him if I stayed within the organization, the path I chose suits me better. I bend the law at will for him while ruling over my own territory.

“There may be more to this meeting than a status update.”

“What gives you that idea?”

“The way Pierangelo threw his weight around on the call leads me to believe there’s more riding on this than we realized.”

“Then I guess you need to tell me everything I need to know. If Pierangelo is feeling the heat from Don Enzo, I’ll have to make doubly certain not to get on the don’s nerves. He isn’t a patient man.”

“Right.”

For the next four hours, Sansone briefs me on the organization’s progress. I take in everything and note Sansone’s fleeting lapses into silence. On the fifth, I wave my hand in his face.

“Where the hell are you going when you know I have people at home waiting for me.”

Sansone jolts. “Sorry, I was trying to think of a good way to bring this up...”

“Good or bad, just spit it out already. The silence isn’t telling me shit.”

He rolls his eyes at me and takes a deep breath. “Tácito’s presence will be a problem in Bari.”

“Are you suggesting without saying the words that I leave him here?”

“You understand why it’s been troubling me?”

“No, I don’t. Explain it to me like I’m two.”

“For the past few phone calls, Pierangelo mentioned your relationship as a situation no DeLuca should be in.”

“What exactly did he say?”

“How can a man, let alone a DeLuca, be proud of the seed in his woman’s belly when someone else can claim it as his own?”

“So he doesn’t fucking approve. I don’t give a shit.” I more than don’t give a shit, but Pierangelo is a continent away and Sansone doesn’t deserve my ire.

“And you shouldn’t. Tácito is a de facto DeLuca, you’ll get no argument from me. But I haven’t told Pierangelo you’re going to Bari in my stead.”

“The fuck! Why?”

“It’s better to ask forgiveness than approval first. Plus I don’t know if he’s the one with the problem or if it’s Don Enzo.”

“Which means I’ll have to kiss the ring extra special when I arrive. Fuck, Sansone!”

“I know, but maybe have Tácito—”

“Not another word. Look, I promised to be what you needed in Bari, but don’t presume to tell me how when it involves my family.” I stand and stare down at my younger brother.

“Val, you know I don’t mean any harm. Tácito was the brother you needed before we knew about each other. I get that. I also don’t want to see any harm come to him.”

“And there won’t be. I’ll always protect mine, even if I have to go against the don to do so.” I walk out of Sansone’s house with a cloud of rage encircling me.

If anyone stops me now, I’ll be on the ten o’clock news for a crime my approval rating can’t make disappear. When I arrive home, Tácito is the first person I see.

One look at me and he nods toward the kitchen. I follow him inside and he begins selecting foods from the pantry and fridge to make me something to eat. It’s a habit he learned from his mother, Marisol.

I get a bottle of water and sit on the other side of the island to watch him. While I become a silent observer, Cielo leaps into my lap to rub her head under my chin. Although she accepts affection from everyone, she reserves her loyalty for Sloane. I peer down at the affection-hungry feline, thinking Tácito and I are much like Cielo in that way.

The silence is cut by rhythmic slicing and chopping as Tácito prepares something that will taste amazing. His dishes always do. He doesn’t prod me to unburden myself, and usually this tactic wouldn’t work on me. Today it does. Today Tácito is at the center of my protective anger.

“Sansone suggested you stay home while I go to Bari with Sloane.” My outburst causes him to pause while chopping chilis.

“And the reason?”

I repeat my conversation with Sansone and watch as disappointment clouds his gray eyes. “Don’t do that,” I growl, remembering his insecurity from years ago when we first married Sloane. Then he didn’t know where he belonged in our throuple, and I’ll be damned if I let his insecurity come back now.

“Do what?”

“Think for one second we’ll leave you behind. Sloane and I have never been ashamed of our relationship and we won’t start now because some ass hat cousin third removed of mine presumes to know anything about us.”

“It wouldn’t be a big deal for me to stay behind.”

“I call bullshit. It would be a big fucking deal for me. Then there’s Sloane.”

“Don’t try to use her to sway me.”

“Then don’t put me in a position where she’ll be upset because you aren’t with us. Or did you think she would enjoy Italy without you?”

Tácito lays the knife down to face me in earnest. “If you explain—”

“You can’t believe the shit you’re trying to feed me. There’s no explanation that will make you not being with us okay. And don’t think I don’t know what will happen if we left. Without seeing Sloane every day, you’ll work yourself nonstop until there’s nothing left of you. Then imagine Sloane’s reaction.” Without giving him time to respond, I continue, “But she won’t let it get that far. If, and that’s a big ass if, Sloane and I did get to Bari without you, it would be with her chewing my ass out the entire way until I got you on a plane to join us. So you might as well be on the same flight as us from the beginning.”

“But what if my being there jeopardizes Sansone’s position?”

“We’ll figure things out without it getting to that point.” I circle the island to grab his nape and stare into his eyes until he grasps my seriousness. “What matters is that we’re a unit. You didn’t let me and Sloane deal with the Ghost Sixes without you. We won’t let you stay behind while I deal with my family in Italy.”

He nods and shakes off my hold. “And why do you need me there?”

“Because you’ll reason with me before I end up killing a motherfucker for stepping out of line.”

He shakes his head. “Even if I’m the reason they step out of line?”

“That’s not a we problem we have to worry about.” I pluck a slice of bell pepper from his cutting board. “Now what are you going to feed me?”

“Did I hear something about food?” Sloane enters the kitchen, her hand rubbing her belly. “I’m starving and I feel like I’ll never be full.”

“You’re in luck. Tácito is the chef tonight.”

He escapes to the pantry and returns with one of Sloane’s favorite fruits. Since her pregnancy, we make sure to have a steady supply to feed her craving. While she moans her delight, Tácito whips up a quick meal for us to eat together.

As I look around the table, my heart fills with a fierce flame. I don’t care what their relationship is to me, but if anyone denigrates anyone in my family, not even Don Enzo’s wrath will stop me from teaching them a lesson.



VALENTINO

We arrive at the DeLuca private airstrip in Bari three days before Christmas, and expect to spend two weeks in Italy. As we walk toward the awaiting armored car, the coastal winds brush against our light coats. Although not summery by any stretch, the moderate temperature is almost tropical compared to Colorado's wintry climes.

"I can't wait to eat everything." Sloane rushes toward the first vehicle in the line of SUVs, but I stop her with a hand on her elbow.

"Where's Ethan?" I ask.

He exits the third car. "Everything is clean. You'll be in this SUV." His crew commands a small fleet of Rolls-Royce Cullinans.

I nod and release Sloane, who walks more sedately to the vehicle Ethan assigned us. We aren't on our home turf, and although it's been a few years, the assassination of Don Ermanno is still fresh in my mind.

Our first stop is our rental in Polignano a Mare. After our long flight, the forty-five minute drive seems to last an eternity. As we pull up to the gates of the private villa, familiar guards check our vehicles before allowing us to pass.

When we circle the drive in front of the main structure, Ethan exits the vehicle first to confer with the ground team that arrived days ago to sweep and set up the place for our needs.

There are four stone buildings spread across the property. Colorful winter shrubs provide added softness to the Mediterranean landscape.

I breathe the fresh air, not as crisp and biting as in Douglas, but no less refreshing.

“This is an amazing getaway destination,” Sloane observes with wide eyes. “I’m going to do all the things.”

“Before you get too excited, we have to pay our respects to Don Enzo.”

“I thought you said Pierangelo dissuaded Sansone from visiting the don.” Tácito frowns, probably worrying about his reception by the don.

“He did, which is why Sansone and I think visiting Enzo is necessary. There’s something fishy about Pierangelo’s adamant demand for Sansone to show up.”

“Why am I just now hearing about this shady business?” Sloane glares at me and Tácito.

I kiss her wrinkled brow. “Because nothing is certain. You know I’d never put you in danger.”

She shrugs away from me to study my face. “I know that, but you wouldn’t hesitate to piss someone off and paint a target on your back. This time, I won’t be able to have your back.”

I grip her neck and press my forehead into hers. “I never want a repeat of that incident. Never. If that means your ass is sidelined for the rest of our lives, so be it.”

“But Valentino—”

“He’s right,” Tácito says in a tone that causes me and Sloane to draw back and inspect him.

Grim lines bracket his mouth and staring into his eyes is like peering into an abyss. There’s no end, only darkness.

“Tácito?” Sloane tentatively reaches out to him and he shakes whatever came over him clear of his face.

But I can’t get the image of him out of my head. It’s as if he saw something he hasn’t told either me or Sloane, and it’s eating him up inside.

He takes Sloane’s hand and kisses her palm. “I’m fine, and I still maintain that Valentino is right. You can’t risk our child to protect Valentino if shit goes sideways.”

She firms her jaw and steel straightens her spine. “Then Valentino needs to ensure shit doesn’t go sideways.” She encompasses both of us in her glare.

“You know I don’t make promises I can’t keep,” I say. “But I’ll make this one, if you even think about inserting yourself at the slightest hint of danger, the only sight you’ll have of Bari is the ceiling because I’ll tie your ass to the bed so good even your skill of escaping tight spots won’t help you.”

“But... How can you ask me to sit aside when you’re in trouble?” Heartfelt tears pool in her eyes.

“Trust me to handle anything that goes down.”

“And trust that I know how to do my goddamn job,” Ethan says from behind her. “I’m going to develop a complex if you keep doubting my abilities.”

Sloane spins around and grabs his arm in apology. “I more than anyone know your abilities. I’ve tested them myself. But.” She reaches out for me and Tácito. “These men are my heart. If anything happens to them—”

“You’ll raise our child to be healthy and know we did everything we could to come home.” Tácito’s tone is unyielding, even under Sloane’s distress.

“But it won’t come to that,” I say to ease the tension. “We’re all going home. First, we need to be fresh for your official introduction to Don Enzo, get Sansone’s business taken care of, then vacay the fuck out of this vacation.”

Sloane glances between me, Tácito, and Ethan before nodding her head. Doubt continues to shadow her eyes, but we’re all on the same page for what happens where she’s concerned. And manipulating one of us is out of the question.

Inside the main building on the estate, the scent of seafood, garlic and olive oil hit us. After eating, we shower and leave.

I don’t share my apprehension with Tácito and Sloane that the only purpose for Pierangelo telling Sansone not to pay respect to Don Enzo is Pierangelo is making moves and he doesn’t want the head of our family to know. If I’m right,

Sansone might be in danger, and it's never a bad idea to get the biggest, baddest DeLuca motherfucker on our side.



After a thorough vetting at the gates of Don Enzo's compound, the guards grant us entry. Tácito and Sloane are stiff with uncertainty, probably wondering why I didn't leave them at the villa.

I'm taking a gamble. Don Enzo's temper is one I'd prefer to be on the right side of. If bearing the brunt of it means getting his blanket protection for Tácito and Sloane, then I'll do whatever it takes.

A guard ushers us into an office. Unlike Sansone, who accompanied our father on a number of visits, this is my first time here. I seat Sloane in front of the desk, but like me Tácito doesn't. Is he picking up on my nervous energy? Either way, the loud ticking from the clock counts down the twenty minutes while we wait.

"Valentino," Sloane whispers into the oppressive silence. "Maybe we should return when it's convenient. Your don is obviously a busy man."

"Your wife is right. I am a busy man and I'm curious to know why you're in Italy and especially here in my home." Don Enzo enters through the heavy double doors.

As he walks deeper into the room, the doors shut, closing us off to any sense of security. He briefly eyes me and Sloane but pays extra attention to Tácito, making me wonder if Pierangelo isn't the only one who has issues with my little family.

I step forward. "Were you expecting my brother?"

"No and I'm not liking the fact you haven't gotten to the fucking point yet."

"Based on your response, you don't know that Pierangelo summoned Sansone here or why. I'm here as his proxy."

“The fuck? Pierangelo doesn’t have the authority to summon anyone.” Enzo walks around us to sit at his desk and fold his hands under his chin to survey his subjects. “Before I handle this, you look like you have more to say.”

“I intend to find out what Pierangelo is up to because it more than likely involves doing my brother dirty.”

“So you want my permission?”

“Not exactly.” I pull Tácito close and place an hand on Sloane’s shoulder. “I want extra protection for them in case Pierangelo shows his ass.”

“You know many in the family don’t condone this union of yours. Especially the question regarding paternity of the one inheriting the DeLuca name.” Enzo pinches his lips while pointedly staring at Sloane’s belly.

I’m not sure if he’s refraining from adding his personal opinion to the matter or if he agrees with the asshole opinion.

“We don’t question the paternity, what right do others have?” I say. “Our relationship is exactly that: ours, and no one has a right to dictate how we live. Not even you.” I stare at the man who could end all three of us as if we are equals. In this matter, no one can scare me out of defending who Sloane, Tácito, and I are to each other.

“Since you brought this to my attention, I’ll step aside for now and give you the extra coverage you need. But I have two stipulations: don’t make noise and don’t fucking call, summon, or interrupt me when I’m with Eve.”

“Thank you for accommodating us. Also, we brought you a gift, to express our appreciation for all you do.” I pick up the gift-wrapped package and place it in front of Enzo.

The box weighs more than it appears. He opens the box to find Colorado-inspired gifts, and he arches a brow at me. I nod at him to dig deeper. Underneath the coffees, ciders, and jams, is the real reason the box is so heavy. A shit ton of hard US currency.

Enzo closes the box and nods. “If there’s nothing else, you can go.”

We depart, feeling his eyes boring into our backs. The new challenge ahead of me is to catch Pierangelo in a trap when I'm not in my territory.



VALENTINO

I pull up to a busy street in Quartiere Umbertino, a neighborhood in the heart of Bari. Pedestrians, cyclists, and cars maneuver through the streets in a perfect choreography of organized chaos. Acquaintances stop passersby to strike up animated conversation, complete with hand gestures. The shouts and horn honking add a layer of welcome I didn't know I needed.

I breathe everything in, feeling the pull on my soul that can only come from returning to one's ancestral place. Colorado is my home, but without my realizing it, being here has injected itself into my DNA.

Before me is Pierangelo's apartment building. He lives in the penthouse where he has a perfect view of the busy pedestrians and the theater across the street. My men and I enter with little fanfare.

Pierangelo's people usher me inside when I tell them I'm here as Sansone's proxy. The decor in the penthouse is all about flash and status. In comparison, Enzo and I prefer more understated elegance that people recognize as soon as they step into our homes without our wealth slapping them in the face.

Already, I expect this meeting to go south. At least, I won't have to worry about Sloane and Tácito since they left with Ethan's and Enzo's people to tour the city. I spy a roman-inspired chaise, one I imagine the emperor Nero used while deciding the fates of common folk fighting for food in the coliseum. I lie on it as I wait for Pierangelo to arrive.

Unlike at Enzo's, I don't fear the man I'm about to meet. With Enzo's backing, there isn't shit Pierangelo can hit me with, and I close my eyes to demonstrate the point for whenever the asshole appears.

Almost an hour passes while I slip into a light doze. When Pierangelo's footsteps echo against the gaudy black and gold

marble flooring, I don't change my stance, though I am more alert.

“What's the meaning of Sansone sending you here?” his voice sounds from above me.

I open one eye to peer at him before rising to a seated position. “As I told your guard, Sansone has a local issue to deal with.” A yawn overtakes me, making me realize the nap was much needed. Since landing, Tácito and I have been very creative with keeping Sloane busy at nights. “I'm here in his stead.”

“This was supposed to be a friendly conversation, but you two have just shit over my good will.”

“How so? You wanted an in-person update, and I'm here in person to deliver said update.”

“Che palle! You must not know me.”

“I don't, but I'm here. Now are we going to discuss business or should I enjoy the rest of my vacation?” I stare him down, unintimidated by his aggression.

He backs away, shaking his head. “I guess there's nothing to be done since you two have royally fucked up my plans.” He pulls an M9 semi-automatic pistol on me. “Sansone was supposed to come here and hand over his territory to my son, Piergiuliano.”

I ignore the gun to get him talking some more. “Is your son such a mezza sega? Do you not want him taking over your territory because he doesn't know how to wipe his own shit? Is that why you want him taking over Sansone's dealings?”

“Vaffanculo, lecchino! Once my son proves himself to Don Enzo, he'll take over for me and control Colorado.”

I snicker at the absurdity he's spewing. “Sounds like Piergiuliano's fucked up already. And if Don Enzo hears that one of his loyal men went down because of you, your son will be the last of your problems.”

The gun in Pierangelo's hand begins to shake. “You don't know shit. But because you showed up, I've adjusted my

plans.”

I narrow my eyes as I put together the long wait with him doing shit behind my back. “And that would be?”

“I’ll have to eliminate you and your brother while sending a message to anyone working for him that I’m not to be fucked with.”

Since shit just got real, I snatch the pistol from Pierangelo and aim it at his head. “Want to repeat what you just said?”

The man backs away. “If you pull the trigger, I can’t call off the contract on your brother’s life. It’s too late for the people in that mansion of yours, but you still have time to be cool headed. You might even be able to save your wife and that fika you let fuck her, like the bitch you are.”

“Like Don Enzo would sanction any of this.” Although I’m heated, I remain cool. But if what he says is true, he made moves to blow up my home before I left Douglas.

“You aren’t here officially. What he doesn’t know can’t harm me.”

“He knows, testa di cazzo! I paid him a visit the day I landed, and his people are with my wife and her second husband.” I shoot the gun, hitting Pierangelo in the shoulder as shock widens his eyes.

He falls back and runs behind his desk.

“Call off your men, stronzo.”

Attracted by the gunfire, two men push through the door with their guns drawn.

I duck behind the chaise, pushing it over to provide cover as bullets pierce its tufted surface. Shit! I let the threats to my family overthrow my reasoning, opening me up to Pierangelo’s trap. An image of Sloane and Tácito’s smiling faces brings everything into clarity.

I’m getting out of here alive. At the moment I make the decision to move, frantic pulses on the device I share with Tácito and Sloane push against my skin. I have no time to look at the message, but it can’t be good.



SLOANE

“I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I’m impressed with Enzo’s protection. If they hadn’t introduced themselves earlier, I would be hard-pressed to spot them.” My praise sours Ethan’s mood.

After my years of constantly giving him feedback, hearing my admiration for another security detail must chafe. Which is partly why I said what I said. I keep him on his toes because he protects the most precious people in my life.

“Leave off Ethan for a few days. It’s the holidays and there’s too much to see and eat for your little rivalry to last,” Tácito says while chomping down on a sgagliozze.

I take a bite out of mine, too. It’s the crunchy polenta street food he prepared during his and Valentino’s failed surprise attempt. Here, in Bari, where it’s piping hot and crunchy is a way better experience than the leftovers we ate.

Tácito laces our fingers together and we walk down the narrow streets in some of the older parts of Bari. Everywhere is decorated with string lights and other festive adornments for Christmas Eve.

“Ooh, look.” I point to the Basilica San Nicola. “I read that the real Santa Clause is buried here. Can we go inside?” I turn pleading eyes to Tácito. “Imagine the stories we can tell our child about visiting the real St. Nick?”

“As if I would deny you. Let’s go.”

Inside, families with small children line up in front of the saint’s likeness. Tácito pulls me close to whisper in my ear, “I bet the parents are telling their kids to be good or else Santa Clause won’t visit them for Christmas.”

I giggle, but sign, “I bet the kids are wondering where all the elves are and that the church looks nothing like Santa’s workshop.”

Tácito grins and pulls me in for a kiss. What I expect to be a quick press of the lips becomes me opening under the slightest pressure of his mouth on mine. He slips his tongue inside, and I lean into his body, forgetting where we are. All that matters is the man in my arms and how he fills my heart with the simplest expression. I circle his neck to get closer, but the harumph from disapproving passersby remind me where we are.

We separate with conspiratorial grins and I nod to Ethan that we're leaving. He takes position in front of us while the three other men on his team circle more subtly around us. Outside, we visit shops and pasticcerias. We leave one with a sampling of purciadduzzi, a colorfully decorated Italian donut covered in honey, sugar, and pine nuts, and a pesce di pasta di mandorle, a fish shaped sweet made from almond paste.

"Leave some for Valentino. I'm sure he'll need something sweet after his meeting," Tácito says as he pops a dough ball into his mouth.

I show him my tongue and roll my eyes, to which he responds by plopping a donut on said organ until I open my mouth fully. Then he gently pushes the sweet treat into my mouth and I close my lips around his finger and lick. The sweetness from the honey blends with his flavor, and I moan around the digit.

Tácito's spectral eyes narrow and darken with a heat that makes me wonder how far we can push the decency laws in Bari.

"Don't start something you can't finish," he warns before pulling his finger from my mouth and licking it. "Tastes even better than the purciadduzzi."

A zing pierces my clit and travels to the rest of my body, pushing my libido in full gear. I push his shoulder. "Who's starting shit now?"

He takes my hand and kisses the palm before dragging me closer to whisper in my ear. "There's more to see before we meet up with Valentino. Be good and I'll make sure tonight is epic."

My breath hitches and I nod, already anticipating being shared by my husbands. As we leave Bari vecchia's cobblestone streets for the more modern side of Bari, the screams reach us before we can properly react.

Ethan turns to me and blood sprays across my face as he falls forward.

“Ethan!” I scream, grabbing him with Tácito's help.

We look around, frantically, but a crowd of people make it hard to see our other guards, though I suspect they're in a similar situation as Ethan.

“Mierda!”

“We need to take cover.” I sign, upset with myself for being too complacent and not surveilling the area better.

Tactio touches my shoulder. “We can't move him.”

“Understood.” For Ethan's sake, I'll rely on Tácito's expertise despite hating our vulnerable position.

“Mierda!” Tácito repeats then removes his jacket to rip Ethan's shirt apart. “Apply pressure to his chest.”

I do as commanded, telling Ethan, “Stay with me. You can't die, you hear me? I will kick your ass and make you the sorriest motherfucker to ever breathe if you even think about tapping out.”

“I wouldn't dare,” he gasps as blood dribbles from the corner of his mouth.

Tácito's lips disappear in a fierce scowl as he wraps a makeshift bandage around Ethan's wound. Like me, he's probably worried about the blood coming from Ethan's mouth. I pray that the bullet missed his lungs and the wound isn't fatal.

In the crush of people, I feel a prick on my neck right before I see Tácito fall over Ethan's prone body. My vision becomes hazy and my coordination is off, but I know I don't have much time. For Tácito's survival, I must act fast. I tap a message into the device Valentino and Tácito always wears, hoping Valentino will find us soon.

Ethan's down. Tácito's taken. I'm drugged.



VALENTINO

I make a run for the door, shooting at Pierangelo's two men. Uppermost in my mind is getting to the urgent message on my wrist. Without knowing the layout of the penthouse, running through the front door would be foolhardy and get me shot full of bullets before I take two steps to the elevator.

The two men go down and I scramble to lift their guns off them while Pierangelo runs for reinforcements. I now have four pistols on me. Hopefully they have enough ammo to get me out of here, but I don't dare to hope I'll leave in one piece. Right now, I'm praying to leave on my feet and not in a body bag.

With time running out before Pierangelo returns, I look out of the office window. There is a rooftop terrace that spans the side of the building. The windows span the floor to the ceiling. Although it is just as easy to open them and leap onto the terrace, my anger spurs me to throw what looks like an antique vase through the window.

Fuck Pierangelo!

On the terrace, I run to the edge of the balcony. Just as I spy another balcony close enough that I won't break a leg, stone shards fly from the railing. I glance behind me to see more of Pierangelo's men at the windows aiming at me. Flowerpots shatter as their piss-poor aim hits everything but me. Either way, my time's up and I can't risk one of them getting a lucky shot. I run to the edge of the balcony and jump.

My bones protest as I land on the hard surface beneath and roll to soften the impact. A feminine scream from inside tells me I haven't gone unnoticed. Oh, well. I jump through the window, shielding my face from the shards of broken glass, and I run like an escaped convict with dogs on my trail. Luck is with me when I rush past a service elevator. I double back and get on. As the doors close, I glimpse Pierangelo's men

running on the floor and I flatten myself against the door and pull out my phone camera to show me their movements.

As the doors close, I breathe a sigh of relief, knowing that I still haven't left the building yet. There's still danger, but now I have time to check my wrist.

Ethan's down. Tácito's taken. I'm drugged.

Sloane's last words burn a hole in my gut. Despair darkens my vision, reminding me of what happened when Ghost Six separated us years ago. Back then Tácito worked tirelessly to save both our lives, but if he is taken, too... I can't dwell on the what-ifs. But he and Sloane aren't the only ones in danger.

With the few seconds on the elevator remaining, I shoot Sansone a text alerting him to the hit on his life and let him know it's not the same threat as he is trying to deal with.

As soon as the elevator doors open, I use the same trick with my phone to ensure the floor is clear. There's no movement but voices in the distance tell me that won't be the situation for long. I duck down, running behind packages and crates until I see an exit. With quick, efficient steps, I make my way to the door, slowly opening it and peering outside.

No one appears to be nearby, but I don't like the idea of going out without some form of protection. I scan my surroundings and find a discarded piece of scrap metal that must have been the remnants of a recent renovation. I grab the metal, placing it in front of me to shield me from being hit upon exiting, and I run out of the building.

"Hey, I heard something in the back alley." The Italian sounds issue from my right, so I sprint left, zigzagging through alleys until I find a large enough crowd to blend in with.

I ditch the shield and peer down at my device again.

Ethan's down. Tácito's taken. I'm drugged.

Where the hell can they be? I go to where we agreed to meet, but they aren't there. I'm still too close to Pierangelo's to feel comfortable letting my guard down, but I have to find my wife and Tácito. That's when distant sirens pierce my

growing panic. Taking a chance that they have something to do with my group, I follow the sound.

A number of ambulances line the street, but one has my attention; the one where a paramedic is loading Ethan.

I rush over to his side. They place an oxygen mask over his nose, but his pale complexion doesn't look good. Familiar strips of material bind the wound. The unique print on the improvised bandages looks like they're from the shirt Tácito was wearing when we parted. They are soaked with Ethan's blood.

"Mi saudi," the paramedic says.

"Io sono il suo capo e lui non parla italiano." I explain my need to ride with Ethan to the hospital and the paramedic allows me on.

"Ethan, if you can hear me, tell me what happened."

He feebly removes the mask. An eternity of lives lived and lost pass by the time he gasps, "I'm sorry Valentino. After they shot me, I passed out for a while. When I came to, Sloane and Tácito were gone."

"I'm going to get them back. You concentrate on healing." I squeeze his hand then replace the mask.

In seconds, he passes out. At the hospital, I arrange for his care. When the doctors stabilize him, I'll have him medevaced to Douglas. While I'm between calls with Ethan's team, my phone rings.

"Ma porca puttana! How the fuck does don't make noise and don't fucking call, summon, or interrupt me when I'm with Eve mean a fucking street shoot out on Christmas Eve?"

"It wasn't me, Don Enzo. Pierangelo set this up before he saw me."

"You asked me to step aside, now I have to—"

"He has my family, but I don't know where, and my wife..." I can't speak the unthinkable words.

"Quel pezzo di merda! What is his endgame?"

“He intends to give Sansone’s territory to Piergiuliano by permanently removing us. He’s already blown up my home and put a hit out on Sansone.”

“Piergiuliano couldn’t find his way out of a paper bag. Give me five minutes.”

Within four minutes a text message alert appears on my phone. Before I can open to see the entire message, the phone rings.

“I sent you an address. If you get there before my men, you might get a piece of Pierangelo for yourself.”

“Are Sloane and Tácito alive? Are they together?”

“They are both. Now do I need to fucking babysit you or are you going to get your woman?”

“Thank you Don Enzo.” I’m running out of the hospital before I complete his name.

Outside, the rest of Ethan’s team that survived the hit wait for me.

“We’re going to get them back, boss,” Ethan’s second-in-command says.

I nod, choking back my fears, and give them the address. We pile into the SUVs. In the back of the car I enter is an arsenal with enough ammo to win a war. The ride over is interminable.

Neither Tácito nor Sloane have sent another message. I try to rationalize that they must be tied up. I pray that’s it because I can’t accept any other outcome.

We pull up to the entrance of a warehouse compound in the zona industriale and everyone files out with their weapons. Although it’s Christmas Eve, the silence disquiets me. I don’t know what building they’re holding my family in, and any wrong move will end my existence.

As my team strategizes our next move, another half dozen cars pull up and unload fully armed men, pointing guns at us.

“Identificatev!” One of the men says.

“Are you the men Don Enzo sent to help me?” I ask instead of telling them my name.

They lower their weapons. “You arrived quickly. Follow us, we know where Pierangelo’s safe room is.”

I nod at my men to follow the team. “Whatever you do, don’t harm my people.”

“Your men will be in charge of getting them out safely. We’re here for Pierangelo.”

I begrudgingly accept their stance. As we approach a nondescript door, an exchange of gunfire blasts the quiet. The violent ricochets of bullets hitting metal and other hard substances cause me to rush forward with no regard for my life.

Everyone runs to keep up. Inside, there’s no trace of Sloane or Tácito, but there are bodies littering the ground.

“It’s about time you showed up Valentino!” Sloane’s anger is the sweetest nectar to my ears.

I should have known my little escape artist would find a way to free herself and Tácito while reversing the situation in their favor.

“Why didn’t you send me an update when you woke up?” I shout while dodging bullets and exchanging gun fire.

“The assholes took our devices. I couldn’t tell you anything.” Sloane is on the move, her voice coming from a different area to make sure no one pinpoints her location.

I stand to take aim at one of Pierangelo’s men and a thud sounds behind me. I get the round off and look back to see one of the enemy has fallen. “Thanks for the assist. Is Tácito safe?”

She takes an eternity to respond, while bullets fly in the general vicinity where I last heard her voice. “He’s with me.” She’s moved yet again, but something in her voice tells me everything is not okay.

For now, I’ll settle for them being together.

“Where’s Pierangelo?”

“He ran through the south doors after I dropped the first bodyguard, probably ten minutes ago. There’s only his minions to deal with now.”

I glance at Enzo’s main man. He splits off ten of his men to go where Sloane saw Pierangelo escape. “Principessa, can you tell Tácito I need to hear his voice?”

After a few seconds where I imaging Sloane signing to him, he says, “Cabrón, will you get rid of these motherfuckers so we can go home?” Although strained as though in pain, I’m happy to hear his voice.

“I’ll get right on that.” With renewed focus, I take aim at the next enemy.

There are about half dozen remaining, and my and Enzo’s teams make quick work of severing their lives from this world. When the last body drops, Enzo’s point person calls for a cleanup team. I don’t spare them much attention.

“Sloane, where are you?” I shout, while running in the direction I last heard Tácito.

I hear a thud before I see him rising and cradling his hand to his chest. Then Sloane’s body drops from above and she does a controlled roll she learned from her Air Force training. Despite knowing she’s maintained her training during her pregnancy, my heart nearly leaps out of my throat at the sight of her dropping from the high stack of containers.

Sloane leaps to her feet and slings Tácito’s uninjured arm over her shoulder, prompting me to rush to her aid.

“What the hell happened to Tácito?” I gently push her aside to help get him out of the warehouse.

“Pierangelo had his men beat on him. One of the assholes stabbed him in his hand. His hand...” Her voice hitches for good reason.

Any damage to his hands would impede his ability to communicate, but more importantly it would mean the end of

his career as a surgeon. It isn't a future I want him to experience after the stigma he faced and sometimes still does.

"Let's get him to the hospital." I grab a hold of his waist.

"I wish someone would tell me what's going on," Tácito grumbles.

Sloane gets in front of us to sign what we discussed. When we reach the car, I direct the driver to run through whoever he needs to to get us to the hospital in under ten minutes.

With Tácito somewhat settled, Sloane asks, "How's Ethan and his team?"

"His prognosis is unclear, but I refuse to believe he won't make it. As to his team, I'm not sure. My priority was getting the information I needed to find you. Now, my primary concern is Tácito's recovery, then I'm going to throttle you for the stunt you pulled."

"Me? I saved my and Tácito's lives. Why are you mad at me?"

"You put yourself and our baby in danger. Though I for one am glad of the results, it was no less harrowing watching you duck fire while moving me from one safe place to the next." Tácito leans heavily on Sloane as he explains and absolves her of the shit she did.

Before I can rip into her and undo the damage Tácito wrought, my phone rings.

"Do you have your woman?" Enzo barks.

"Yes."

"Pierangelo?"

"Escaped. Your men are chasing him."

"So you have everything you need?"

"If you know an excellent orthopedic surgeon, we could use one to save Tácito's hand."

"Fucking Pierangelo! I'll see what I can do."

In minutes, we pull up to the emergency intake area and I help Tácito inside. Once he's on the mend, Sloane will learn that although I am grateful she is alive and well, putting herself in the line of fire is unacceptable. A month, I decide. I'll tie her to the bed for thirty days where her complaints will be background noise. Until she learns how precious she is, she'll stay where I put her.

A nurse greets us with an overworked smile of concern. Enzo's people are on point. As soon as I mention my name, he wheels Tácito to a private examination room where a doctor orders scans of Tácito's damaged hand.

Once the images come through, everything passes in a blur. They rush Tácito to surgery while Sloane and I wait to hear news. After six hours, the staff shares the post-op steps we'll have to take to insure there's no infection and the timeline for recovery. Although they believe the procedure to be successful, it could take months to confirm.

The doctor prescribes pain medication for Tácito and makes sure he gets the first dose before leaving. Because of my insistence, they'll allow Tácito to rest here for the night. When Tácito's eyes glaze and his body relaxes, some of the tension leaves my body. I stand behind Sloane as she brushes Tácito's hair from his face.

"I'm going to ask Marisol to teach me to cook your favorite meals while your hand heals up."

Tácito laughs, causing Sloane to pout. "She'll move in before she'll trust you to cook for me. But I'll eat by your hand alone. How about that?"

She leans forward to kiss him on his cheek. "I promise to make every feeding session memorable."

As she rises, a look of alarm comes over Tácito's face.

"Valentino?" she asks in an odd voice.

"Yes, principessa."

"Catch me."



TÁCITO

As color drains from Sloane, I reach for her with my good hand, unmindful of the IV distributing my pain medication. Not that I would be able to do much in my condition that wouldn't bruise her or possibly harm the baby.

All the fears brought up by our recent harrowing experience hasn't had time to calm. I still see Sloane risking her and our baby's lives while trying to protect us, straining herself to lift and pull me to safety then doing the same for herself. Superimposed on her was the image of her bleeding out while I fought to save her life and sacrifice another.

As I watch her fall backwards, asking Valentino to catch her, he closes the gap between them to easily save her from hitting her head on the ground.

"Is she bleeding?" I shout. "Check for blood. We need to save the baby. We can't let them die. Never again," I sob uncontrollably, thrashing and trying to leave my bed but getting tangled in the wires. My body is a sum of alien parts, none coordinating with the other and only working to hamper my movements.

Valentino's response doesn't register over my frantic demands to save this pregnancy. This child.

I barely notice the doctors and nurses that enter the room to cart Sloane off or the nurses injecting my IV with more drugs. I mumble incoherently as these drugs work faster than the last dose, then I black out.

When I wake up, I'm in a position I'm unused to. Valentino is the one who shares hospital rooms with Sloane, not me. And I'm usually the one taking care of their wounds, not strangers who speak another language. I sit up and start pulling out needles so I can check on my wife.

"Sit your ass down and stay there," Valentino barks at me. He sits in a chair between my bed and Sloane's, but zeroes in all his attention on me.

I glare back at him, seething at the leashed violence in his tone. “I need to check on our wife.”

He studies me as if trying to unearth my secrets, but I’ve held onto this one so long. “What you need to do is explain the shit you were saying before they checked her out.”

I glance toward Sloane who lies still on her bed, her diagnosis unknown.

“She was dehydrated. They put her on saline and she’ll wake up soon. And the baby’s fine,” he bites without looking away from me.

Sloane turns her head. A wrinkle furrows her brow but her eyes remain closed, a sign she’ll soon rouse.

“Now explain what you meant when you said you won’t survive if we lose another baby.”

I swing my head to meet his glare. “I said that?”

“Tácito, you’re trying my patience. What other baby are you talking about?”

“Other baby?” Sloane’s groggy voice pipes into the conversation. “Who’s having another baby?”

Panic crawls up my throat. I’ve been protecting them from this truth for years, but Valentino’s insistence will only spur Sloane’s curiosity. “Don’t make me say it. Let’s pretend you misheard me and move on.”

“Wait, what other baby?” Sloane is more alert, sitting up and glancing between me and Valentino.

“That’s what I’m trying to establish. I’m waiting, Tácito.”

Seeing my distress, Sloane says, “You’re bullying him. We don’t do that to each other.”

“Don’t, principessa. You passed out and he went berserk, talking all kinds of shit I can’t make sense of. Because he’s keeping something from us. And if I had to bet, I’d say it’s the reason he was overworking himself and withdrawing.”

“Valentino, please. You don’t know what you’re asking of me.”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t back down from this. Not when it affects you this way. The doctor said if they hadn’t sedated when they did, you could have permanently damaged your hand. Are you telling me the secret is more important than communicating with us? Than your livelihood?”

I look from Valentino to Sloane, frantically finding and discarding excuses to give them, but the concern shadowing Sloane’s eyes breaks me. Unable to look them in the eye any longer, I stare at my bandaged hand. “I only wanted to protect you. The truth nearly destroyed me, and I’m still fighting to deal with it every day. How can you ask me to inflict that kind of pain on you?”

A tight grip on my nape pulls my head up until I see the blue fire in Valentino’s eyes. “We share everything, asshole. The joys, the quiet moments, the burdens, and especially the sorrows. After all this time, how can you not remember where we came from? What we endured? We survived through the years because of each other. Why would you think that would change now?”

“Because I wasn’t able to save our baby!” I raise my hands, palm up to him, silently begging him to end my misery. “I’m the surgeon who saves everyone when they’re hurt, but I couldn’t stop Sloane’s bleeding. All my knowledge and skills meant nothing. She was so early in the pregnancy and...”

Valentino releases my neck, stumbling back until he falls on the bed, his golden complexion losing color. “You kept this from me? From *us*?”

“To protect you from what you’re feeling now, and so you wouldn’t blame yourself for what Giulio did.”

“Stop saying you were protecting us! I should shoulder the responsibility, too. The way we couldn’t keep our hands off each other, I should have expected her to get pregnant.” He pounds his chest as if the self-inflicted pain can dull the emotional one I dealt. “And because you kept things to yourself, do you realize I could have put her in more danger with the decisions I made for our family? Do you? For one, I

would never have agreed to coming on this trip if I knew she had a miscarriage.”

“Valentino...”

“No, Tácito. We’re closer than brothers. So what if I get hurt or blame myself? You’re supposed to be there to share my burden the way I’m there for you. How am I supposed to trust you won’t hold something this big from us again?”

Seeing hurt and betrayal ripping Valentino apart, I turn to Sloane for... I don’t know. Understanding... some way to make what I did okay?

Silent tears drip from her eyes. “You’re both wrong, you know?” Her voice is low with a desolate quality I’ve never heard come from her. She rubs her swollen belly. “If anyone is to blame, it’s me. My job is to nurture and protect the life inside me, but I didn’t even know... Then I forced you to take me to the ambush.” A sob interrupts her and she crumples into a ball.

As one, Valentino and I rush to her bedside. The needles and tubes are no longer an obstacle in my need to reassure her.

“You were not at fault,” Valentino fiercely says as he cages her face between his hands. “Repeat what I say, ‘I’m not at fault.’”

“But—”

“There are no buts.” I bring her hand to my lips and kiss her knuckles. “Say the words.”

She grabs one of Valentino’s hands and my uninjured one. “Only if you say them with me. You can’t absolve me when you harbor the same feelings I do.”

Valentino and I share a look. The same doubt and pain racking my insides reflect back at me in his blue orbs.

“I mean it,” Sloane pleads.

“I can only do that if we promise there will be no more secrets.”

Under their expectant gaze, I reassess everything. Making this promise means revealing another truth I've held onto. Already, the burden from keeping the fate of our first child secret has eased with sharing the news. Although my grief is not something that will disappear, at least now I can speak about it openly with my family.

I nod. "No more secrets."

Valentino and Sloane return my gesture and as one we repeat the words, "I'm not at fault." We say them again and again until our voices lose the fainthearted notes.

When we stop, I'm not wholly convinced that I'm blameless, but the ever present weight I carried is more manageable. From Valentino's stance and the clearness in Sloane's eyes, the mantra must be working for them. Still, it will take time for us to stop holding ourselves responsible in our heads.

Uncertainty washes over me when I realize something is missing from our moment of solidarity. "Does this mean you forgive me for not telling you back then?"

As soon as the words leave my mouth, Valentino turns an angry frown on me. "Tácito, for a skilled surgeon, you sure have your idiot moments. There's nothing you can do that I won't forgive."

"That goes for me, too," Sloane says.

"I hope you remember you said that because I have to come clean about something else." I release Sloane's hand and sit heavily on my bed. As the silence stretches out, I try to find the words that will soften the next blow to Valentino. Sloane's reaction, I expect, to be less emotionally complicated.

"Spit it out already. Is there something else you found while operating on us?" Worried tears glaze over Sloane's eyes.

"I killed Giulio," I blurt out to ease her anxiety and because I don't have an easy way to admit the truth.

"What the fuck did you say?"



VALENTINO

After Tácito drops his bomb about Giulio, a nurse comes into the room to explain visiting hours are over. After a brief discussion, where I let her know my ass wasn't sleeping anywhere my wife wasn't, she offered to procure an extra bed for me.

When she leaves, I turn to Tácito. "How the fuck did I not know you did what I couldn't do? And don't give me the protection speech again. That shit is getting old."

Tácito shrugs. "There are many sins you take on to protect us. I wasn't going to let patricide be one of them."

"Well, fuck."

"I hate you were the one to do it," Sloane says. "It must have eaten you up inside."

"You're wrong. I don't regret what I did to him. In truth, if I could bring him back to life to do it again, I would. He deserves to suffer the pain and torture I inflicted on him every day for the rest of our lives."

"Dude, I knew you could go dark, but this is another level." Sloane peers into his eyes, searching for something she must have found because she nods. "Despite you going Dexter on me, you're still my sweet Tácito."

"Siempre, mi corazón."

"And how do you feel about everything?" she asks me.

"I feel cheated, but not enough to make a big deal about it." I shake my head in wonder. When did I miss the hardened resolve under Tácito's quiet calm? "Tácito, promise me one thing."

"What's that?"

"You won't give us another Christmas gift like the ones you dropped on us today."

“Oh my God, today is Christmas!” Sloane gasps with her hands covering her mouth. “I completely forgot with all the kidnapping, and gunshots, and the knife wound. I hope we never have another Christmas Eve as eventful as this year.”

“I promise. I’m getting too old to keep up with you two.”

“You should start training with Ethan.” Sloane snaps her fingers. “That’s right. How’s Ethan doing?”

“He’s alive? I’m relieved,” Tacito says.

“He survived his first surgery. When they stabilized him, I ordered his removal to go home. He’ll have a long recovery ahead of him, but I’ll make sure he gets the best of care.”

“Will he require a nurse?” Sloane’s question causes me and Tácito to frown at her. “I was thinking that Hilde would be great. She managed me when I was less than willing. If we want Ethan to heal and return to work, who better to make that happen?”

“She has a point. I always intended to rehire her if you two found yourselves on my table again.”

“I’ll make the arrangements,” I say.

A text alert on my phone interrupts our conversation. It’s a simple message. Without context, it would leave strangers to scratch their heads as they try to figure out the hidden meaning, but I know the meaning.

Christmas gifts have been delivered to your villa. Let this be the end of things.

“Looks like Don Enzo has gifted us something good for Christmas.”



The plans we had to stay another night in the hospital come to an end because of Enzo’s text. Although Italy is infamously slow, the hospital staff check Sloane and Tácito out.

Tácito wears a sling to raise his bandaged hand and we take extra care not to bump into him. “I hope you don’t think you can leave me out of this.” He glares at me and Sloane.

“Wouldn’t think of it. Didn’t you know? Dishing out vengeance is a family affair. After everything you shared, you should know we’ll share in this, too.”

Sloane rubs her belly and talks to the baby resting inside. “Ignore your daddy, little one. Your parents will take care of everyone who wishes you harm without you having to lift a finger.”

“That’s a given.” I roll my eyes at her before turning serious. “Anything you want to do in particular or we’re just going to fuck Pierangelo up real good before he breathes his last?”

Sloane rests a hand on Tácito’s shoulder, and my eyes travel to his injured arm. “I vote that we fuck him up for everything he did to Tácito and our team. Make him meet his death in agony.”

“I second, because he put our wife and our baby at risk when he drugged her. He deserves all the smoke. I just wish I had my tools to prolong his suffering.”

Despite Tácito’s earlier confession, the look in his light eyes is jarring. Now I understand why Sloane’s refusal to provide access her doctor wasn’t limited to me. From what she said earlier, he’s shown her glimpses of this side to him.

If I had known he was about that life, I would have invited him on my trips to meet with Sloane’s exes. Let him work out some of his pent up frustration while she waited to acknowledge we were meant to be hers. Because I’m reminded of the bone of contention predating this trip, I get Tácito and Sloane’s attention.

“Since we’ve all promised not to keep secrets, there’s one thing I’d like to ask Sloane to relax her stance on.”

“Oh? What have I—Valentino, be serious. Remember? I like my doctor,” she whines. “And I want the same doc for all our children so they can grow up getting tired of my stories

about the same person delivered them. Don't you want that for us?" She rubs her belly while peering up at me through her lashes.

I almost bend, but TÁCITO comes in with a save.

"Attending your appointments would probably help with the nightmares."

She spins in her seat to glare at TÁCITO. "You've been keeping that from us too? Nightmares?"

"They were related to the big secret that you all know. But if you want me to rest easy at night, I'm sure being a part of your visits will go a long way."

"But..." she glances between me and TÁCITO. "I love my doc."

I narrow my eyes. "When did love enter the equation?"

"Don't you dare blow this out of proportion. It's not that kind of love."

"I'm not comfortable with you associating that word with people we don't know."

"Valentino's right. If feelings are involved, we definitely have to have a conversation."

"Stop! You two are the absolute worst."

A contrite look enters TÁCITO's gaze, though I question how remorseful he is. "I don't think we can budge on this. We want in that room when you see the ultrasound and to we want to ask questions about you and the baby's progress."

"And I want assurance that my doctor will live a long happy life with no interference from either of you."

TÁCITO and I stare at each other, silently weighing our options. Before embarking on this trip, I joked with Sansone that blinding the doctor could be a viable compromise, but Sloane's folded arms and militant expression say otherwise.

"What if—"

"No mysterious injuries either Valentino."

“Principessa, be reasonable.”

“I won’t budge on this.”

“Will you at least prepare us?” Tácito asks. “How many pregnancies are we talking?”

Sloane shakes her head and smacks her forehead with the palm of her hand. “I’m not giving you a number to countdown so you can off my doctor after they deliver the last baby. Nature will decide how many kids we have.”

I sigh, seeing where this is going, but needing to put up one last show of resistance. “Is this promise the only thing standing between us and being by your side for every pregnancy milestone?”

“Of course. Do you think I don’t want you there? I miss you so much, but I’m standing firm on this.” The glittery resolve and her admission knocks the walls of my resistance down.

From Tácito’s slumped shoulders, he’s also ready to give up the fight.

“Okay, we’ll agree to let your doctor live,” we say.

“And you promise not to injure them,” Sloane prods and Tácito and I repeat like put-upon school children.

“Finally! You guys held out way longer than I expected.” Sloane snags my phone, fiddling with it before handing it back to me.

New invitations fill my calendar app inbox. They’re all Sloane’s upcoming appointments. I show Tácito who discreetly wipes his face.

“Thank you, principessa.” I pocket my phone as the car comes to a stop.

The light hearted mood shifts as we ready ourselves to face our enemy. As soon as we step out of the vehicle, we head toward a guest house. Someone prepared the site, covering every surface with drop cloth. The temperature is in the eighties, causing us to remove our light outerwear. In the corner, two plastic tanks sit with ladders resting against their

sides. They are almost as tall as the ceiling. And in the middle of the room is our reason for rushing home. Except with Pierangelo is his son Piergiuliano who is in a ball. His shoulders shudder and a low-resonating no issues from him. The two men are chained to the floor.

“Valentino, I’ll make amends if you promise to let my son go.”

Piergiuliano perks up at the possibility of being freed.

“Before we negotiate, there’s one agreement you need to make now.” I squat in front of him and pluck his phone from his breast pocket while Tácito and Sloane’s silence speaks to their support of whatever I’ll do next.

“Anything you want, I’ll do it for the sake of my son. Per favore, Valentino.”

I sneer at the lump loudly sobbing beside his father. Disgust fills me. How are these two DeLucas related to me?

I hold the phone to his face to unlock it. “Call off the hit on my brother.”

“Of course, of course. I’ll do whatever you need once you untie me.”

“Hmm, nah, I think you’re where you’re meant to be. Tell me who the number is under and I’ll dial it for you.” I shake the phone in his face.

He turns his head away as he mumbles, “Reward.”

I place the phone on speaker. A man with a Scandinavian accent picks up after the first ring. “Your order is on the way. Is there a problem?”

“Yes! I’d like to cancel.” The whites in Pierangelo’s eyes grow as we wait for confirmation on the other end of the line.

“And might I inquire as to your reason for canceling, sir?”

“It no longer fits.”

“There is a cancellation fee for returns after an order has shipped.”

“That’s fine! I’ll pay however much you need, just cancel the hi—contract.”

“I can confirm your delivery has been cancelled. Please remember us for all your future delivery needs.” The man disconnects the call before I do.

“Now let my son go,” Pierangelo demands.

Piergiuliano raises his head. His skin is blotchy from weeping, marring his classical Italian good looks.

“Tell me, do you believe that what you did makes amends for trying to wipe out my family?” I nod for Tácito to step forward. “For doing this?” I point out Tácito’s injury.

“What would you have me do?”

“Sloane? What should we make him do?” I ask.

“Suffer then die.”

“I can’t argue with my wife. You understand, she’s pregnant. I have to give her what she wants.” I rise and grab Piergiuliano and push him in front of his father

The sniveling man attempts to crawl away, but hobbled the way he is, he only succeeds in doing an awful caterpillar impression. The chain jangles with his movements.

“Do you know what’s in those tanks?” I point toward the large containers in the room and wait for Pierangelo’s nod. “Now, typically we dissolve dead bodies after we do the whole torture and dismember song and dance, but today I want to switch things up.” I step on Piergiuliano’s neck, halting his escape. “I want to hear your son sing.”

“Madonna santa, Valentino have mercy.”

“I’ll show you and yours the same amount of mercy as you had for me and mine.” I free Piergiuliano then grab him by the hair and push him toward the tanks. “Get in.”

When he hesitates, I pistol whip him until he moves of his own accord. He hangs back when he reaches the top and peers down on me. Whatever he sees in my face gives him the push he needs to crawl over the lip, but his fingers clutch the rim.

While waiting to hear the splash to tell me he's hit the liquid inside after losing his grip, I gather chairs for Sloane, Tácito and me to sit on. I cross my legs and stare at Pierangelo's distraught features as he prays and curses for us to save his son. The moment we're waiting for arrives when Piergiuliano screams as his soft tissue begins to dissolve in the sulfuric acid solution.

For hours, we sit there, listening until Piergiuliano's voice fails and the only sounds disturbing the eerie silence is Pierangelo's anguished cries.

I hand Sloane my pistol. "Ladies first."

She shoots Pierangelo's hands and returns the gun to me. I glance at Tácito.

"I'm a shitty shot. Do the honors for me."

I nod and take aim. "Don't worry, Pierangelo, you'll join your son shortly." I fire one shot through his throat. "That was for calling Tácito a cunt, and this is for denigrating my relationship, you piece of shit motherfucker." I fire another shot through his heart.



SLOANE

It's New Year's Eve and we leave for home in three days. I wish I had the energy to care about our dwindling time, but with Tácito and Valentino behaving like we're on another honeymoon, I've rarely seen much of Bari outside of our bedroom.

Today is different. I need it to be. Starting off the new year after the mess over Christmas means something more this year. And I want to celebrate the fact that we're alive and have so much to look forward to as we ring in a new time.

I crawl over Tácito's naked body hoping that by showering and dressing for the night's festivities, I'll convince my husbands to do more than pull orgasm after orgasm from me.

When Tácito's good arm wraps around my waist, I know my mission has failed. "Where are you going, mi corazón?"

"To get ready."

Valentino rises to flank my side. He reaches between my thighs and caresses my labia, still slick from our earlier bout of lovemaking. "You feel plenty ready to me."

In my mind, I bid farewell to the crowds and the wonderful energy that comes with ringing in the new year. Instead, I get in position before Valentino says the word. I've been to this rodeo enough times to know the deal.

I cup Tácito's balls, and begin licking to the sounds of his groans. As usual, I get lost in his scent and soft skin. The bed shifts, as Valentino positions himself behind me. And I arch my back, teasing the both of us with what's to come.

"Principessa, is your pussy ready for my cock?"

"Why ask me? Ask that wet finger of yours." I wriggle my ass and he grabs my hips.

"Sloane, please take me in your mouth," Tácito begs.

While he wears a bandage to protect his hand, I can't seem to prolong teasing him. I take him in my mouth, with renewed hope of seeing outside these walls for New Years. If both men come quickly, I can probably convince them to give me a treat.

Valentino pushes inside me, shoving me further onto Tácito's dick, filling me to the point of gagging. While I still have the will, I clamp down on Valentino.

"Oh, shit," he says.

I smile around Tácito's dick as I employ every trick on my husbands. I can't deny the added benefits I receive as Valentino hits that spot inside me just right.

"Mmm," I moan around Tácito's dick.

He places his good hand on my head, not to control my actions. Sometimes I think Tácito needs to touch me because his hands are so important to him and doing so is another layer of intimacy he uniquely experiences.

As I really get into blowing Tácito's mind, Valentino creeps one hand between my legs while his other works my ass cheeks apart.

Shit!

This motherfucker intends to destroy me before I get him to come. As the realization hits, he strums my clit and piercing. At the same time, he gently pushes his thumb into my rosette.

My body becomes a mass of sensitive nerves being pushed closer and closer to a cliff's edge. My uncontrollable moans also affect Tácito whose hips seem to be on autopilot as he pushes deeper into my throat. His thighs tense and my body trembles from overstimulation.

The first spurt of cum hits the back of my throat and I swallow everything he has to offer when Valentino hits that spot again and I lose control. I fall off Tácito who's still coming and squirts cum on my cheek and neck.

I can't care that I've wasted my treat because I'm coming hard and Valentino isn't letting up on me. He concentrates his

efforts on *that* spot, fills my ass to drive me wild, and toys with my piercing until I scream my release. Only when my body loses tension does he roar as he climaxes inside me.

“Happy New Year, principessa.” Valentino repositions me to lie between him and Tácito.

I’m exhausted and unable to open my eyes. So much for convincing them to go out tonight.

The bed shifts by Tácito and cool air replaces his heat, but not for long. He returns with a cool washcloth to wipe away his cum. He discards the cloth and rejoins us in bed, holding me close.

“Are you disappointed we aren’t celebrating in the streets *mi corazón*?”

I smile sleepily. “Not at all. Being with you in any way is the best way to ring in the new year. Add in orgasms and it beats the ball drop and fireworks.” I wrap Valentino’s hand around my waist, happy and sated with the men who own me heart, body, and soul.

The End



Thank you for reading *Surviving Christmas*. Enjoyed this story? Be sure to leave a review! You can also preorder [Sansone DeLuca](#). And don’t forget to download [Valentino DeLuca](#) to pick up another prequel story in this series! And don’t forget to join my [newsletter](#) for a free novella prequel in the Stiletto wHeels series.



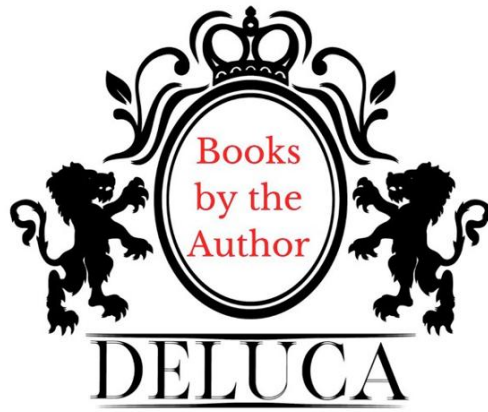
Melverna McFarlane loves love stories with Happily Ever Afters. After years of characters taunting her imagination with their potential, she decided it was time to write her own scorching hot romances. When not writing, she is reading romance, YA, and Fantasy, country hopping, or vicariously obsessing over other people's cats, because she can't have one.

CONNECT WITH MELVERNA MCFARLANE

You can find Melverna on her website www.MelvernaMcFarlane.com.

Drop her a line, or tease her with pics and stories of your cat's antics. She might feature them in her next book.





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**A CHRISTMAS RECKONING:
MARCO DELUCA
BY CASSIE VERANO**



ABOUT A CHRISTMAS RECKONING: MARCO DELUCA



Marco DeLuca spent a lifetime being married to the wrong woman. He spent that same amount of time loving the right one. Two years after losing his first wife, Marco is ready to marry the woman of his dreams, and he's planning a surprise wedding.

The heat between Marco and Piper could never burn hotter. She sizzles at his touch, and his body incinerates with one taste of hers. She's the perfect complement to his life.

While Marco works to keep the surprise wedding he's planning a secret from Piper, only two things stand in their way: her family and his nemesis.

Determined to marry the woman of his dreams, Marco will hunt down the person who's out to ruin his magical day.

This savage Christmas promises to be very merry, sexy, and brutal.



SAINT NICK

The glass doors open once more, and I can hear the bassline thumping and vibrating throughout the U-shaped room beyond. The dim red light and black walls create a sensual vibe, while black luxury leather chairs and couches create cozy seating groups. Patrons sit around a U-shaped leather bar that takes up the back wall.

Disappointment swells in me again when the person stepping inside isn't anyone that I want. I turn my attention back to the whiskey neat on the table to my right. I take another sip, considering all the possibilities that are here for me tonight and all the propositions I've turned down. None of them have what I'm looking for. I'll know when the perfect one arrives.

Prodigal Nights offers every fetish a person could want and the exclusivity and anonymity, without the risk of exposure, to entertain their sexual fantasies if they can afford it.

My position in the room adjacent to the bar allows me to see every part of it without being seen. I spot the moment that she walks through the door, and I can smell her heat all the way from where I'm sitting. That's the one for me tonight.

I watch closely as she glances nervously around, fidgeting with the ring of the black leather choker at her throat. I would love to wrap my hands around her lovely neck and squeeze to see those large, brown, almond-shaped eyes widen.

Several sets of eyes turn her way, but she ignores them all. A blonde waitress wearing a black leather catsuit bites her bottom lip before sucking one long, red talon into her mouth. She makes her way to me, briefly blocking my sole attraction.

"Is there anything that I can get for you, sir," she asks hesitantly.

I don't answer. Instead, I turn my drink up and finish it, setting the empty glass back on the table beside me. She grabs

the glass and heads back out of the room towards the bar.

I keep watching as the mystery woman works her way through the crowded bar, moving to a set of double doors to the left of the bar.

Scanning a VIP card, she pushes the smoky black glass double doors open and makes her way into the exclusive lounge that I occupy. The music here is more subtle, sexier, and conducive to having sex. Zayn's *Pillowtalk* sets the mood for something more sensual.

I train my eyes on the woman who has caught my attention.

She glances to the right at a St. Andrews cross, taking up one corner of the room where a Dom canes a woman strapped to the cross.

Though she's turned slightly away from me as she watches the caning, I see her arousal in the pebbled nipples underneath the sheer, long-sleeved, black lace dress she wears. I see when her mouth parts slightly, and I know that the sight turns her on. It amuses me to think that she might be a pain slut. Her fists clench and unclench, and her breathing seems to deepen for several seconds. This isn't an environment that she's familiar with. She's a virgin to this lifestyle.

Then, as if she remembers that she's here for a purpose, she closes her eyes and inhales deeply. Slowly, her gaze turns away from the couple at the cross until she spots the platform bed raised by chains where two men and a woman are acting out a scene.

This time, she turns her gaze away a little swifter as she looks around the room, observing couples in various stages of flirtation or play. Then, finally, her eyes land on me just as the waitress returns with my drink.

"Thank you," I mutter as the waitress walks away.

The mystery woman saunters my way with a confident look in her walk, but it fails to reach her eyes. I pull my drink back up to my lips again as I watch her, never allowing our gazes to break.

“Are you reserving this seat for someone?”

“If I were, that’s all changed now.”

She glances at me and smiles just as the waitress returns, taking her order. The waitress smiles flirtingly at me, and I feel the woman’s eyes on me. I turn towards her, and I ask, “Why did it take you so long to find me?”

“You presume I was looking for you,” she remarks coyly.

“And yet,” I say, turning to eye her up and down, “here you are.”

She looks around. Shrugging, she says, “You’re the only detached man in the place. Some of them are paired with one woman, while others are having orgies.”

“Is that not your thing?”

“I don’t know what my thing is yet. I did notice that you’re sitting alone. Is that your thing?”

“Orgies? No.”

“Then why are you alone?”

“Do you think that was by accident?”

She bites her lip worriedly as the waitress returns with her drink.

“No. I don’t,” she says, sipping her Cosmopolitan.

“Your choice of drink says a lot about you,” I observe.

“Oh? What does this say about me?”

“That you’re a sophisticated woman with complex layers. You’re intrigued by its stunning beauty and pulled in by its enchanting taste. Your drink has a clean base and a sweetness with a hint of sour.”

“So, you’re saying that I’m a superficial woman with convoluted tastes?”

“There’s nothing superficial about you, Bella. Convoluted? Yes, but not superficial.”

“I feel like you’re judging my tastes.”

Turning my lips down, I reply, “No, not judging you. But I would love to taste you.”

I hide my smirk behind a sip of my drink as her eyes widen, and she chokes on her drink.

“That was a bit forward, wasn’t it?”

“I’m not into playing games. You’re here for a reason. You purposely sought me out, and all I want is to satisfy your body’s desires.”

“You think that you can do that?”

“I know that I can.”

I trail a finger down the curve of her jawline, and her chest heaves heavily.

“Give me one hour, and I promise to make you cum at least three times, and that’s before I penetrate you.”

She squirms in her seat and plays with her hair at the nape of her neck. “Um...you assumed that I sought you out, but what about you?”

“What about me?”

“Are you waiting for someone?”

“She’s already arrived.”

“She can’t be doing her job too well. Your hands and mouth aren’t busy,” she says.

I lick my lips and take in the beautiful woman once more. I could close my eyes and describe her in my sleep. She’s beyond beautiful. She’s gorgeous, striking even. Skin the color of pure honey, a slightly upturned nose, and a medusa piercing that accentuates thick, full lips that look as if they’re swollen from sucking dick. Thick, long, curly hair is swept up into a high ponytail, drawing attention to her graceful, long neck enclosed by the choker.

“Why are you here?”

“Like everyone else, I’m looking for satisfaction,” she shares.

“That’s a pretty big ring on your finger to be looking for satisfaction. Does your man know you’re here?”

“My man sent me out for a night of fun.”

“Without him?”

“I’m a big girl. I can handle myself.”

I growl at that. “Your man fucked up.”

“Is that so, Mr....”

“No need for names.”

“Then what shall I call you?”

“Tis the season for giving, and I’m in a very generous mood. You can call me Nick.”

“As in Saint Nick?”

I smirk and wink as I use my tongue to pull my bottom lip inside my mouth.

“What are you planning to do with that tongue, Nick?”

My eyes slowly roam over her body before coming back up again and stopping at the space between her thighs. “He’s a kitty licker.”

“Mmm, I think I like that better than Nick, Mr. Kitty Licker.”

“Was that a purr that I just heard?”

She smiles and glances shyly away. I stand and kneel before her, grabbing her hand. Meeting her gaze, I slowly trail my tongue over her palm and watch in anticipation as she squeezes her legs closed.

“I can smell your desire. I’ll bet you taste like freshly poured honey with a hint of almond liqueur.”

“Oh, wow. So distinct.”

Leaning in, I whisper a challenge, “Prove me wrong.”

“What makes you think that I’d be interested?”

“The simple fact that you were bold enough to approach me. I like that. A woman who knows what she wants and isn’t afraid to let a man know. I’m not into games, Amorina.”

“Is that the name you’re giving me, Nick?”

“It’s the name that I’m giving her,” I nod my head at her lap. “She’s the one I’m negotiating with.”

“And what does it mean?”

“Little love.”

She leans into me and whispers, “I promise, there’s nothing little about her.”

I wink and say, “Show me.”

She tilts her head sideways and asks, “Is this what you do? Seduce women who are new to the club?”

My hand squeezes her thigh, and I reply, “I’m not seducing. You’re doing that all by yourself. Seducing your way into my bed.”

Laughing, she says, “I have no plans on leaving this club with you tonight and going back to your home.”

“For what I have planned, we don’t have to go to my home, but I promise that when it’s all done, you won’t want to return to yours.”

“What makes you think that I don’t have a man worth returning home to?”

“If he were worth it, you’d have never left. If you were my woman, you’d never want to leave home.”

“You sound confident in that.”

“Let me show you.”

She parts her legs slightly and says, “Just one night. I’d like to know what it feels like to be fucked by a stranger. To owe no explanations.”

“Is that an invitation?”

She grabs my hand and pulls it between her legs, pressing it against her hot, wet mound. Her thong is soaked, and I smell

her heat as she spreads her legs a little more.

“Three orgasms within an hour.”

“With that smart-ass mouth, I’m not sure I’ll let you cum.”

She looks intrigued, and I lift her legs and perch each over an arm of the chair.

“Here?”

I look around and reply, “Trust me, they’re having too much fun themselves to give a fuck about what we’re doing. If you moan loud enough, they’ll want to join in, but I’m not in the business of sharing.”

She hesitates briefly before spreading her legs a little. “Okay,” she concedes.

“Baby, I need room because I’ve got a big ass head.” Her eyebrows lift, and I nod. “Yeah, both of them.”

I pinch her clitoris as she drops her head back against the chair. Cinnamon-colored nipples pebble once more, begging to be unleashed from the lace and sheer dress.

Sliding a finger inside her thong, I slowly stroke her as my thumb rubs her clit. Lowering my head, I bring my nose to inhale her essence. This is my favorite part of a woman: her scent and her flavor.

With the softest purr, she draws me in to take a sip, and oh, how sweet the taste is. With my first lick of her kitty, I know that I’ll never be the same. I don’t know what man fucked up and let her out of his presence, but I swear she’s never leaving mine.

Wrapping my arms around her thighs, I pull her to the edge of the seat and prop her legs over my shoulders. Our eyes meet in a heated clash as I indulge in the sweetest pussy I’ve ever tasted. Her gaze remains locked on mine as she pinches her nipples, arches her back, and feeds me her nectar.

I think of all the things that I want to do with this woman to bring her to the brink of pleasure, only to push her back again. I’ll torment her before the night is over again and again before I allow her to experience the release her body needs.

And when I'm finished with her, she won't ever look back at what was...only looking forward to the future.

“You seem hungry, Nick,” she moans, jerking her hips up.

“Baby, I'm famished.”



MYSTERY WOMAN

He's not what I expected. There's a certain darkness about him that lurks deep within. It's like a predator stalking its prey, constantly watching, always wary, but never giving up its position.

When I first laid eyes on him, I thought he was a businessman, especially since he was in the VIP section. I thought he might be brutal but that it would show itself early. He's neither brutal with me nor gentlemanly. I can tell that he's biding his time, patiently waiting for the moment to unleash a certain savagery on me.

He stalks around me, his eyes assessing me as though memorizing every single detail. For what? Future reference? I'm not sure, but his eyes make me feel like he knows all my secrets.

My legs are spread wide, and my hands and wrists are cuffed to a cross. My dress is ripped to shreds on the floor by the door, and my soaked thong is somewhere back in the club.

The way his mouth and tongue worked my pussy over, I thought I was going to faint. He brought me to the brink of an orgasm repeatedly, only to stop. He wanted me to know who was in control.

Just when I couldn't take it anymore and was damn near ready to fight, he carried me to a private room. Black wallpaper with a crest and fleur-de-lis motif decorates the walls. A large, black wrought iron chandelier hangs from the ceiling over a massive dungeon bed at the back wall of the room.

To the left of the bed in a large corner is a metal St. Andrew's cross like the one in the main club area, which is what I'm currently strapped to. To the right of the bed is a spanking bench.

To the right of the door and across from the bed is a wall filled with hooks displaying a variety of toys. Beside that is a

large black glass cabinet that has even more toys to enhance your sexual experience, and a black garment bag hangs inside. A pedestal sink and mirror stand on the other side of that.

To the left of the door is a large red velvet chair that's reminiscent of a throne and is fit for a king.

“How will you explain these lashes I'm leaving on your body?” he asks in a low, sultry tone just as he brings the flogger over my ass again.

My body trembles with unbridled need. I always suspected that I was a pain freak, but tonight's the first time I've had a chance to explore this side of me. The tassels gently brush my shoulders and dip down to tease my already erect nipples.

Hard rocks that they are, they're painfully pressed against the cold metal of the cross. All I want is for him to suck them into his mouth.

“If my woman ever walked out of the house in a dress like the one that you wore tonight, she wouldn't be able to sit her ass down for a week,” he says through clenched teeth, accompanied by a slight growl.

I drop my head forward as he brings the flogger across my ass. The tell-tale sting of the falls lashing against my ass indicates the strength by which he's wielding it. I bite my bottom lip as tears spurt into my eyes, and my pussy gushes as the falls tap against it with his next strike.

It's like he's in tune with my body because his hand instantly goes between my thighs. Pressing a kiss to the side of my neck, he whispers, “You're a pain slut.”

I purr through the ball in my mouth, jutting my ass back and pulsing my pussy in his hands.

“That's it, dolcezza. Gush for me! Gush for me, amorina.”

There's something about that thick Italian accent that's so hypnotizing. He pulls me into his spell with the gentle flicker of his fingers against my nipples, those thick, full lips on the side of my neck, and his palm splayed over my belly. The falls of the flogger rests against my thigh, gently teasing my pussy lips.

“Your fiancé will thank me when I’m done. You’ll know how to obey, how to submit to a man. And when I return you to him, you’ll be properly fucked.”

I hiss, but he can’t hear my words. Nick presses his tongue against the side of my neck and tugs on the ring of the collar at my neck. “Can’t hear you, Tesoro. What was that?”

He removes the ball gag from my mouth, and I hiss, “You said I wouldn’t want to return home when you finished with me.”

“Is that an invitation to fuck you?”

“Please,” I beg as my juices continue slicking my thighs.

Hot lips press against the nape of my neck as the flogger drops to the floor, and he presses his hand between my thighs. Thick, long digits penetrate my folds as he slides two fingers and then a third inside of me. With his free hand, he squeezes my ass cheeks before slipping a finger between them.

I squeeze against his finger as I feel him prodding.

He chuckles a deep, dark laugh. “Don’t tell me no one’s ever been back there before.”

“No,” I gasp.

“Tonight’s a night of many firsts. No, amore mio?”

“You’re not going back there.”

He laughs. “You say that as if you have a choice.”

“I do.”

His voice goes cold and deadly.

“You have no fucking choice. The moment that you stepped inside this room and decided to give your body to me, you signed away all options.”

And there it is. The darkness that I sensed, perhaps feared, lurking underneath.

“I will fuck your ass, and you will like it. And no, I won’t be gentle. Because you mouthed off at me, I’ll fuck you up the ass until it’s raw, Tesoro.”

He pinches my clit, and I cry out. Why the hell am I still leaking juices for him when he just threatened me? What the hell is wrong with my body?

Nick kneels behind me and begins licking my thighs, cleaning the sticky essence of my desire. My head rolls from side to side as he draws nearer and eventually consumes my pussy with a hunger I've never experienced.

Once again, just before I cum he pulls back. Releasing the cuffs from my ankles and then my wrists, he says, "I'm going to fuck you really good and then I'm claiming that ass."

"You can't claim something that doesn't belong to you," I object, rubbing my wrists.

He doesn't respond, but his dark eyes twinkle at me as he slowly undresses. I take in the multitude of colors stretching across his chest and arms. I would love to add to his beautiful canopy of color. Before I can ask him about the tattoos, he's removed his pants, and my eyes drop to his length.

Damn! He's huge, and while my mouth is salivating, my pussy is begging for mercy, and my ass is ready to run from the room. There's no way that he's putting that in any of my holes. He's a fucking monster inside and out.

Nick stretches his hand out, grabbing his length and slowly working his hand up and down it. A bead of precum dribbles to the surface, and I kneel in front of him, licking it away. When I look up at him, those dark eyes seem to have grown darker, if possible.

He's watching me and waiting to see what I'll do next. The way that he's been gobbling me up all night, I have no problem pleasuring him. It's the least that he deserves. I've barely got his dick just over a quarter into my mouth before I start choking.

He pushes and pushes, stretching my lips to the point that I wonder if I'm going to have abrasions at the corners of my mouth. Pulling back, I spit down his length and use my hands to work it down while sucking his balls.

A large hand rests on my head, caressing as he encourages me, "That's it, Bella."

I pull back and work his shaft into my mouth again. Slowly, I work him further down until I'm gagging and have to take a rest. He pulls back and then guides himself back down my throat. He does this several times until we find an easy flow where he's fucking my mouth hard and fast. The sound of my lips smacking and the hums from my throat are the only sound in the room, except for his intermittent "Mmms," "ahhs," and "fuck yeah."

I feel him growing inside of me, and just when I think he'll explode, he pulls out, grips his dick tight and squeezes his eyes. Helping me to my feet, he says, "You don't get off that easy, Carina."

He leads me to the red velvet chair, and he sinks on it. Fisting his dick, he says, "Take your seat."

I'd love to tell him that my seat is on his face, but the way that my ass stings right now tell me I'd be in more trouble. Either that, or he'd oblige me since I get the feeling that he loves eating pussy, or at least mine.

Spreading my legs wide, I climb up in the chair with him. He shifts me so that my legs are draped on either side of the chair, and my pussy and ass are spread wide.

"Don't be afraid," he says, still fisting his dick.

He slides the tip against my slit, and I moan, eager for him to be inside of me, yet fearful at once.

"Come on, baby," he coaxes.

There's a familiarity in his tone as though we've always been this way, and it's that tone that relaxes me, soothes me, and convinces me to sink onto his dick. Instantly, I feel the stretching and the pain taking hold of me.

Biting my bottom lip until blood comes to the surface, I hop up quickly. Nick's arm wraps around me, and he presses a kiss to my lips.

"Don't be scared. I've got you," he lures.

He presses himself inside of me, pushing and pushing until he's a perfect fit.

"I'm not all the way in yet," he says, deflating my excitement. "You've got to work it down further. Either drop down and take this dick or work your way back up and then down until he's all inside of you."

With all the work we just did, there's no way that I want to move. I'm afraid that if I do, he'll slip out, and we'll have to do that shit all over again.

I lock an arm around his neck, press my forehead against his, and use my free hand to hold his dick to keep it from going all the way inside. Leaning forward, he bites my bottom lip and jerks my hand from between us. He holds that one hand above my head and then thrusts hard and fast inside of me.

"Shidd!" I scream.

"Take this dick!" he barks back. "All of it!"

I swear it feels as if he's ripping my insides, but foolishly, joy, excitement, and pride all swell together inside of me, welcoming the painful bliss he's bringing. When his pounding inside of me soothes to a familiar comfort as if we were always this way, I finally take the reins and ride his dick.

I ride it to the ranch and back. Beautiful brown hair wet with sweat takes on a sheen that makes it appear onyx under the dim purple lighting in the room. My fingers cradle his face, loving the silken hairs on his cheeks and chin. His large hands cradle the back of my head, bringing me closer until our lips are sealed with a passionate kiss.

I want every sexual encounter to be just like this one. I wonder how I can have this man permanently. His deep, heavy thrusts inside of my wide-open cavern stake a claim that's never been laid before. And when he rises from the chair with our bodies still intact, I know that I'm in trouble.

The way he loops my legs over his arms without allowing me to wrap them around his back opens me up wider than when I was on the chair. He pounds into me hard and strong. I

feel as if he's touching my uterus and working his way up to my lungs the way he snatches every breath.

"You're having no mercy on my pussy!" I cry.

"Baby, I'm a muthafuckin' savage!" he roars.

I'm on the brink of an orgasm now, and there's no way that I can stop it. My pussy knows this. I know this. And he knows this.

"Let it go, Tesoro. Give me all that pussy. Drown this fucking dick with your cum," he growls, and I do.

He slowly begins walking, and he locks me in a sultry kiss. I wonder what he's going to do to release his orgasm. It's no secret he's been fighting all along to hold on to it, same as me.

When he lays me on the spanking bench and straps my wrists underneath and my ankles behind me, I begin to protest.

"Please don't fuck me in the ass," I beg as he walks around me and opens the cabinet.

Turning to glance over his shoulder, there's a sneer on his lips and darkness in his eyes.

"You have no say over that body. That ass is about to be christened tonight," he says, placing a ball gag back in my mouth when he returns.

Shit! I can tell by the way his dick bounces that he's determined to go to no-man's land. Nothing I can say or do will deter him.

When he kneels behind me, the gentle side of him briefly returns in the form of kisses against my ass, soft caresses, and tender squeezes. Then his tongue presses back there, bringing heat and arousal with it.

He moans into my ass, and I feel my pussy swelling again, this time with arousal so deep that I think I'll cum at the feeling of his tongue in my ass. The moans and grunts he releases are even more passionate than when he ate my pussy or when he was buried inside of me.

"Oh, shit!" I scream as I begin to cream again.

Who knew?

Pain, fingers inside of my pussy and a tongue in my ass apparently are my weakness. This time, when he pulls back, he pours something cool into my ass and begins working it in with his thumb.

It takes a moment before I finally relax, and when I do, I feel the head of his dick pressing back there. Squeezing my ass tight again, I hold my breath.

“Relax, Tesoro,” he says, pressing a kiss to my lower back. “Relax.”

It’s not that easy, but I finally do. He pushes himself deeper inside of me slowly, inch by excruciating inch, until I’m full. He holds himself still and runs a hand down my back before sliding one between the bench and me to pinch my clit.

“Can we stay like this?” I plead.

Those words are an invitation for him to loop my loose ponytail around his hand. He begins pumping my ass, holding onto my hair, and riding my ass like he’s riding a horse on a ranch.

My body shifts vigorously up and down the bench, welcoming the sensation of him filling me up back there. The way that our bodies connect at this point and the sweaty warmth of his slick skin against mine strengthen the bond that I feel with this stranger.

My pussy grows wetter the more he works my ass over, and I’m surprised at how much I like anal sex, so much so that I cum. He pulls out finally, and I know he’s not done, but he smacks me on the ass several times before he kisses it again. When he walks away, I turn my head slowly to follow his steps.

Broad shoulders, long, muscular, and hairy legs, and a wide, muscular back that tapers into a trim waist. His body is beautiful. He returns with the flogger, removes the ball gag, and spansks me until I’m crying out in pleasure from the stinging pain.

He frees my wrists and lets me sit up. We share a kiss before he walks away again, and when I prepare to move, I'm reminded that my ankles are still cuffed. I watch as he washes his long dick, and I wonder how many more rounds he can go.

I know that he's worked hard to maintain his arousal and not cum, but his patience is greater than anything I've ever seen. He returns to the bench, grabs my hair, and jerks my head back, pressing his dick to my lips.

I open wide, taking him inside of me and sucking him deep, thankful that he's no longer raiding my ass like a burglar. I suck him deeper and harder until he's fucking my throat again, and I know it'll be raw in the morning. His balls are smacking against his thigh, spit dribbles from the corners of my lips, and tears roll down my cheeks.

He finally shoots hot cum down my throat but pulls back before he finishes. Smacking me in the face with his dick, he shoots semen all over my face as I lick at it, taking him in at every pass.

The look of relief on his face is intense. It takes a few beats before he moves behind me and uncuffs my ankles. The embrace that he locks me in when he kisses me makes me feel so safe and cared for.

Damn, he's got a sexy swagger, I note as he walks to the cabinet and removes a washcloth, towel, and some soap. Moving to the sink on the other side of the cabinet, he wets the washcloth and begins cleaning me and then himself.

When we're finished, and he's dressed again, I lift my arms. "I have nothing to wear home. Did Santa prepare for that?"

Smirking, he nods and opens the cabinet. He pulls out the black garment bag and removes a scarlet, long-sleeve cocktail midi dress. It has a lace shoulder overlay and a corset bodice.

His touch is tender as he helps me dress. Pressing a small kiss on the nape of my neck, he asks, "Think we can ever share this experience again?"

I turn my head, glancing at him over my shoulder.

“You set the date, and I’ll be here,” I whisper as he softly presses a kiss to my lips.

He escorts me back through the club with his hand on my lower back, guiding me through the crowd. Just as we’re about to exit, the receptionist says, “Good night, Mr. DeLuca. Good night, Ms. Chambers.”

“Good night, Erin,” we say in unison as we look at one another and share a knowing smile.

Standing at our chauffeured Bentley, Marco looks down at me and says, “Now, back to the real world.”

“Only for one night. You promised a surprise trip tomorrow.”

“It’ll be better than tonight,” he promises, kissing me again before ushering me into my seat.

When Marco climbs into the car with me, he pulls me into his arms. I love the hell out of this man. This man who would indulge my fantasy of making love to a stranger. He only took it to another level by taking me to a sex club, something that had never entered my mind.

He locks our fingers together and whispers in my ear. “Do you trust me completely now, Piper?”

“Always did, Marco. I always did.”

“Good. Well, keep trusting me in the days to come.”

I’m too tired to ponder or ask what that means. I fall asleep long before we arrive home.



MARCO

Pushing my thumbs into my eye sockets, I groan. What started as a little tension in my head is promising to turn into a full-blown migraine before the day is over.

I went from having the time of my life with my fiancé last night to being ready to murder her parents this morning.

A knock sounds at my door.

“Yeah,” I grumble.

“Mr. DeLuca, your driver’s here,” Nora, my assistant, says.

“Thank you. Are the arrangements in place?”

She smiles, “Yes, sir, and the refrigerator and freezers are fully stocked. All the gifts have arrived and are ready to be placed under a tree.”

I frown. “Damn it! I forgot about a tree. Piper’s going to kill me.”

Shaking her head, Nora says, “No, she won’t. There’s a fresh twelve-foot-tall spruce standing in the foyer of the cabin waiting to be trimmed.”

Standing, I go to her, hugging her briefly. “Did I give you a Christmas bonus, Nora?”

“You did.”

“I should give you a raise,” I declare as I grab my jacket from the back of a chair and head out into the foyer.

“I won’t complain, Mr. DeLuca,” she gushes.

“The only thing that you could do to be a better assistant is —”

“To go in your place and meet Nora’s parents.” She turns her lips down and says, “I don’t envy you that task.”

“Yeah? You got the same vibes that I get from them?”

Nora called to set up arrangements for Piper's parents to meet me for brunch after they'd ignored my calls on several occasions.

"Let's just say that I won't be surprised if your future in-laws not only won't welcome you into the family but also won't be wishing you a season of tidings and joy."

I sigh deeply. "Yeah, I know. If it weren't for Piper, I wouldn't give a fuck about them."

"Well, they are her parents."

"Yeah, unfortunately. Hey, she should be waking up in the next hour. When she does, let her know that I had a last-minute family meeting and I'll be back as soon as possible. Make sure that she's packed."

Nora shakes her head, giggling. "I'll see what I can do, Mr. DeLuca."

As much as Piper is ready to go on vacation, she's been procrastinating about packing. I know it's because she wants to spend the holidays with her parents.

I head out of the house, hop into the back seat of the waiting silver Range Rover and wait as Gino, my driver, closes the door.

"Morning, Mr. DeLuca."

"Is it?" I grunt.

"It's all up to you, Mr. DeLuca. It's only a few days before Christmas. Don't let anyone ruin it for you."

"Good luck with that. They've already managed to fuck up my day."

Chuckling, he pulls out of the circular drive and down the long driveway. "Look at today like a new opportunity to win her parents over."

"Why does everyone assume that my troubles have to do with Piper's parents?"

"Because they do. We all know that nothing can stop you from doing whatever you want, and if anyone gets in your

way...so help them, God,” Gino says, peering at me in the rearview mirror.

“Don’t know why the Chambers don’t understand that,” I grumble.

I can see the smile Gino’s biting back, but he lifts an eyebrow and suggests, “Maybe because they’re her parents?”

“Yay, me.”

“It’s one breakfast. They either agree to your suggestions or disagree.”

“Yeah, and if they agree, then I’ll be stuck with them through the holidays.”

“But isn’t that what you want?”

“No,” I grunt.

Gino shakes his head as if I’m not making sense. Maybe to some degree, I’m not because I don’t do this: chase other people and kiss their ass.

“I want Piper to be happy and have what her heart desires this Christmas. And though she doesn’t say it, I know it’s to be with her family.”

“Except they don’t accept you.”

“Right.”

“Oh, I’m sure you’ll win them over with your charming and witty ways, sir,” he says, glancing at me in the mirror.

I can see him smirking at my ever-present scowl.

“The fuck are you so goddamn happy about today?”

“Found out I’m about to be a father next year.”

Leaning forward, I grip his shoulder and squeeze. “Fucking congrats, man!”

“Thanks,” he says, smiling, as I settle back into my seat, scowl firmly fixed in place.

Gino leaves me to stew in silence throughout the remainder of our ride to Park 75 at the Four Seasons.

I spot Piper's parents, Pamela and Grant Chambers, sitting at the rear of the dining room near an exit sign. Looking like they're ready to bolt.

"Mr. and Mrs. Chambers," I greet as I take my seat, adjusting my cufflinks.

Mrs. Chambers doesn't speak, but Mr. Chambers does.

"I had a feeling it might be you," he grumbles.

Nora lied and told the Chambers that she had some information about me that she thought they needed to know. She'd also said it was information that Piper wasn't privy to and she didn't feel comfortable sharing over the phone.

Nora had made the right number of innuendos about my family's business to get the Chambers' attention.

I settle back in my seat as I cross my ankle over my knee. "If you hadn't ignored my calls, I wouldn't resort to drastic measures. I would assume that anything concerning Piper's happiness you would want to be informed of. I'd hate to believe that I am the only one invested in what brings Piper happiness. And since it is the season of giving," I say, spreading my hands out just as the server arrives.

"Order whatever you want; it's on me," I say when they hesitate to order.

"Due to present company, I don't have much of an appetite," Mrs. Chambers says, rolling her eyes.

The server shifts uncomfortably from one foot to the next, glances at me and then the Chambers before clearing his throat.

"Bring them a sampler platter of everything."

"We don't—" Mrs. Chambers begins.

"Tell Chef Girard Mr. DeLuca requested it."

"Will do, sir," the server says, stuttering briefly before bowing and quickly leaving our table.

Mrs. Chambers lifts her eyebrows and rolls her eyes.

“Look, Mr. DeLuca, I don’t want to waste your time or ours. Whatever you have to say, we’re not interested. We came here today because we thought we were meeting Ms. Sims,” Mr. Chambers says.

“Now that you’re here, you may as well hear me out.”

“I’d like to leave now,” Mrs. Chambers says, grabbing her purse and turning to her husband.

“Come on, baby,” Mr. Chambers says, preparing to stand.

“If you get up and walk out of that door, you’ll probably never see your daughter again. We are getting married whether you like it or not. I won’t place her in a position to choose, and neither will you. I won’t tolerate her being stressed the fuck out the way she’s been these last few months since you pushed her out of your lives.”

“What?”

“Piper told me about how you have distanced yourselves from her since I proposed to her this summer on her birthday.”

“We’re trying to keep our daughter from making a grave mistake,” Mrs. Chambers says, glaring at me as if I were a piece of shit on the side of the road.

Shrugging, I reply, “I’m not here to argue with you. I’m here to say that Piper and I are going to marry whether you agree or not. I know this season is a special time for her. She loves spending the holidays with you. As much as I don’t want her to miss out on that this year, it looks like it’s going to happen. I’m not going anywhere.”

“We’re not suggesting you do. It’s simple. Piper will come to visit us for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day the way she always does. I’m sure you have something or someone to keep you busy,” Mrs. Chambers says.

“We won’t be here for the holidays.”

They both slowly sit back in their seats, Mr. Chambers looking disappointed and Mrs. Chambers staring daggers at me.

“Where are you going?”

“To a little town in the North Georgia mountains called Tinsel Falls. With the entire Edoardo DeLuca clan.”

Mrs. Chambers laughs, and then she narrows her eyes. “Are you joking?”

I lean forward and say, “Mrs. Chambers, there isn’t a funny fucking bone in my body.”

“You’re taking our daughter away for the holidays,” she hisses.

“Holidays to which you’re invited.”

They both look at me again as if I’ve grown a second head. I glance at my watch with boredom.

“We’re leaving today. Here’s the deal: my assistant, Nora, has made the arrangements, including ones for you all if you’d like. The place that we’re staying in is a log cabin with enough room to accommodate you if you’d like to join us, but if you don’t want to stay there, she’s made reservations for you at a local B and B. She’s also reserved a rental car in your name if you’d like to take advantage of that. The trip is an all-expenses paid one. It will cost you nothing to be there for your daughter.”

“Except our dignity and values,” Mrs. Chambers mutters.

“How long is the trip?” Mr. Chambers asks.

“A few days.”

“Our daughter deserves to have the Christmases she’s accustomed to,” Mrs. Chambers says smartly.

“Then you’ll show up at the cabin tomorrow. I’m sure that would make Piper’s Christmas very merry and bright. Nora will be in touch regarding the arrangements, itinerary and the NDA.”

“NDA?” They both balk at once.

“Everything that I do isn’t just to protect my family. My primary concern is and always will be Piper’s safety and her happiness.”

“I still don’t understand why *we’d* have to sign an NDA,” Mrs. Chambers argues.

“My concern isn’t your understanding. My only concern is Piper’s well-being and her happiness. I will always do whatever is in her best interest.”

Mr. Chambers narrows his eyes. I see the waiter lurking behind a plant, watching us. Poor bastard. I’m accustomed to that. Unfortunately, most people are scared as fuck of me.

Standing to signal the end of our meeting, I say, “Enjoy your brunch. It’s been a pleasure.”

I take two steps before turning around and saying, “Oh, and please...pack something formal to wear.”



PIPER

“What should I pack for this surprise trip, Marco? It’s three days before Christmas!” I panic, walking back and forth in my large walk-in closet, trying to figure out what to take.

“Just pack about a week’s worth of clothes,” his gruff voice calls out from our bedroom.

“That’s the problem. I don’t know if I should be packing a bikini and flip-flops or sweaters and boots, or formal wear or ___”

“Or you could go just like that,” he says, peering into the closet and nodding his head at me. “I’ll buy you clothes.”

I glance down at my nude body before lifting an eyebrow at him.

“I don’t think so. If we’re flying, the last thing I want is for the pilot to see me like this.”

“I’d pluck his fucking eyeballs out,” Marco says. “And don’t try to manipulate me into figuring out if it’s a short or long trip again.”

“It’d be nice to know,” I scoff as he comes behind me and nuzzles my neck.

“Seriously, baby. Just pack enough warm winter clothes for a week.”

“You know that translates into two weeks in my mind, right?”

“I do.”

“I want to pamper you, especially after last night.”

“Mm, that sounds lovely,” I murmur when his hands find their way between my thighs and parts them, bringing back memories of last night at Prodigal Nights. I enjoyed pretending to meet him for the first time and having sex with a stranger. We’ll have to think of new ideas like that all the time.

A loud knock sounds at our door, interrupting my midday pleasure.

“What!” Marco shouts in a gravelly tone.

If I’d been on the other side of that door, I would have run. Unfortunately, it’s not me, but his PA, Nora, who isn’t afraid of my cantankerous fiancé.

“Everything is packed except for Ms. Piper’s luggage. Your driver is ready, and we’re ten minutes behind schedule,” she calls out in a singsong, chipper voice.

I roll my eyes and groan. “Do we have to keep a schedule?”

“We don’t have to do shit but keep you happy,” he says, bending and wrapping his arms behind my knees.

I get slightly dizzy as he lifts me higher and places my pussy in front of his face. My legs lock around his neck, and my fingers tangle in his hair as his mouth meets my twat.

I don’t know what the hell Marco has planned, but I don’t really give a damn either. We could stay right here in this closet, and he can eat me out all day and all night, and I wouldn’t issue a single complaint.

He sets me on top of the marble cabinet in the middle of my closet and lays me out like a Thanksgiving turkey. Spreading my legs wider, he pulls me to the edge of the cabinet and twirls his tongue in circles against my clit before moving down to take slow, long licks from my labia.

My hands reach for his hair, but he grips my wrists and presses them to my sides. My hips jerk up, pressing myself deeper into him, encouraging him to take his fill.

Marco differs from most men I’ve dated in the past because he loves eating pussy. It’s his favorite, even beyond penetration. He’s great at sex, and he loves it, but I swear he loves cunnilingus more, and I don’t mind that he does.

He absentmindedly releases one of my arms, and when I go to reach for his hair again, I remember that he doesn’t want me to touch him. It’s not like he doesn’t want me to, but it’s a

little game we play. Instead, I rest my hand on my abdomen, and that's when I see it, and it makes me smile.

The platinum three-carat ring with three rows of Pavé diamonds winks lovingly at me, reminding me that just four short months ago, I accepted his marriage proposal. I haven't set a date yet, and the reminder of why instantly saddens me.

My parents refuse to meet Marco or even accept him in my life. They know who he is and all about his past. My mother claims that he's the reason for me leaving my former fiancé, Kenneth, at the altar. Never mind the fact that Kenneth had an entire child and ex-wife he'd hidden from me. An ex-wife that he'd been involved with up until three weeks before our wedding.

I left him standing at the altar, and my mother hasn't forgiven me for that. Compound that with the fact that I'm engaged to a man from a well-known organized crime family, a man who happens to be a capo in the DeLuca mafia family.

My father knew that Kenneth wasn't shit, and he was okay with me not marrying him. He was the only person who knew that I planned to leave Kenneth at the altar after confronting him on his bullshit. Yet, he's also not happy about me "rebounding" with Marco.

I don't care about that. I also don't care that he was in an arranged marriage for a long time, one that he could only leave by losing his life because the marriage was sanctioned by his father and the don of the DeLuca family.

What I do care about is that I've loved this man for more than a decade, and I finally have a chance with him. Even as he slides his tongue and fingers inside of me, the sadness that lurks in the background tries to come in and tamper my spirit.

The sadness comes from my parents refusing to be in my life now that I'm with Marco. Initially, it was the strained phone calls and visits. It whittled down to them not calling or visiting me but me always calling and visiting. The next phase was them not returning my calls or always being too busy for me to visit until they'd finally told me that I had to choose.

They couldn't be a part of my life if Marco were in it. His lifestyle went against their religious beliefs.

A tear slips from the corner of my eye, but I press those thoughts out and focus on the man between my legs. The man who's determined to make me happy regardless of everything else. He's moaning, and his slurps are growing louder as he hums his contentment into my pussy.

Marco's eyes open, and his gaze slowly rises to meet mine, and that sly smirk crosses his lips as he pulls back.

"Turn around," he says with glistening lips.

I sit up on the cabinet and turn around with my ass facing him as I position myself on all fours. I hear him rummaging around in one of the cabinet drawers before he places his hands on either side of my hips, positioning me the way he wants me.

My body stretches just a little to make room for the toy he inserts inside of me. I have no idea what he's using until the soft pulsation of the vibrator stimulates me, making me gasp in pleasure and suck in a lungful of air as he sucks me, licks me, and nips at me.

It's not long before the dip in my back increases, my legs spread wider, and my ass juts in the air giving him more access to me. I began to collapse and damn near fall off the cabinet as I scream, "Marco!"

Though my man holds me up, and though he doesn't finish with me just because I'm finished, he manages to push all thoughts of my parents away.

It takes a few more minutes before he finishes, humming in contentment. I hear him leave my closet, and I'm sure he's heading into our bathroom.

I'm still lying on the cabinet five minutes later when he comes by and smacks me on the ass.

"Get in the shower. I'll handle getting your things packed. We'll roll out as soon as you're dressed."

"Kay," I mumble tiredly as he helps me off the cabinet.

Yeah, I'd be just fine staying in bed with him for the rest of the day.



Snow falls around us and glitters like diamonds on the street. White streetlights twinkle in the dark, adding to the festive merriment of the colorful Christmas lights hung on telephone poles and outlining business windows, making them look more welcoming.

Frank Sinatra's *Have Yourself A Merry Little Christmas* plays from speakers posted along the street over each business. Santa Claus, reindeer, and holly decorate the light posts along the way. Everything works together to give the beautiful town character and that small-town Christmas ambiance.

Marco pulls the door of O'Callahan's Pub open, and I step inside, brushing the snowflakes from my shoulders. Removing my cap, I stuff it into my coat pocket and shake my curls out. We stopped here to get something to eat first before arriving at our destination for the evening.

"It's much warmer in here," I say.

"There's one empty table over there. You want to grab it?" he asks, pointing to the left of a fireplace.

"Yes," I say excitedly as a little chill runs through me.

I remove my leather gloves, stuff them in my other pocket, and take the seat that Marco's holding out for me.

No sooner than he's seated, a waitress arrives at our table to take our order. Marco places an order of wings, fries, shrimp in garlic sauce, and tater tot nachos with kimchee sauce.

"When will your family arrive?"

"Niccolò, Alessandro, Mila, Bianca, and Aris should be pulling up any minute. Their flight landed two hours ago, and the last time I heard from them, they were already on the road

from the airport. Antonio, Giulia, Gaia, Massimo, Luna and Ilaria will arrive tomorrow afternoon with my parents.”

“A big Italian Christmas. This should be lots of fun,” I mutter.

Marco reaches over the table, grabs my hand, and presses his lips to my knuckles. Pulling back, he asks, “Are you going to be okay with this?”

“I am.”

He nods. “You’ve met my family, but you’ve never been around them all at once. I can think of no better time than Christmas for you to be submerged in DeLuca love.”

“I’m looking forward to it, baby. I wish they were all staying until the New Year.”

“I don’t,” he grunts.

“Why not?”

“How am I gonna make you scream my name all over the place when my parents are there?”

Giggling, I turn my attention to the bar. A man wearing a ball cap and sunglasses sits at the bar, sipping a drink. He’s staring openly at me. It gives me the creeps, but I don’t say anything because I don’t want Marco freaking out. Besides, our security team is right outside this door, and two of our men are in the pub with us, seated at tables not too far away.

We talk for a while longer before our food arrives, and we dig into it. I didn’t realize how hungry I was until this moment. I guess with all the sex we were having, I’ve worked up quite an appetite.

By the time we finish our meal, the man has left the bar.

“You ready, babe?”

“Yes,” I say, standing as Marco helps me back into my coat.

We head out into the night once again, and someone bumps into Marco.

“Scuse me,” the man says, pushing quickly past us.

I turn just as Marco’s team turns and watches him go. Their hands are on their guns, but Marco growls his displeasure at the men, not preventing the unwanted contact. That contact could easily have been a knife to his gut. I know they’ll hear about it when I’m no longer around.

Yet, the glance that I get tells me that it’s the same man from the bar. I never saw his face, though. I push it out of my mind as we climb into the waiting car and resume our journey to our lodging place for the next week.

The drive is only another fifteen minutes before he says, “We’re here, baby.”

“It’s beautiful, Marco,” I whisper as the towering cabin—freaking castle is more like it—comes into view through the beautiful snow-laden mountain ash trees. Their red berries, though covered with snow, are magnificent in this wintry wonderland.

A two-story log cabin has balconies on every side with some glass walls and covered patios. Warm, orange light beacons from within promise warmth and coziness from the harsh winter cold.

Snow glistens on the grounds and trees like tiny diamonds on a white blanket. The black paved driveway sparkles in the late afternoon sun as if diamonds have been sprinkled on its surface.

It’s incredibly beautiful. We seldom get snow in Atlanta, and when we do, it isn’t nearly this much. When the car rolls to a stop, I jump out, throwing my arms out wide and spinning around.

The fresh mountain air, the whispering wind, and the stillness promise that this vacation will be serene.

Something I’ve needed for the last few weeks.

“This is so beautiful, Marco.”

Wrapping his arms around me, he pulls the hood of my coat from my head and kisses my neck. “Glad you like it.”

“Look!” I point excitedly to the left of the cabin.

A family of deer stares at us. They don’t remain there long because no sooner than we grab our bags, they scamper off into the woods.

Marco gives me a tour of the ten-bedroom, twelve-bathroom, eighteen-thousand square foot home with magnificent views of the snow-covered mountains from every room in the house.

“Marco, this place is beautiful,” I say, stepping out of the library as we head back to the foyer. “But it’s not a log cabin. It’s a freaking mansion.”

“It is a log cabin, Tesoro,” he says, smacking me on the ass. “You like it?”

“Like it? I freaking love it!” I exclaim. “I’d like to rent this place out more often.”

Pressing a kiss under my ear, he says, “No need.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s ours.”

“Your family owns this cabin?”

“No. You and I do.”

“Marco!” I exclaim, spinning around.

“You love it, baby?” he asks, throwing his arms out.

“Baby, why?”

“Early Christmas gift.”

“It should be the only Christmas gift. I didn’t get you anything this lavish.”

“That’s okay. This is a present for the two of us to enjoy whenever we want.”

“You can’t keep doing things like this for me, you know.”

“Things like what?” he asks, pulling me into his arms.

“Buying businesses and houses.”

“I can do whatever the fuck I want because my name is Marco Fucking DeLuca. And seeing as how you’ll be Mrs. Marco DeLuca soon, that means you can have whatever the fuck you want,” he says, kissing the side of my neck.

“Is this an attempt to get me to set a wedding date?” I laugh.

“No, this is an expression of my love. It’ll happen when it’s time.”

“How do we know when it’s time?”

“We’ll know.”

“I’m thinking it’s time soon, Mr. DeLuca. Maybe at the first of the year, we can do it.”

“As long as you feel loved, protected, and appreciated, that’s all I care about.”

“Well, I feel extremely loved, Mr. DeLuca, but at the rate, you’re going, I think I’ll have to marry you soon, or you’re going to go broke wooing me.”

Chuckling, he grabs my ass and says, “You’re already wooed, baby.”

I press my lips against his and say, “I definitely am.”

Our kiss lasts several seconds before I realize that his family will be here soon. The last thing I want is to be caught having sex when they arrive.

“Nora thought of everything, didn’t she?” I say, turning over boxes of hand-blown glass decorations in specialty boxes.

“That’s what she’s paid for,” he says in a distracted tone as he glances at his phone.

“She’s paid to be your PA, babe, but this is well beyond the usual.”

I turn as Marco walks away. He places a call and steps back outside, and I sigh, sitting on the bottom step. He’s been distracted a lot lately, and I wonder what he’s stressed about. He doesn’t discuss family business with me, but something must be brewing.

Late-night phone calls, lots of meetings, and him holed up with Nora more than normal tell me that something is off. It scares me the thought of losing Marco again in any way. In the past, I've lost him because he was married, but this time, I'm afraid of losing him to the streets.

I know that's the life that I've signed up for, but I can't help but worry. I also can't help that I love a man who's in the mafia.

It would be easy to say the last few months together have been beautiful. They have been, but they've also had moments of tension where I'm worrying whether he'll come home. I can't always call him, and I don't want to stress him out, but I am worried about what's going on.

Sighing, I head upstairs to shower and change into something comfortable. By the time I return downstairs, I hear lots of laughter and Italian speaking, and for just a moment, I feel lonely. I think about my brother and my parents and wish they were here.

Although Grant and I aren't extremely close, having my brother in my life is important. Yet, since my parents and I have been on the outs, he seems to be avoiding me, too, though he hasn't cut me off completely. Then again, that might have something to do with him and Samaria spending so much time with her family lately.

Grant told me that they would be spending the holidays with her family in Alabama this year. It worries me that my parents might be alone. It's not something I can help, though, since they've pushed me away.

"Hey, beautiful!" I hear a squeal that has me pulling myself from a trance.

I turn away from the large, fluffy, but naked spruce Christmas tree, and my eyes widen.

"Mila!" I scream, wrapping my arms around Alessandro's wife. She's the only black woman in their family that I can completely relate to.

"Someone missed me," she laughs, squeezing me back.

When she pulls away from me, she stares knowingly at me. “You’re going to be fine.”

We laugh. “I wish my parents could be here.”

“Still not speaking much.”

“No. I can’t believe they’re being like this, Mila. I mean, don’t get me wrong, my brother Grant was always the goody-two-shoes, and I always stayed in trouble.”

“Sounds like the perfect match for Marco,” she says, trying to make me smile.

“Yeah. I don’t get them being pissed at me for not marrying Kenneth and getting engaged to Marco instead.”

She grabs my hand and leads me to the library. Closing the French doors behind her, she makes her way to the bar and prepares a drink for me.

“Here.”

I take a sip of the strong drink, blink rapidly, and then shake my head.

“Girl, you’re gonna need it to deal with all the DeLucas. But...you’re going to have so much fun that you won’t have a minute to be sad. Your parents are missing out on the memories that you’re making, and one day they’ll regret it. Just relax, enjoy yourself, and just let go, girl.”

I plop down on a tan leather couch and kick my shoes off so that I can pull my feet onto the couch with me. I watch Mila prepare a drink for herself as she talks.

“Honey, I get that your parents are worried as hell about you hooking up with a man who’s in the mafia. If it were Bianca, I’d freak the hell out.”

“Your parents accepted Ales.”

“My daddy was one of the biggest drug dealers in the South. He was a badass muthafucka, and my mama was and still is a bad bitch. So, they look at this like their daughter has the best possible protection she can ever have. Your situation isn’t the same. You told me your parents are church deacons

and on the board of a few nonprofits. That explains why your brother is a goody-two-shoes.”

She sits beside me.

“I was looking forward to baking and shopping with my mama. We get most of our shopping out of the way early on, but we enjoy running to the mall for last-minute items and being squeezed in with the crowds. Baking the weekend before Christmas is a big thing, and it won’t happen this year.”

“Yes, hell, it will, girl. Maybe your parents won’t be involved, but we’re going to bake our asses off this week. On Christmas morning, we’re gonna be fat, drunk, full, and happy. I can promise you that,” she says just as the door bangs open, and her seven-and-a-half-year-old daughter, Bianca, comes rushing in.

“Mommy! Mommy! Uncle Marco says we can start baking Christmas cookies.”

Right on Bianca’s heels is her baby brother, eighteen-month-old Aris, who looks just like his father except for his mother’s caramel coloring.

Mila looks at me, winks, and says, “Girl, I guess that’s our queue to get moving. Girl talk is over.”

Laughing, I follow her to the kitchen.



MARCO

I pull a hand down my beard and nervously glance around.
“Are you sure you’re doing the right thing?”
Alessandro, my younger brother, asks.

Tossing my hands in the air, I pace back and forth on the patio. We’re both dressed warmly to ward off the cold. Me in my cobalt blue Stefano Ricci cashmere coat with its mink fur collar and Alessandro with his double-breasted wool coat, neither of us is feeling anything.

I toss my cigar into the snow and stub it with the toe of my alligator Paolo Scafora shoes.

“Think she’s gonna be pissed when she sees how you’re ruining this perfect snow?” Ales asks, stubbing out his cigar and then placing it in the outdoor ashtray.

Bending, I pick up my cigar and toss it into the same receptacle. Shrugging, I reply, “Piper likes to think that all things are beautiful and that we can be protected from the ugliness of this world if we choose to.”

My brother smooths the hairs of his right eyebrow with his index finger. “Of course, you know better.”

Shrugging again, I reply, “Not only do I know better, but I’m also a part of that horror. As much as I want to protect her from it, I can’t protect her from all aspects. The sooner she learns that and that it’s not a reflection of my love if I fail to, the better off we’ll be.”

“The parents.”

Nodding, I say, “Assholes are so goddamned full of themselves. If I didn’t think it would hurt her more, I’d have a bullet placed between the eyes of her bitch of a mother and the spineless coward she calls Dad.”

“Sounds like you weren’t very convincing at brunch earlier.”

“Not really. I chose not to scare the shit out of them. But I’m second-guessing if that was the right move.”

“How do you think she’ll feel about Saturday if her parents aren’t here?”

“Piper’s about to be my wife soon, and some harsh realities I can’t protect her from.”

“Like the one where you might not walk back through those doors one night?”

“Exactly.”

“It’s why I didn’t take the underboss position. Mila, Bianca, and Aris were worth it to me.”

“She’s worth it to me. It’s just who I am, Ales. The mafia is in my blood. I live and breathe for the family, and without it, I might go fucking insane.”

My younger brother laughs and says, “The fact that you can say that shit with a straight face lets me know just how crazy you are.”

“I want her to be happy, but she has to choose to be. Some shit’s out of my hands. Whether or not her parents show up for her, for us, for our future, that’s not shit I can control. Whether she allows that to ruin us or make her stronger is in her hands. It’s up to her to be happy no matter how fucked up her parents are.”

My brother grips my shoulder and says, “As long as you know that, then you’ll be fine.”

“I was wondering where the two of you disappeared to in this big-as-fuck-for-nothing cozy cabin. Cozy cabin, my ass,” Niccolò says, narrowing his eyes through a plume of smoke as he steps up onto the patio.

He appeared from somewhere on the side of the house.

“Big bro is second-guessing his decision,” Ales says, nodding his head at me.

Nico raises an eyebrow and pulls his cigarette back to his lips. With a slight nod, he says, “I can see that.”

“I can’t. He never second-guesses himself. You never second-guess yourself,” Ales says, pointing at me.

“Don’t want to fuck this up.”

“Then why’d you decide to do it?” Ales asks.

“She said she wanted something small and intimate. She even said she’d consider eloping yesterday if that meant she didn’t have to plan another wedding. Only problem is she knows I want my family there.”

“You can’t predict how women will act even when you think you’ve got all the clues and the algorithms figured out,” Nico says.

“This coming from the guy who has never had a relationship, let alone brought a woman home,” Ales chuckles, jerking his thumb at our baby brother.

“Why the fuck would I do something like that?” Nico asks.

He’s considered to be grumpy like me, just not fucking crazy. I would say that Nico’s the smartest out of all of us because he plays by his own rules and keeps everyone the fuck out of his business. Not just in how he handles his personal life, but the kid is just smart as shit. He was an all-A student throughout school, earning a Civil Engineering degree.

“Mamma is gonna want grandkids from you soon,” Ales says.

“You’re doing a great job of keeping her supplied with them between you and Mass. D’ya know he has another little fucker on the way?” Nico asks.

Laughing, I reply, “The last two months.”

“The fuck? He never said anything to me until last week,” Ales says.

“I just found out yesterday morning,” Nico says.

I look at them and shake my head. My twin, Massimo and I have always been close, but these two feel left out whenever I know something about him that they don’t.

“So, what are you second-guessing?” Nico asks when I don’t respond to his confusion.

“Saturday,” Ales answers for me, pushing his gloved hands up and down inside his coat pockets.

“Instead of freezing your cogliones, let’s go inside,” Nico says.

“Can’t. He doesn’t want Piper to overhear our conversation,” Ales says, speaking up for me again.

“House so damn big she won’t find you until next year.”

Shaking my head, I say, “And yet, our actual home is bigger.”

“Just saying. You claimed you were buying her a little mountain retreat, but this is more like a resort,” Nico exclaims.

My ears tingle like they always do whenever Piper’s around.

“The woman could find me if she was blind, couldn’t smell, was legless and had her hands cuffed behind her back.”

“You shouldn’t say such things about your mother,” I hear behind me.

Turning around, I smirk when I see Piper. Pulling her from behind me, I reluctantly relinquish her to Ales and then Nico for a hug.

“Piper!” They both exclaim.

“When are you gonna make an honest man out of our brother?” Nico asks.

“Soon,” she promises, turning back to me and wrapping her arms around my waist.

“Not soon enough. Someone else needs to get pregnant so Mamma can get off me about more grandkids,” Mila says, laughing.

Piper’s face turns red, and then she shakes her head. “I want at least two years with this man to just love everything about him before that world is interrupted.”

“You deserve that time,” Ales sniffs.

Everyone silently nods, and I rest my chin on my fiancée’s head. Her fingers are warm and soothing against my beard when she lifts her hand to scratch it and then pulls her fingers through it.

“Once kids arrive, it’s all about them, and they’ll be here forever.”

“Don’t I know it,” Ales grumbles.

“Boy, shut up! You’re right with your mom in trying to get me pregnant again,” Mila says, laughing as Ales pulls her into his arms and nuzzles the side of her neck.

“I’m just in it for the fun of getting there.”

Giggling, Mila says, “No, you’re trying to bring more babies into this world. You love those two crumb-snatchers in there.”

“Speaking of...where are they?” I ask, scowling.

“Not ruining your house, that’s for sure,” Piper says.

I frown at that. I don’t know when she’ll stop looking at everything as mine instead of ours. That was the purpose of buying this house and putting her name on it. Maybe after I show her the paperwork, she’ll believe it.

“Bianca is taking out the ingredients for the cookies we’ve been ordered to bake.”

“And Aris?” Ales asks.

“Sitting at the island with his sippy cup and some apple slices,” Mila replies.

“That’s only going to last for so long. It’s time for us to get back inside,” Ales says with a resigned sigh.

“You’re right,” Mila agrees, leading the pack back into the house.

When Piper turns to follow behind Nico, I grab her hand and pull her back against me. I remain silent until the patio door closes.

“Everything okay?” she asks, turning in my arms and staring up at me.

“Are you happy?”

“Of course I am.”

“If you could marry me today, would you?”

“Absolutely.”

“Without your parents?” I ask.

“Hey,” she says, resting her palms on the sides of my face. “Don’t do this. My parents have issues, and it may hurt me that they don’t accept this.” She gestures between us with one finger and then places her hand back on my face. “But that’s their issue, not ours. I love you, Marco DeLuca and everything that you represent, even the big, bad, scary, and corrupt parts of you. When I accepted that ring on my hand, it wasn’t for show. It wasn’t about all the people gathered there that night or about you buying me another salon. It was because my heart said yes, and my soul was glad it found its way home. Yes, I would marry you right now barefoot in the damn snow in this backyard if we had everything set up for it.”

I kiss her lips slowly, gripping her hips tightly in my hands as I pull her against me so she can feel my erection.

“I love you, PJ,” I say against her lips, calling her by my nickname for her.

Laughing, she says, “I know you do.”

We kiss again before she pulls back and stares into my eyes.

“You having second thoughts about marrying me, Marco?”

“Never,” I whisper harshly. “I just know that the holidays are special to you and your family.”

“They chose to love each other, and it didn’t matter what anyone else thought about it. I choose to love you, and it doesn’t matter what anyone else feels about that. Will it hurt if they continue to treat me this way?” Tears sparkle in her eyes, but she nods firmly. “Absolutely! But I can’t do anything

about that. I'm not going to beg them, bribe them, or threaten them. They have a choice to make, and they've made it. Me?" she says, jerking her thumb at herself. "I choose you."

She kisses me again, long and hard, this time before pulling back. "I'll show you just how much tonight. But now...let's get some damn baking done!"

She pulls away from me, laughing, when she dodges my attempt to pull her back. The patio door is opened before I can reach her, and she's disappeared inside.

Briefly, I look into the sky at the stars twinkling overhead. If I'd never had another wish granted, I would want the one for her parents to arrive tomorrow to come true.



PIPER

“I’m having a hard time getting these knots out of your shoulders,” Aurora, the masseuse and owner of Encore Day Spa, says.

“I’m trying to relax, Aurora, but I just want everything to go well for Christmas.”

“Girl, you need to relax. From everything that I see of you two, that man loves your dirty drawers,” she says.

I sigh. “I don’t know. There seems to be a disconnect between us lately. I feel like he’s holding something important back, and I don’t know what it is. If I ask him if everything is okay, he reassures me, but something deep inside tells me it’s not.”

“Have you told him that you don’t believe he’s being truthful with you?”

“No. I don’t want him to think that I don’t trust him.”

“You think he’s cheating on you?”

“No. He’s the most loyal man I’ve ever known. But something is going on with him, and I can’t put my finger on it.”

“Maybe you need to tell him how you’re feeling, and if he still insists all is well, then give it a break for a while. I’ll be right back, Piper. I have the perfect thing to ease your tension,” Aurora says.

“Okay,” I mutter with my face in the massage pillow.

Soft Christmas jazz music plays, creating a relaxing atmosphere. My body may be relaxed, but my mind isn’t.

I want to build a home for him that will be his place of solitude and refuge. I want to be his strength and backbone, who he pours into when the world is against him.

While I respect and understand that he can’t tell me certain things, I need him to be honest with me when he’s having a

bad day or if he's under pressure. That's the only way I can figure out how I can serve him.

The door opens and closes again, and I sigh.

"You're right, Aurora. I think that it is the holidays. His family is in town. He wants everyone to have a beautiful time on top of running his business. That must be what has him stressed out, and I'm probably adding to it by nagging him," I agree.

Aurora's oily fists knead my back muscles and slowly work their way down to my thighs. The scent is sandalwood, and it mixes well with the lavender oil she'd previously used.

I find myself relaxing further into the table and not thinking about the tension that Marco has been under. The music changes to Boyz II Men's *Let It Snow*.

"I love this song," I murmur.

I feel the knots ease from my body as my eyes drift closed. After a couple of minutes, I feel myself drifting into a peaceful rest. I'm somewhere between napping and resting when I hear Ginuwine's *Mistletoe* come on just as Aurora's hands slip between my thighs and graze my core.

I instantly start to shift and get off the table, but she presses me back down, forcing my face into the massage pillow. I stare uncomfortably through the hole at the teak floors.

"Hey, umm...watch where you put those fingers," I warn.

I'm no longer comfortable, and while I don't want to think she intentionally did it, I'm still a bit uncomfortable. She doesn't respond but continues working my thigh muscles.

A kiss pressed against my back when I finally relax again alerts my senses that something is completely off. That wasn't Aurora. Hell, unless she grew a beard in the last half an hour.

Lifting my head, I glance questioningly over my shoulder and laugh.

"What the hell?"

“Relax, baby. I’m taking your stress into my body,” Marco says, working his hands further up my thighs.

“How did you get in here?”

Ignoring me, his large hands grip my butt muscles and work them over so well I can’t help but lay down again and relax.

The music, the scents, and the feel of Marco’s hands on my body are the perfect stress reliever. When his fingers stop working, I listen closely to figure out what he’s doing as I hear his footsteps recede.

He locks the door and then returns to me and works my other leg before returning to that pleasant space between my thighs. His fingers lightly brush me, and my pussy pulses wanting him to do more, but I don’t move.

“Relax, baby. You’re at my mercy,” his deep voice grumbles.

Lord have mercy, and what great mercy it is, I think, when his thumb slips inside of my ass and works it over. A soft moan escapes me as he continues to work it while his other hand drizzles peppermint-scented oil over my back.

Marco’s tongue is a sensual contrast against the cool tingle of the peppermint as he licks down my spine, pressing his tongue against my asshole. My knuckles turn white, and my fingers redden from gripping the table so tightly.

“Damn, baby. Put me out of my misery already,” I beg.

“Every time you complain, every time you beg, I’m going to punish that ass,” he says, shoving two more fingers in my ass along with the thumb that’s already working it.

I feel the stretch, and I moan in pleasure at the heady sensation.

He removes his hand and says, “Turn over, Tesoro.”

I comply readily, not sure what he’s about to do, but I know that I’ll love it.

His fingers return to working my ass as I push my feet up on the table with me, bringing my knees to my chest.

“Unzip me,” he orders, standing by my head.

I unzip him, and I’m surprised to find that he’s gone commando. I often do that for him, but he’s never done that.

I lick my lips and moan again at the pearlescent bead of pre-ejaculate on the tip of his dick.

I angle my head and take him into my mouth as he continues fingering my ass. His pinky and index finger rub my slit while his other fingers pick up speed, drawing me close to an orgasm.

“Don’t you fucking cum until I say so. Capisci?” he orders.

“Si, capisco,” I reply, briefly pulling his dick free from my mouth to acknowledge my understanding.

Marco jerks my head up and forces himself back into my mouth and deeper into my throat. His thrusts are unapologetically brutal as he works to maintain the speed of his fingers, pillaging my ass as if I’m not already sore from the other night at the club.

“Aww, fuck, Piper. You suck dick so good. You love sucking dick, baby?”

“Grush,” I grumble, trying to say yes with a mouthful of dick, which seems to humor Marco based on the twinkle in those dark eyes.

Slob dribbles from my lips down his shaft and onto the floor. I can’t even begin to think what Aurora must be thinking about what’s happening in this room. Too late for regrets and second thoughts. We’re deep into this thing now, with his dick ravaging my throat and his fingers fucking me in the ass and pussy at a vicious pace.

Just when I’m about to cum, he removes his fingers and smacks my pussy.

“Told you not to fucking cum. I feel you tightening around my fingers,” he growls.

Tears stream from my eyes as he picks up speed. He pulls back, points at the floor, and says, “I want you on the floor, on your knees.”

He helps me off the table and onto my knees, where he clutches a fistful of my hair in a tight grip. Gripping his dick in my hands, I slowly work the head of his dick over until I work my way further and further down his shaft. I pull back and suck his balls into my mouth, alternating licking and sucking them.

Marco snatches my head back, and tears prick my eyes. “Suck this dick, PJ!”

I return to the head, working it over, encouraged by his groans of pleasure until he wants more. My man has no problem conveying what he wants in or out of the bedroom, or in this case, the massage salon.

With both hands, he grips my curls in tightly clenched fists, and he begins to fuck my face savagely, brutally, to the point that the only thing keeping me upright is his fists in my hair.

The humming in my throat is not in sync with anything as he wildly thrusts and pummels inside of me while instructing, “Don’t you fucking bite. Make sure you keep those teeth covered,” and I do, I always do.

Marco’s growling like a caged bear trapped in the wild. My hands try to maintain their grip on his shaft, but it’s impossible because he’s pumping at an erratic and reckless pace.

“Fuck, PJ!” he groans. His voice almost sounds as if he’s about to cry.

“Fuck, PJ!” he repeats. “You suck dick so fucking good. Bring a man’s enemies to his knees. You fuck—”

He doesn’t finish his sentence because he’s rendered speechless by the thick sheets of semen seeping from him down my throat. I drink it all, eager to please, ready to satiate my hunger.

My fiancé's breathing is heavy and uneven as he tries to steady himself when he's finished. When he finally releases his grip on my hair, he reaches down and pulls me to my feet, claiming my lips in a hungry and heated kiss.

"On the table," he orders, his chest still heaving.

When I climb back up, he smacks my ass and says, "On your hands and knees."

When he enters my pussy, I can already feel the soreness from what he'd started earlier, but it's pleasant, so I welcome him inside of me with gratitude and ease.

I love it when we connect like this when his savagery overtakes my gentle spirit, and he claims me as his. My body makes room for him, allowing him to be deeply seated inside of me.

His strokes are slow and long, drawing out the pleasure as I clench all around him. Marco's long, tapered fingers nestle into my hips as he makes his home inside of me.

When I think I can't take anymore, he pulls out and buries his face inside my pussy, sucking, licking, and nipping it from the back. Like a feline, I arch my back with my belly low to the table, granting him ease of access.

It's a give-and-take that I'm happy to comply with.

Marco hums, groans, and talks to me, speaking a language that my ears perceive but don't understand; only my body is fluent in the words and sounds coming forth, and it responds accordingly.

We return to our earlier session of his fingers in my ass and his tongue and lips in and all over my pussy. Using two hands, he spreads me wider, my legs barely remaining on the table. I'm pushed from behind, and it's only when the table rocks do I realize that he's climbed up here with me.

"Come on, baby. Give me all that you have. Release it."

Marco, too, is on his hands and knees, his fingers, tongue, and lips deep into their work. It doesn't take long from this

position, him behind me, face buried in my ass and pussy to make me cum.

When I'm done, he places his hands on my ass, spreading it apart. It's not long before I feel the searing pain of his big dick pressing into my asshole.

“Told you I'd punish this ass for disobedience.”

And punish he does as he pumps me hard and fast until I'm gritting my teeth. He takes and takes until I'm begging for mercy. And miracle of miracles, I somehow manage to cum again through the pain and savagery.

When I cum this time, it's a keening cry that I know will alert every damn body in this building to what's going on in room two-C, though we're in the back corner.

Everyone will know that Marco just took my body to new heights and relieved tension that the most adept masseuse can't accomplish with fingers alone. I'll walk out of here on shaky legs, and they'll know that he's the one behind that. A smile will grace my lips, and everyone will be aware that it wasn't a good fucking alone that accomplished that.

And I won't care.

Why?

Because I'm a thousand times more relaxed than I was when I walked in.



MARCO

I've got a headache the size of Texas. I seldom get headaches, but there's a fucking knocking in my skull that's been driving me insane for the last almost forty-eight hours. It's been ongoing since the incident outside the bar Thursday night when some man bumped into me.

I gave my soldiers shit for even allowing anyone to get that close to me.

Something is off, and I'm not sure what it is. There's a buzzing that's taking place in my brain, and the last time this occurred was when Graziella was murdered almost two years ago. I'll be damned if I let anything happen to Piper, but my senses are telling me don't trust shit.

"What's wrong?" Nico asks, walking up to me where I stand in the backyard overseeing the vendors.

"Some shit's about to go down."

"No one knows about this day except for our family."

"And a few of her friends and the vendors. I hope that shit doesn't come back and bite me in the ass," I mutter.

"Tell you what. Keep making sure they get the arch and those damn flowers in the right position, and I'll look around."

"Nearest neighbor is four miles down the road."

"My point precisely," Nico says, walking towards the tree line to the rear of my backyard. We own ten acres of property that I still haven't gotten completely secured.

Flipping my phone out, I call Nora.

"Hey. How far away are ya?"

"We're still shopping. We were sidetracked at a gentleman's store that Mila and Piper just had to go in to buy gifts for you guys, and don't you dare ask me what she bought because I'm not telling. Oh, yeah, and your mom stopped to get a gift for your father."

“What store?”

“I’m not telling. You’ll only figure out what gift she’s got you if I tell you the name, Marco.”

“How long before you guys head back this way?”

“About an hour.”

“Shit.”

“You’re not finished?”

“No.” I glance around me at the people coming and going setting up chairs, flowers, arches, and all the other shit they have to set out. “I’ll have them move their trucks so she doesn’t pick up on anything.”

“Should have let me stay there and run things. I would have made sure they stuck to the schedule.”

Grunting, I reply, “Yeah. I know.”

“By the way, her curiosity was definitely piqued when I showed up this morning.”

“Great story, by the way.”

When Nora arrived in an Uber this morning, she told Piper that I had invited her to spend the holidays with my family since hers had gone to France. Piper bought it hook, line, and sinker and went on and on about how thoughtful and sweet that was of me.

After today, Nora will be driven back to Atlanta to spend the holidays with her family.

“Thanks. Tell you what...I can stall a bit by dropping by the caterer and checking on things. I’ll tell her that I’m checking on an order for Christmas Eve. Hey, gotta go. Piper’s heading my way,” Nora whispers and clicks off the phone.

Placing two fingers in my mouth, I release a shrill whistle. The workers all stop and turn to stare at me.

“You’ve got thirty minutes to get this shit together and get the hell out of here!”

“Yes, sir, Mr. DeLuca,” they all call out and begin running from one place to the next.

A hand grips my left shoulder, and I turn to see my father.

“Padre.”

“Marco. I’ve never questioned the steel of your balls, but even I gotta admit this takes big ones.”

“Yeah, even I’m questioning your sanity on this one,” Ales says, coming up to my right.

“When you’ve got money, and you pay attention to your woman, you can make her dreams come true.”

“Why’re you looking so worried then?” my oldest brother, Antonio, asks from behind me.

I step aside so that he can join the semi-circle.

“Not worried about this. Something else is off, and I can’t put my finger on it. I sense danger, and I don’t know who, what, or why. The only fucking thing I know is that I’m doing this today no matter what happens.”

“You think it might be her parents?” my father asks.

Shaking my head, I say, “No. They haven’t arrived yet, but Nora confirmed they did pick up the rental.”

“Mm.”

“Larry will be here,” Ales says of his father-in-law, Lawrence Hartwell.

“We’ve got enough manpower to handle whatever,” Tony says.

“Hey, what’s with the faces?” my identical twin brother, Massimo, jokes, stepping out into the yard with us.

“Marco thinks there’s a threat.”

“Where?” Massimo asks as he instantly goes on alert, shifting his three-year-old Ilaria to his other hip.

“Don’t know. I sense it,” I say.

My twin's eyes go as deadly as mine as our father takes my niece from my brother and kisses her cheek.

"Everyone be on guard. You checked out the staff?" Massimo asks.

"They're Dante's people. He's vetted every one of them," I say, referencing my cousin, Dante Bianchi, who just arrived last night with his wife, Indigo.

"All right. Let's stay focused and keep this show moving. I just got a call from Giulia, and she says they're heading to their cars now," Tony shares.

"Where's fucking Nico?" my father asks.

"Checking the grounds."

"Tony. Ales. Mass. Find your brother and make sure everything's okay," my father orders.

They all head off in different directions, and it gives me great comfort to know that my brothers are here with me if shit jumps off.

My cousin, Dante, steps away from the florist for a moment and asks, "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah. But I've got everyone on high alert because I think something's about to go down."

He nods. "I've got you. Just tell me where you need me."

"I need to get the vendors out of here first. The women are on their way back."

"I know. Indigo just texted me and said they were fifteen minutes out. Everyone except for the minister is packing up so they can head out. The caterers just arrived a few minutes ago."

"Good. What about their truck?"

"One of your men showed them the designated spot to park," he says, crossing his arms.

"Cool."

"Her parents just pulled up."

“Good,” I grunt.

“How do you think they’re going to act to news that she has a surprise wedding today? Did you tell them?”

I slant my gaze at him and look at him from underneath my lids. “They know.”

“Cool. I hope that they don’t screw it up. Is that the threat you feel?”

I glare at my cousin and ask, “Threat? They’re not a threat to me. I hope they’re showing up to support Piper.”

“I’m sure they will.”

He grips my shoulder, and I nod and head back inside to meet with her parents, but not before stopping to talk to Nico, who swiftly jogs in my direction.

“What’d you find?”

“Nothing that looks out of place or sends any warnings, but I have to be honest, big bro. I’m tense as hell. I feel it, too.”

“Be vigilant. I’ve already told my men to be extra observant today. Think I need to remind them.”

“Beat you to it. Already talked to each of them. They’ll be checking guests as they come and go, and they’ve already checked the vendors. Everyone’s leaving except for the caterers.”

“Yeah, Dante just gave me the heads up.”

“Hey, I forgot. I got a call from Nora. She says she tried to call you but couldn’t reach you.”

“Yeah, the battery’s dead,” I grunt, looking at the offending object in my hand.

“She says you need to call her immediately. It’s urgent and has to do with today.”

“Fuck!” I grumble, taking his phone from his outstretched hand.

I dial Nora.

“Hey,” I greet Nora when she answers.

“What took you so long? I called over an hour ago!” she whispers.

“Phone died. What’s up?”

“I stopped by the caterer like I said that I would, and it’s not good news.”

“The fuck do you mean? They’re here already. No one has said anything to me.”

“Well, I stopped by there earlier, and they were preparing to leave, so I know that everything’s fine with the food. That’s not what I mean.”

“Get to the point, Nora,” I grumble.

“When I stopped by, one of the staff said that someone had been in asking about the event yesterday.”

“Explain.”

“They saw the cake and asked if it was for the DeLuca event that was happening today. She told the person no. She said she didn’t know anything about DeLuca events. She knew if they were associated with the DeLucas, then they would know that information. She also knew she’d signed an NDA and that she wasn’t allowed to discuss the event with anyone except for you and me. I told her to give me a call if she saw the person again.”

“Good job, Nora. Was she able to give you a description of what the person looked like?”

“Yeah. The guy was of average height and build, with sunglasses and blonde hair that she thought was a wig. She said he was in there supposedly inquiring about their services and prices.”

“I don’t have time to go back and pull their cameras. Get your asses back here in a hurry and make sure all of you stick together.”

“We are. I did tell Luigi and Bruno, though,” she says of two of my soldiers who are brothers and who I assigned to the

women this morning.

“Good. I’ll see you soon.”

I end the call without bothering to say goodbye and instantly dial Luigi.

“Hey, Boss.”

“Panel up?”

“Yeah, they can’t hear anything.”

“The fuck is going on?”

“Don’t know, Boss. I know Nora said some shaky shit was happening at the caterers. The women are in the limo now, and we’re heading back your way. Bruno’s driving. No tails.”

“Good. Get back here.”

“We’re five minutes out.”

I hand the phone to Nico and head inside to meet with my future in-laws and hide them before Piper arrives.



PIPER

“I’ll need to head back out into town either this afternoon or tomorrow,” I say as I head into the cabin with the ladies.

“For what? You bought out the entire town,” Mila says.

“Did you see the cute little boutique owner?” Giulia asks.

“She was so excited!” Gaia says.

“She should have been with the amount of money we spent in there,” I say, stopping in the foyer before heading upstairs.

“What?” Paula, Mila’s mom, asks.

“Do you smell that? Something delicious is cooking, and all the women have been gone. I can’t imagine who—”

Mamma DeLuca grabs me by the arm and turns me back toward the stairwell. “Oh, no, you don’t. Pappa DeLuca and the boys are having guy time.”

“If Pappa’s cooking, it’s going to be delish!” Giulia says.

“Well, I can’t wait to eat because I’m starving. All that shopping has worked up a big appetite in me,” Paula says.

“Me too,” Gaia agrees. “I could eat a...what do you say, horse?”

Laughing, Mila replies, “Girl. You eat so much and don’t gain a pound. I can’t stand your skinny ass.”

“Mila!” Paula calls.

“Sorry, Mom. But look at her.”

When we reach the second landing, the ladies each turn either to the left or right to head to their room, except for Mamma DeLuca.

“Going to shower so we can head out for our surprise dates,” Mila calls out.

A chorus of giggles goes up.

We're all supposed to shower and dress because the men are taking us out on a surprise date tonight.

"I'm going to check on our grandbabies and make sure they haven't driven the men crazy. You...relax."

I look at her curiously, not sure what that means.

"Okay, but I'm fine."

She winks and smiles at me, leaving me to wonder what that means.

I head into the room, shower, and then collapse on the bed for a while. Picking up my phone, I want to hear Marco's voice, but I heed Mamma DeLuca's warning about the men having time with their dad.

I throw an arm over my head and close my eyes. The tears seep from underneath, and I remain in this position for several minutes, crying.

A knock sounds at my door.

"Come in," I sniff.

The door opens, and my mother peers inside. I sit up straight.

"What? Mommy...what are you...what are you doing here?" I ask in disbelief as I stare at my mother.

"Piper Chambers! I know you're not crying over a man."

"No, Mommy! I'm crying because you and Daddy are breaking my heart!"

"There's no room for all the dramatics, honey. Not today of all days. We'll work it out."

"I can't go on like this. I need you, and I need Daddy, but if you're asking me to give up Marco, my answer is a firm and resounding no."

"Then good. Because that would be a horrible shame if your daddy and I traveled all this way today to watch you exchange vows with the man that you love, and you refuse to marry him," Mommy says.

“What wedding vows? We haven’t even set a date yet,” I say.

My best friends, Rashida and Toya, step into the room behind my mother, and my mouth drops.

“You may not have set a date, but that man did, Piper,” Toya says, holding a box in one arm and a case in another.

My eyes go from her to Rashida, who’s holding a large garment bag.

“What’s going on here?” I ask, standing up as another woman steps inside. “Champion Smith?” I shriek.

Champion is a makeup artist for celebrities, and she has her own videography and photography business. I know that it costs an arm and a leg to have her here today, but why?

“I don’t understand what’s going on.”

“Show her,” my mother says, pointing at the garment bag.

All three ladies, my mother and two best friends, are wearing formal attire, and their hair is freshly styled. Rashida and Toya are attired in deep red formal gowns with sweetheart necklines. Rashida has a white fur shrug, and Toya is wearing a white fur stole.

Champion puts her three large bags down and proceeds to hold the garment bag while Rashida unzips it. My breath hitches in my throat as I take in the champagne-colored Italian silk mermaid gown with Leavers lace overlay embroidered with Swarovski crystals.

I know the details of this dress to the stitching, though I haven’t seen it before. I drew a picture of it for Marco years ago before I broke up with him. I told him if I ever married, that is what my dream dress would look like.

When I was marrying Kenneth, I couldn’t afford to have my gown designed. I also didn’t want to wear the gown for him that I’d shared with my lover.

I can’t believe that Marco kept that picture after all these years.

“What’s going on here?” I ask, looking from my best friends to my mother for an explanation.

“What’s going on is that Marco was determined that he’s marrying you today. He’s not letting anything or *anyone* stop him,” Rashida says with a pointed look at my mother.

“Don’t get fresh, young girl,” Mommy says, slicking a hand over her sleek, grey-haired updo.

“This man has spent the last two months planning this day for you. He’s pulled in Rashida and me to help Nora with the details and took your notebook that you’d been writing your thoughts and ideas in to give us all a guideline,” Toya says.

Laughing, I say, “I’m gonna kick his....” I trail off when I see my mother glaring at me.

“He knows that I’ve been looking for that journal everywhere! And he had it all this time?”

“He said that he wanted to be as stress-free as possible for you so that the only thing you had to do was show up and say I do,” Rashida explains.

“Mommy, how did you come to be here? You don’t like him, and neither does Daddy. Is he here?”

“Yes, sweetheart. Your father is here. As a matter of fact, he’s the reason that I’m here. He put his foot down and said enough was enough. We didn’t have to like Marco, but you will always be our baby girl, and you’ve done nothing to lose our support except love the wrong man.”

“He’s the right man...the only man for me.”

She steps closer and takes my face in her hands. Wiping the tears from my eyes, her face crinkles like she’s fighting back the tears. “I’ve been a foolish old woman. I thought maybe if we held out, you would come to your senses and give up this silliness and not do something so reckless as marry the mafia.”

I roll my eyes.

“But,” she continues, “What I couldn’t see was that your father’s and my actions were hurting you more. Do you know

Marco tricked us into meeting him for brunch Thursday morning?"

I frown. "I knew that he had a brunch, but I thought it was for business."

"Yeah, well, he handled business, all right," my mother says, looking none too pleased. "He gave your father and me an ultimatum about being here for you this day and for the holidays. Now, the only thing you need to do is let Champion fix your face and hair, get yourself into this beautiful dress, and see what this man has planned for you."

"This is a lot," I say, dropping down on my bed.

"That's fine. I can work with a lot, but I don't have a lot of time, so all I need to know is...are you marrying the man or not?" Champion asks.

I look at my friends and mother, and I can tell they're all holding their breaths. They can't imagine what it might be like to tell Marco DeLuca no.

"I blamed Marco for messing up your wedding to Kenneth. From all accounts, you were going through with the ceremony until Marco showed up at your dressing room just minutes before you were to walk down that aisle. It took a lot of courage for him to do what he did, but I didn't respect him. He could have chosen any day to tell you how he felt, and I was so pissed at you and him for a long time after that. I didn't understand how I could raise a daughter to be so foolish that she'd mess up a thing with a good man."

"So, you've been punishing me all this time."

"I have. I should have encouraged you to slow things down. But here you are in another relationship with another man who was married when you were involved with him the first time. There's no way that I can see you not getting hurt."

"Mommy, I understand that. But if I'm going to be hurt, why not just be here to wipe my tears if it happens rather than being the one to contribute to that hurt?"

She grabs my face, pulls me in and kisses my forehead. "You're right, sweetheart. Seeing Marco making the demands

and concessions that he made for us to be here today lets me know that he loves you. Having your friends coordinate with his PA to make this day come true lets me know that he wants the world for you. He wants you to be happy.”

“He does, and he works at it all the time.”

“I can’t say that it’s easy to ignore that he’s in the mafia, or at least his family is,” she says.

I won’t address that because whatever she wants to think to make it easier to deal with, I’ll let her have it.

“But I have chosen to love my daughter in spite of what things appear to be. I don’t want to miss out on any more of your life. Your father and I decided that if we missed this, we might never forgive ourselves.”

I wrap my arms around my mother and squeeze her to me before turning my head and kissing her cheek.

“I love you, Mommy.”

“Love you, too, Piper.”

“So, there is going to be a wedding?” Champion asks.

“Yes!” I exclaim, and she instantly jerks me up and pulls me into my dressing room to start working on me.

It’s not long before the women in Marco’s family join us, and it’s one big happy party with everyone chattering away.

Another knock sounds at the door, and Marco pushes it open.

“Ladies, can I have a minute?” his gaze is on me.

“You can’t see her before the wedding!” my mother protests.

“Marco, be patient,” his mother pleads.

A low rumble pushes from his throat, and he doesn’t say a word, neither does he break our gaze.

“Please. Can you all give us a moment,” I plead as my heart roars to life in my chest.

There's a lot of fussing, but eventually, everyone clears out of the room.

Marco's leaning against the doorjamb, staring at me. He's beautiful in his suit with his hair slicked back.

"Come here," I whisper.

He pushes off the door jamb and says, "I remember meeting you in another room similar to this one almost two years ago. Difference was you had on your wedding dress."

I loop my arms around his neck. "Thank you for what you're doing. My gown is gorgeous!"

"Glad you love it."

"And thank you for saving my life that day. I don't know if I'd have had the courage to do what I did if you hadn't shown up."

"Glad I did," he says, kneeling before me.

"Marco! You're going to ruin that suit."

He winks. "It'll be worth every lick," he says, parting my sex under my dressing gown and licking me. "Every suck," I groan at his words and his lips on my clit. "And every nip," he growls before consuming me.

My hands go to his shoulders, and I work hard to steady myself, but Marco lifts me and carries me to the bed. Splayed out on the bed, I watch as he buries himself between my legs and puts in the work. My back arches, and I pump hard and fast, feeding him my pussy until he's the one moaning, and I'm grabbing a pillow to muffle my screams.

Marco feasts greedily until I'm thrashing wildly on the bed. When he sits up, he rocks back on his heels, and I smirk at his shiny beard, lips, and mustache.

"Got a little something there," I say, swiping my finger to indicate the area I'm referencing.

He winks. "Just the way I like it. See you at the altar, Ms. Chambers?"

“See you at the altar, Mr. DeLuca,” I smirk as he licks his lips and saunters from the room with me still on him.



MARCO

Our cabin is in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Georgia, at Brasstown Bald. We have a perfect view of the snow-covered mountains from our backyard and any room in the house.

A wooden walkway has been erected to lead Piper from the house to where I'm standing at the gazebo near a cliff that looks over a ledge. Large, snow-covered beech and pine trees surround us on two sides.

Heaters are set up all around to combat the cold, wintry temperatures to make sure our guests are comfortable. They were all served hot cider, hot toddy, or hot chocolate upon their arrival. Warm blankets were on the backs of each chair that had been set up to help ward off the cold.

The wooden walkway is lined with candles and poinsettias. A large arch crafted from Juniper bushes is decorated with white Christmas roses and poinsettias.

I know she'll love the fragrant aroma the Juniper bushes create. My heart thuds again, and I look at Massimo just as he bobs his head towards the glass French doors leading from the family room to the outdoors.

Gaia gets up from her seat, walks to the piano to the left of the arch, and smiles at me.

I watch as my sister closes her eyes and strikes the first chords of *You Are The Reason*. The double doors open, and Piper and her father step out just as someone steps from the left of the house.

Calum Scott begins to belt out the lyrics of his song, and I watch as my fiancé's head swivels in his direction. Her mouth drops, and she turns back to me with tears in her eyes.

For the first time in a long time, my heart is full of joy, peace, and love. Despite the warnings triggering in my brain, I'm determined to marry this woman today. To claim her as

my own so that she's always loved, protected, adored, and honored by me.

Piper is the epitome of a princess in her beautiful handcrafted one-of-a-kind gown with the diamond tiara taming her curly hair into a graceful ponytail with curls cascading down over her shoulders. She drew a picture of the gown several years ago when I was still married to Graziella. I kept that picture all these years, and last year, I gave it to Silver Wang, a couture designer who took the fashion world by storm a few years ago.

At that time, I had no idea that Piper would take my hand in marriage. I was still a broken shell of a man, but I knew her love could make me whole.

I watch her now as she waltzes toward me, and I think about the conversation I had with her parents when they arrived. I think of how I promised her father I would never hurt her and that I promised to always place her life before mine.

I think about how I promised her mother that I've already planned for Piper to be taken care of if anything should happen to me. I think of how they accepted my promises, though I know they're still not happy with the man she chose to love.

I'm grateful that they chose to honor her wishes and support her despite their feelings. I don't expect we'll become a happy family overnight. What I do expect is that they will respect me, and I'll do the same for them as I give every day of my life, honoring the promises I'm about to make her now.

"PJ," I say when her father places her hands in mine.

"Baby, you made my dream come true," she says, waving a hand around to indicate the wedding décor, our families, and her friends.

I lean in and kiss her lips as the priest clears his throat.

"May I have the privilege of performing the ceremony first?" he asks, causing our guests to laugh.

I nod, and the ceremony commences. Every word that is spoken, every vow taken, I commemorate in my heart. There

is nothing about this day that I want to miss or forget. Yet, I'm still vigilant.

Though I have my best men on duty today, I'm as alert as always. This is my family. This is my heart. And this is our home.

"You may now kiss your bride," Father Gallo pronounces as we conclude our vows.

I pull my beautiful bride into my arms, and I know she feels my arousal, my desire for her pressing through the layers of fabric because she grins into the kiss.

"Later," she promises against my lips.

Just as I'm closing my eyes to kiss her again, but this time a little sweeter than the first, I catch a glint of metal in the woods from the sun's reflection.

"Get the women and kids out of here!" I yell, throwing Piper to the ground and covering her with my body as the first shot rings out, hitting the arch where we were standing. Father Gallo drops to one knee and begins shooting.

A firestorm of bullets rains down around us, and I look at Piper, who's under me and staring at me in bewilderment.

"Are you having second thoughts?"

"I knew what I was getting into when I said, 'I do.' You said you'd protect me, right?"

"As long as I'm still breathing, Tesoro."

"Don't stop breathing."

I pull two guns from the inside of my coat and jump back up. "Nico! Get Piper!" I order as he runs toward me. No sooner than my brother grabs my wife, I begin shooting in two directions toward the trees to cover Nico as he runs to the house with Piper. He'll be back fighting by my side in no time.

Alessandro runs around the house to the right, and Massimo heads to the left. My men are scattering around and shooting. Father Gallo and I take off running in opposite

directions as my father helps Tony and Piper's father usher the women inside.

Rage rips through me, and I feel the blackness begin to take over. I feel the emptiness ripping me inside and the demons clawing at my soul.

Every fucking body will pay for this. I hear a barrage of gunfire in a cluster of trees on the other side of my property. I take off towards it.

When I arrive, Nico's foot is crushing a man's chest. Another man lies dead near Alessandro and Massimo. I walk to the dead man and lift his head. That's the motherfucker that bumped into me at the bar when Piper and I first arrived in town.

"You, okay?" Nico asks, and I know he's asking about my mental state.

It's no secret that the darkness comes to claim me at times. The last time that happened was when my last wife was murdered.

"Yeah," I reply.

Fuck! I know Piper's parents are probably ready to take her home and as far from me as possible.

"Two dead on the left side of the house, by your men, and I left one dead in the front," Larry, Mila's father, reports as he joins us.

"Something's not right, big bro," Nico says.

"I know. Five men? That's all they sent to take us out?" I ask.

"The other men are searching the grounds now for anyone else, but they've reported in on their walkie-talkies, and they haven't found anyone."

I kneel beside the man who Nico's foot is on. I recognize him, but I'm not sure who he is.

"Who the fuck sent you?"

“I don’t need anyone to send me to avenge the wrong that’s been done to my family.”

“Your family?”

“The Colombos.”

“How did you find out about this weekend?”

“Lovely in-laws, huh? Once we heard about a family event, it was just about keeping an eye on you from there.”

“My in-laws?” Then it clicks. “The waiter from the restaurant.”

“What restaurant?” Nico asks.

“Where I had brunch with Piper’s parents. Who the fuck are you?”

“Claudio Colombo!” He spits.

“You fuckers, just don’t quit!”

“You’ll pay for killing my uncle Alberto and my cousins!” he sneers.

I put one of my guns away.

“What unlucky bastard had the nerve to bring you into the world?”

“Ezio Bruno!” he sneers.

“Well, today’s his lucky day. He’s no longer strapped with the fuckup he made over two decades ago.”

I stand and aim my gun at his head. Nico jumps back as I release the trigger and watch the bullet tear into the back of Ezio’s head, splashing brain matter and blood everywhere.

I remove the handkerchief from the pocket of my tux and wipe away the remnants on my face.

“Fuck! I paid three grand for these shoes!” Nico growls.

I glance at the red suede shoes and shake my head. “Shouldn’t have.”

“Get Pietro Colombo on the line,” I order Nico.

Nico pulls out his phone, still grumbling about his shoes and how I owe him a new pair. I walk to Paolo, my head of security.

“Yes, Mr. DeLuca?”

“I need these bodies cleared out, and the blood-covered snow cleared away before my family comes back out here.”

“Yes, sir.”

“How the fuck did they get in, Paolo?”

“Elio just called. He checked the system from the aerial view and found a black van with blacked-out windows a couple of miles down the road with four people tied up inside. The caterer owner, her husband, and their teenage kids. Only two of the workers here are real, and that’s the girlfriend of one of the kids who works for the caterers and their other adult daughter. Says they threatened them that if they said a word, they would send word to the man still in the van to kill them. So, they’ve been working with them involuntarily in silence. They trekked up here through the woods.”

“Get with those two workers now and clean this shit up. I want the entire property secured and monitored!”

“On it now, sir.”

“Marco!” Nico calls, walking to me with his phone.

Taking the phone from my brother, I greet Pietro in a deadly tone, “Colombo.”

“DeLuca.”

“What the fuck was that?”

“Your brother told me what happened. The family did not sanction that. Claudio’s my cousin Maria’s bastard son. He’s trying to make a name for himself in the family, but the only thing he did was sever ties. If he and his friends can’t fucking follow a direct order, they have no place in the organization. Besides, I would never send a fucking punk five men after you, DeLuca. I don’t underestimate my enemies. Please don’t insult my intelligence; it’s offensive.”

“That’s no longer anything you have to worry about. I cleaned up your mess,” I seethe.

“Well, if you didn’t, I would have. As it relates to Colombo and DeLuca business, we can handle that later.”

“I’ll see you soon, Colombo,” I say, clicking the call off.

Looking at Claudio’s dead body, I say, “So, you came to take me out, huh? Good luck with that.”

“You ready?” Massimo asks.

“Fuck no,” I say, but head towards the house anyway. As long as the DeLucas and the Colombos breathe, there will always be war between us.

We head downstairs into our ballroom-sized, underground basement, where our family and friends are gathered. I feel the tension no sooner than we step inside the elegant but concrete bunker.

Mamma has Mila and Gaia serving drinks, and she has Giulia and Paula, Mila’s mom, serving food.

Luna is rocking Aris, and Ilaria and Bianca sit quietly at her feet, playing. The rest of the guests are watching us as they either eat or drink, except for Piper’s parents.

I see the look of terror on their faces.

Piper rushes to me from where she’d been sitting with her brother, sister-in-law, and her friends.

“Ciao, Bellezza!” I greet Piper as I remove my jacket.

Relief washes over her face.

“You’re okay,” she confirms in a slightly steady voice.

I kiss her before saying, “PJ, I know you have a lot of questions. But let me deal with your parents first, okay?”

She nods.

My new in-laws tense as I approach, and I don’t know if it’s because of the shitstorm we just survived, the fact that my mother’s playing Volare by Domenico Modugno in the background, or that I have blood stains on my suit.

“Mr. and Mrs. Chambers,” I say, taking a seat on a chair opposite them. “Are you okay?”

Mr. Chambers pulls his wife closer, and she shakes her head. I can tell she’s still in shock.

“No. I want to go home now,” Mrs. Chambers whispers.

“What was that?” Mr. Chambers grunts, scowling at me.

“That was the attempt of a very foolish man to ruin what was the best day of my life. I assure you that he and his men have been dealt with.”

“Lord, forgive us. We’ve become co-conspirators to murder,” Mrs. Chambers gasps.

“Mrs. Chambers, I’m doing whatever is necessary to protect my family. Which now includes you and Mr. Chambers, as well.”

“We’re not—”

“Mrs. Chambers, I know that you just survived a harrowing experience. I sympathize with you on that, but I’d warn you to be careful with what you say. This room is full of hot-blooded Italians who would go to war for you in a second,” I say, snapping my fingers. “But those same Italians won’t take kindly to being insulted either.”

“Marco, you promised me that you would protect my daughter and that you’d place her life before yours.”

“And I did that, Mr. Chambers. Before the first shot rang out, my wife was on the ground underneath me, covered by my body. I turned her over to the best person to protect her besides myself. Maybe you could do a better job of protecting her, too. They got their information from you and followed you here.”

I see the blood drain from their faces, but Mrs. Chambers recovers quicker than her husband.

“How?”

“The server at the restaurant where we had brunch was behind this.”

“Oh, my God!” she exclaims.

“What if something like this happens again?” Mr. Chambers asks.

“I won’t lie to you by saying that it won’t. I will only tell you that she will have protection wherever she goes.”

“Does she know this?” Mr. Chambers asks.

“She does. We’ve talked extensively about it.”

“No one wants to live like that!” Mrs. Chambers hisses.

“Mrs. Chambers, I understand you’re upset, and it’s warranted, but Piper chose before it happened. I’ve always been protective of my family. I’m even more so with Piper in my new role as her husband. I don’t take this lightly. A message has been sent and received. Now that they know who you are, you both need to be more cautious about who you talk to and around, as well.”

Mrs. Chambers shakes her head. “I just want to go home.”

I stand and address the group.

“What happened here today was malicious and cowardly. An attack on my home against my family is not to be taken lightly. We have dealt with the people who did this, and I assure you that if you choose to remain here today to finish helping Piper and I celebrate, I will ensure you’re protected. However, if you decide that you would rather go home, then I understand that, and I promise to get you home safely with the protection you need. Nothing will happen to you or any member of your family. My men are scouting the area and making sure that there are no imminent threats other than those we’ve handled.”

There are soft murmurs all around the group. I know that as I’ve been addressing Mr. and Mrs. Chambers, my parents and brothers have been doing the same thing with Piper’s friends.

“I know this isn’t easy for any of you. Baptism by fire for all of us. Piper into a marriage with me, me as a husband, and the rest of you into our family. I really hope that you will trust

us to continue to protect you throughout this day. And I ask you...please celebrate with Piper and me and help us to enjoy the rest of our day.”

I see head nods and hear murmurs of agreement. Everyone wants to remain in place.

Turning to the Chambers, I say, “I don’t plan to make this a point of contention between you and her. Whatever you decide, I will respect and honor that. I apologize that you had to witness what happened here today.”

Mr. Chambers whispers something to his wife.

“We’ll stay,” he says.

I stand as Piper joins us. I say to her parents, “Benvenuto in famiglia.”

They both look perplexed.

“He says welcome to the family,” Piper says.

I lift my brandy snifter, take a sip, and smile before I leave with my wife.

“May I have this dance?”

“You know, you are kind of cute and charming, but you’ve got some explaining to do.”

“And I will, baby. Relax,” I say.

Surprisingly, she does as she rests her head against my chest. I drop my chin on top of her head and hold her hand in mine as we dance around the large floor. Our family and friends surround us, and I couldn’t ask for more.



PIPER

It's Christmas morning. As I lay in my bed beside my husband, I think about the events of the last couple of days. I'm still shaken about the shooting incident, but I trust my husband to protect me. Our wedding day was full of excitement, stress, outrage, and, eventually, bonding.

Everyone stayed in our cabin overnight and returned home the next day, except for Marco's family, who are still here.

My parents were reluctant to leave me and made me promise to answer every call and text. It will take some time for my parents to come around and accept my decision. I don't think they will ever embrace Marco the way they embraced my sister-in-law, Samaria. That's fine with me as long as they respect him.

We welcomed Christmas morning with Mass at a nearby Catholic church. It was humorous to me to see the DeLuca men's bodyguards and Marco's entire team surrounding the church inside and out while other parishioners looked on with curiosity. He refused to allow their normal Christmas tradition to be hampered by the assault that took place on our wedding day.

Marco runs a hand down my thigh as he pushes up on his elbow and moves over me. I spread my legs wide, smiling at my husband, my lover, my friend.

I'm still ecstatic that we've said I do, and despite the catastrophic events of our wedding day, I don't regret taking those vows.

"You made me so proud," I say, looping my arms around his neck.

"How's that?"

"The way that you stood your ground with my parents but still respected them. I know they can be difficult, and I know it wasn't easy for you, but you gave me my dream wedding."

He kisses my lips. “I just want you to be happy.”

“Who were those men that invaded our wedding? You never told me, and why did they come here to—”

“Shhh,” he says, kissing my lips again. “You know that I won’t talk with you about that. You only need to know they’ve been handled. Those men who came on the grounds will never be a problem for us again.”

“Yeah...because you guys killed them.”

“You have a problem with that?”

I twist my lips and say, “Really, Mr. DeLuca? I’d expect that if there’s ever someone who attacks our family, you’d handle it.”

He breaks free from my embrace and roams down my body, parting my legs and slicking his finger across my heat. His tongue is like a cool breeze on a scorching day. My legs gap wider as he props my legs over his shoulders and burrows into my pussy like a beaver in a hole.

My back arches high off the bed, and I grip the sheets, rocking my hips forward to cement the connection between his mouth and me. Marco’s large hand presses on my abdomen, pushing me back down on the bed.

His muscular arms are a gripping force that keeps me in place as he dines on me. My fingers tangle in his hair as I enjoy the way my husband eats me out, satisfies my desire, and makes me feel things I’ve never felt before.

He’s always been good at this, but there’s something about him doing it as my husband that makes it even more special. I’ve noticed that every day since we married. It’s better, hotter, sexier and drives me insane.

When I finally cum, Marco cleans me up with his lips and tongue before he hovers above me again and kisses me deeply. I moan into his mouth, gripping his dick through his underwear.

Jerking his underwear over his ass Marco knees my legs apart and enters me sweetly. He releases a deep sigh as he

closes his eyes, and his head drops.

“Baby,” I say when he doesn’t move.

“Shhh...just want to stay like this for a minute. Buried deep in your heat. Your wetness all around me, your soft folds covering me, your walls quivering against me. Fuck!” Marco groans as his words torment us.

Marco shifts forward, digging deeper inside of me, rocking side to side. Large hands palm my breasts, mimicking the loving, tender strokes that I give his chest, twisting my nipples the same as I do his.

Rolling my hands up, I lock my arms around his neck, pulling him closer to me. My fingers pull on the ends of his hair as he leans into our heated kiss. Our bodies are connected at almost every point.

It feels good being solid with him the way we are. Our lips meshed, our chests melded, abs flattened against one another, hips rocking into each other, his dick thrashing my pussy, our legs locked in a deep intimate promise, and our feet sliding against each other walking through this passionate crescendo together.

Marco and I are one. In every way, that matters. Heart, body, soul, and name.

Being Mrs. Marco DeLuca is the best Christmas present I could receive.

When our orgasm crashes over us, his is a deep-seated growl emanating from his belly and tumbling up and out of his throat. Mine is a soft whimper and plea for mercy that begins in my core and spirals up and softly pours from my closed lips.

“You make loving you so easy,” he whispers against my lips.

“Loving you ain’t been bad at all either,” I reply, thinking about the two years we were together, the subsequent eight-year separation, and reunification for the last year and a half.

“Think you’re gonna want a baby sometime soon?”

“Whoa! Slow down, Mr. DeLuca!” I laugh, pulling my fingers through his hair.

He’s still lying on top of me, kissing my shoulders and neck. “We’re not getting any younger, Mrs. DeLuca.”

“Yeah, I know, but I’d like to enjoy married life for at least a year. Then we can try after my thirty-sixth birthday.”

“Works for me,” he growls, nipping at my bottom lip.

A knock sounds at our door.

“Who is it?” he growls.

“It’s me, Uncle Marco! Time to open the presents!” Bianca shouts through the door.

He groans. I laugh.

“Yep, that’s what you’re asking for when you ask for a family,” I smirk.

He hops up and smacks me on the ass as I roll over onto my side.

“Get dressed,” he grumbles as he gets up and grabs his underwear.



The house is redolent with the sugary and citrusy aroma of the chocolate panettone and pandoro from last night that’s being served this morning for breakfast, along with the rich aroma of the crab and artichoke frittata and the olive biscuits.

We ate the breakfast that my mother and father-in-law prepared prior to opening gifts, to my niece’s chagrin. It was delicious. There will be more baking this evening, skiing this afternoon, and a big traditional American Christmas dinner this evening, prepared by Paula, Mila, and myself with a little assistance from the other women.

We’re all still in our pajamas, mugs of coffee in our hands as we watch the kids open their presents in delight. They squeal and scream and run around, giving hugs and kisses to

all of us as they discover what they have and who gave it to them.

My heart bursts, and I can't help but think that, yes, I definitely want in. I want all the joy, excitement, and craziness that being in the DeLuca clan brings.

“Oh, look! Here's a gift for you and Marco, Piper,” Mamma DeLuca says, pulling a large box from underneath the tree.

“It's from Enzo,” I say, carefully taking the box from his mother.

My father-in-law says, “The don sends Christmas greetings and best wishes on your nuptials.”

“Aww, how sweet was that!” I exclaim.

It still baffles me that Marco has a cousin who's younger than him that's a freaking don! Every morning that I wake up, I question if I really married into the mafia.

“Go ahead, open it,” Pappa DeLuca encourages as Marco pulls me onto his lap.

Mamma DeLuca continues handing out presents to the adults as I unwrap the exquisite paper that's too beautiful to throw away. The GF label on the box takes my breath away.

I've seen Glancy-Fawcett products, and I've never been able to afford their luxury dinnerware sets. The fine bone China plate nestled inside is so delicately beautiful. The DeLuca family crest is engraved in gold in the center.

“These are beautiful,” I whisper, showing them to the others who ooh and aww over the gift. Marco presses a kiss against the side of my neck.

“Only the best for my baby. Sometimes, our lives bring out the savage in us, but along with that savagery comes a world of beauty, protection, and the finest that life has to offer. That's now your life.”

“A life that I very much want and love, Marco,” I whisper, smiling at my in-laws reacting to their gifts. “Merry Christmas, Marco,” I say, turning sideways on his lap.

“Merry Christmas, PJ,” he whispers, kissing me to a chorus of “awws” from the women and “yuck” from Bianca.

They are a loud, rowdy, and sometimes brutal bunch, but they’re so full of love and humility. I couldn’t ask to be married into a better family, nor ask for a more perfect Christmas.

The End



Enjoyed this story? Be sure to leave a review! You can also preorder [Nico DeLuca](#).

And don’t forget to download [Alessandro DeLuca](#) and [Marco DeLuca](#) to pick up prior stories in this series.



A USA Today Bestselling author, Cassie Verano pens steamy interracial romance for readers of all cultures. Her heroines are super sassy and wicked smart, and her heroes are sexy, alpha males who are fiercely protective of the women they love.

This native Georgia Peach enjoys reading cozy mysteries and criminal thrillers, and she enjoys writing steamy romances guaranteed to make you drip. She's married to an Alpha male and the mother of three crazy humans.

Cassie is the other half of the dynamic duo podcast Cozy Sips with C.a.T. with her co-host Tiye Love as they chat about books, life, love, and sex. The show airs every other Tuesday at 8 PM EST. Catch it on YouTube at: <https://bit.ly/3S6lNWC>.

Connect with Cassie online:

Newsletter: <https://dl.bookfunnel.com/xi6niycktl>

Website: <http://www.cassieveranoromance.com/>

Email: cassiepensromance@gmail.com

GLOSSARY: ITALIAN TRANSLATION



Amorina – Little Love

Dolcezza – Sweetheart

Tesoro – sweetheart

Amore mio – my love

Ragazza dolce – sweet girl

Hai ragione – You're right

Benvenuto in famiglia – Welcome to the family

Capisci – Do you understand

Si, capisco – Yes, I understand

HOLIDAYS WITH THE DELUCAS

GIUSEPPE DELUCA

MICHELE DELUCA

BY IMANI JAY



Guseppe & Madeleine

This is the first Christmas Joey & Maddie share after their wedding.



MADELEINE

Christmas Day

I wake up with a gasped moan. My eyelids fly wide open, meeting nothing but darkness in the room surrounding me.

I went to bed alone. Sad and dejected. Wearing one of my husband's shirts. My nose buried in his pillow, inhaling his scent. The intoxicating blend of woody cologne and his subtle masculine musk. Our large bed feeling cold and way too big for me alone. Nothing like the fun place we'd made it over the past year.

And now, I'm feeling the unmistakable rasp of a tongue I know like my own sliding through the wet, swollen folds of my pussy. The strong, masculine hands that could draw my body from memory, pinning my wrists at my sides. The weight of the body I couldn't confuse with any other, keeping my legs spread.

"Shhh, baby," Joey coos. "Your man is fucking starved. I need you to be a good girl and let me feed."



Christmas Eve

"I'm sorry, baby. I wish I was home, but this fucking weather..." Joey's deep, rumbly voice resonates through my cellphone. He sounds tired and irritated. I'm happy to hear him, but the strain in this tone makes my heart squeeze.

I hold back a sigh. "It's okay, honey. It's not your fault. Just take care of yourself, and I'll see you when you get back. Okay?"

"Okay, babe. I'll keep you posted." His sigh is heavy. My poor baby.

I nod, as if he could see me. "Bye, baby. I love you."

“Love you, too, mia regina,” he rumbles softly before hanging up.

I stare at the silent device in my hand. Feeling my eyes well up with tears, I take in a deep breath. *Don't be a fucking baby, Maddie. It's not his fault the airport is shut down.*

Joey left California for a business trip to Boston a couple of days ago. I'm not supposed to know for what exactly, but I suspect a meet with the Irish. He was supposed to be back today, on Christmas Eve. But there was a snowstorm, and all flights -even private ones- are canceled. So here I am, alone, the night before Christmas.

It's funny how reality and perception work. I was a loner for most of my life. All I had was my mother and very few friends. That was my reality. I wouldn't say I was fine with it. But it certainly wasn't my biggest concern. I had bigger fish to fry with my psycho father. I never cried or felt sad on the many Christmas Eves I spent with only my mom for company. But then everything changed. He changed everything. My tall, handsome, dark prince. Giuseppe DeLuca appeared out of my wildest dreams, slayed all my dragons, and swept me away to his enchanting castle. My Joey. My knight, who toes the line between light and shadows. I feel so blessed, so happy we were reunited. But this is our first Christmas as a married couple. In our home. I wanted it to be special. Perfect. I wanted my Joey all to myself. No work, no social obligations.

I know Joey's parents are smiling down on us from the heavens. My mom and her husband, Callum, left the cold East Coast's frigid winter to spend the holidays in their vacation home in the Seychelles.

I had everything prepared to the smallest details. The house looks amazing. A true winter wonderland. With soft, twinkling lights everywhere, holidays decorations all over. The fireplace in the vast family room glows and crackles, diffusing the comforting smell of oak. I have heavy candles burning all around, filling the air with enchanting scents. A jazz playlist resonates through the sound system. And the dining room table is decked out with an amazing holiday meal. Turkey roasted to perfection, creamy, buttery mashed potatoes, golden

dinner rolls, a delicious gravy, homemade cranberry sauce. I have pies keeping warm in the oven. My favorite flavored sparkling apple cider chilling in a silver bucket. I spent days getting everything ready for tonight. All that for nothing.

I let out a deep sigh, store away the food, blow the candles, turn off the fireplace and oven.

I drag my feet, climbing up the spiral stairway to the first floor of our mansion. Our bedroom, en-suite bathroom, powder room, dressing rooms, offices and a small family room occupy the entire two-thousand square-foot floor.

Walking around the long marble table at the center of our dressing room, my toes digging into the plush carpet, I make my way to Joey's side. The tips of my fingers glide over rows after rows of beautifully tailored suits, impeccably custom-made button-down shirts and neatly arranged silky ties. I fill my hands with buttery-soft fabric and bury my nose in Joey's scent. It's everywhere. Following my instruction, our sheets were not changed when Joey left for his trip. So his pillow and our entire bed smell of him. Dark, masculine, intoxicating, with a hint of his rich cologne and the lingering aroma of the thick Cubans my man favors.

I miss him so much, it's as if the emotion pulsates inside me. Like a parasite living in my core. After one more deep inhale, I let my head drop back between my shoulders, blinking away more tears under the soft glow of the ceiling lights. *Fucking get yourself together, Madeleine!*

I shrug out of my deceptively casual, off-the-shoulders sweater dress, keeping my woolen thigh-highs on. He would have loved this outfit. When I picked it, I imagined the way his dark eyes would light up, dragging the length of my curves. How his powerful hands would feel squeezing my flesh. How the dress would end up on the floor in a heartbeat. How he'd demand I keep the thigh-highs on while he fucked me silly... I shrug into one of Joey's shirts, leaving the buttons undone. If I'm going to be alone on Christmas Eve, the least I can do is make it a fun solo evening...



I pushed the covers away and surrounded myself with our mountains of pillows. I may have grown up in luxury, but even I know I upgraded when I moved in with Joey. My worthless, low-life crook of a father might have amassed tens of millions of dollars - partly stolen from the DeLucas - but my husband and his family are rich by hundreds of millions. And I even suspect their wealth amounts to billions on a global scale.

I'm laying on my back, propped up on fluffy pillows, wearing one of my husband's powder-blue Oxford shirts, basking in the scent of him, rubbing my wool covered legs together, feeding the fire burning between my thighs. Eyes closed, my bottom lip held between my teeth, my hands slide under the soft cotton fabric, running over my warm skin. One hand palms my full breasts, feeling the fullness of the large, round globes, the tips of my fingers gliding over my erect nipples. The other one sneaks down my torso, over my throbbing mound. The skin there is incredibly hot. I push one finger through my folds and find them swollen, drenched, and vibrating with need. Behind my shut eyelids I see him, my nostrils filled with the smell of my Joey. I can almost taste him on my tongue. That delicious flavor that's all his. A hint of musk, the incredible aroma of his clean sweat, just a pinch of salty, and that surprisingly sweet undertone. I moan loudly, pushing two fingers inside my clenching pussy and pumping, at the same time rubbing the heel of my hand on my pulsating clit. *Fuck, I miss my guy.* My hips writhe and shake with want and pleasure. My tongue runs over my lips, chasing the ghost of his ravaging kisses. I wish it was his big hands on my body. His cock inside me. The weight of his tall, muscular body on mine.

"Joey..." I moan loudly.

My fingers move faster, deeper. My palm presses harder on my small bundle of nerves. I pinch, roll, and pull on my taut nipples. The sensations growing sharper, stronger, until the powerful wave of a mighty orgasm crashes over me.

Leaving me jerking, gasping, moaning loudly. My hands rubbing frantically, chasing every single drop of pleasure. I can't see, hear, or smell anymore. My entire body is reduced to being the recipient of this devastating orgasm. I slow down my movements through the last tremors. My eyes slowly opening into hooded slits. My lips parting into heavy breaths. The muted ringing in my ears receding. My nostrils filling with the scent of sex. That was good. Nothing compared to the real thing. To him. Us. But a well-deserved release. And now at least I can fall asleep. I snuggle into Joey's pillow, burying my nose in the small of him, and let myself drift off. Body wrecked by my orgasm, mind at ease after my release.



GIUSEPPE

I walk into my house tired, still irritated, and fucking starved for my girl. The sound of the heavy thump my bags make when they hit the marble floor resonates through the vast foyer. Then it's the clap of my shiny leather loafers as I take the stairs two at a time, calling her name. The cling of my belt being undone by trembling fingers, the sound of my zipper getting lowered. Before I even reach our bedroom door, I pull on and throw aside my tie, shrug off my suit jacket, impatiently remove my shirt, buttons popping in the process. And by the time I'm standing bare feet on the plush carpet, my slacks are pooling at my feet. Stark naked in the dimly lit room. Sunshine barely poking through the space between the heavy drapes of our floor-to-ceiling windows.

I'm beat after almost an entire day spent in the private jet terminal of the Boston Logan Airport. I was pissed and snappy the entire fucking time. This is my first Christmas with my fucking wife. My parents were killed when I was a teenager. And although my extended family was always warm and welcoming, it was never the same again. Christmas became meaningless after my folks' passing. It was just a reminder of what I didn't have anymore. No one to come home to. No one to love me unconditionally. Lay down their life for me. Be there no matter what. Comfort and care for me. Until Maddie. She fucking changed everything. Turned my life around. Brought love, warmth, and light into my dark existence. She's my fucking sunshine. And this was supposed to be the perfect first holiday together for us. Until that fucking snow storm descended over Boston. All the flights got canceled, and I was stuck. I felt like a fucking wild beast in a cage. All my money, all my power, my connections, my mighty will. None of it mattered. There was not one fucking damn thing I could do to be with my girl on Christmas Eve. I growled and barked orders all fucking day. Tried bribing and intimidating my way through it. No dice. It was fate fucking reminding me I'm just a man. I may be a fucking DeLuca, but at the end of the day, she decides. So my anger was tainted by something deeper,

darker, more feral. Terrifying. A reality check. Ultimately, I have no control. Madeleine is mine, but I could lose her in a heartbeat. She could lose me. All the shit we went through, and the fucking weather could fucking tear us apart.

I take in a ragged breath, dragging my fingers through my disheveled hair. *Fucking calm down, Joey. It's all good. You're home. You're fine. She's fine.* As always, when I'm rattled, I hear my father's calming voice in my head. Hasn't happened very often in the past year, though. There's been so much more love, happiness, and peace than heaviness and sorrow.

My eyes adapt to the almost darkness and my mouth tugs up on one side as I take in the form laying in our bed. I lick my bottom lip, my dick jumping with excitement at the sight of her big ass jutting under the covers. This time when I start walking, my pace is unhurried. I know I have all the fucking time in the world. I'm home. With my woman. Merry fucking Christmas to me.



I slide under the sheet from the foot of the bed, running my big, rough hands over her soft, warm skin. With my head covered, the small space saturated by her scent, I feel almost dizzy. Fuck, I missed her. I lay soft kisses the length of her shaped calves, kiss her thick thighs, spreading them apart in the process. Fill my hands with her juicy ass and gently squeeze. She starts moaning and moving in her sleep. Good. *Wake up for me, sleeping beauty.* I press my nose at the apex of her thighs and push her legs apart wider, using my broad shoulders to keep her wide open for me. At this point, my cock is throbbing like crazy, my breath comes out in heavy pants, and I'm thrusting into the mattress like a teenager in rut. I feel myself leaking precum like a motherfucker. My lips press to the plump lips of her cunt and my tongue swipes through her folds. Taking my first hit in fucking days. Fuck, she tastes fucking heavenly! Not just delicious, clean pussy. No, my naughty girl made herself cum. I greedily lap the nectar from her pussy. Sucking and tonguing her with gusto. When

Madeleine tries to move, I pin her hands at her side, pressing the weight of my large body into hers, holding her in place to feed at my leisure.

She lets out a loud moan, writhing in her constricted position.

“Shhh, baby,” I coo. “Your man is fucking starved. I need you to be a good girl and let me feed.”

When I dig back in, my thick fingers press into the crease of her big ass, keeping her wide open for my lips and tongue to kiss, suck, lick and fuck more slick out of her spasming pussy. Maddie is shaking, jerking, crying out loudly. She’s trying to kick me, turn around, get her hands and mouth on me, feel my body, get her own way with me. I know this is driving her fucking crazy, and I chuckle against her trembling flesh.

“Did you make yourself come thinking about me?” I growl into her spasming opening, adding the vibrations of my strained voice to my lusty caresses.

“Ooooh... Joey... Please, baby,” she fucking begs.

“Please, what, wife?” I demand, sucking her pussy lips into my hungry mouth.

“Fuck me, baby. Please,” she whines loudly.

I lap at her juices some more, resisting the siren call of her supplications, burying my mouth and nose deeper, tongue-fucking her pussy, bringing her to the edge. Driving myself crazy with need, want. Fucking dying to fuck my woman. Pushing us both to the brink. And when I know I’m about to fucking come all over the sheets like a fucking pimply kid, just from rubbing my dick against the mattress. When Maddie’s loud cries and trembling body tell me she’s ripe for the taking, at the door to her climax, I pull the covers away, straighten up, and flip her around.

I’m on my knees, eyes wild, fingers shaking, dick throbbing, finally staring into my wife’s eyes.



MADELEINE

He's magnificent. Giuseppe DeLuca is the most beautiful thing I've ever laid eyes on. Huge, even in the dim light. Broad shoulders, wide chest, cut stomach. A smothering of dark hair travels from the space between his thick pectorals, through the line between his abs, and ends in a happy trail that ends in a neatly trimmed patch of dark hair at the base of his magnificent cock. His long, broad, heavily veined, fat cock that points at me like it's choosing me in a crowd of eager women. His dick bobs up and down, glistening at the slit, fucking perfect. I lick and bite my lips. Up on my elbows, fascinated, frozen in place. Just seeing him, being this near, my pussy still throbbing from his ravaging kisses, my breath heaving, I'm beyond turned on.

"Baby," I say softly. "I missed you."

His small smile turns into a full-blown grin that squeezes my fucking heart.

"Fucking missed you, too, mia regina." His queen. Fuck, I love my guy.

He leans in slowly, his gestures tender now. Large, warm hands sliding over my body, facing lowering to mine, eyes locked till our lips meet, and I sigh. It feels like relief, peace, content. He's back. Safe. All mine. For as long as life will let me have him.

The life we lead is full of dangers. It may have been the bad weather this time, but the danger often comes from others. Enemies lurking in the dark. Rivals and fake friends. Despite all we've been through together, regardless of all the precautions Joey takes, despite how powerful and feared he and his family are, I know there are those lurking in the shadows. My father may have been taken care of, but there are always more. I push away my fears and desperately pour my soul into our kiss. This is all that matters. Here, now. Joey and I, together.

Our tongues slide and roll together in a frantic dance. Our lips crushing, teeth clashing. Hands touching wherever we can reach. I push up on my knees, facing him, our fronts molding. His fat cock sliding through my wet, swollen pussy lips. Joey detaches his mouth from mine with a wet sound, framing my face with his large hands, towering over me, his dark eyes filled with love and heat.

“Merry Christmas, baby.”

I let out a strangled laugh. “Merry Christmas, my love.”

His gorgeous smile takes over his handsome face and my sex spasms, my chest filled with love for my man. I gently run my fingers over his features. Touching him like it’s our first time, like I haven’t seen him in months, like he’s a soldier returning from the battlefield.

“How was your trip?”

He lets out a low chuckle. “Fine. Till that fucking storm.”

I giggle, pushing him down for a quick press of our lips.

“It’s so good to have you back, baby.”

He pulls me into his big chest, strong arms wrapped around my body, nuzzling the side of my face, lips on my skin.

“It’s good to be home.”

The low rumble of his voice courses through my body, sending thrills all over, the peaks of my nipples hardening even more, rubbing into his soft chest hair. I moan into the crook of his neck. Joey’s answering purr sends a shiver down my spine and I tighten my arms around him, rolling my hips to meet the shallow thrusts of his engorged shaft through my throbbing folds.

“Baby,” I moan. “I need you.”

He lifts his head and I’m floored all over again by his beautiful face. Jet black hair askew, thick, inky eyebrows, that Medici nose, the cut cheekbones and jaw, and that mouth... Full, pouty, pink lips I could kiss on for a lifetime. And the possessive grasp of his big hands, the inferno blazing in his somber eyes. His ragged breathing and throbbing cock. All of

him says his mine and I'm his. All fucking his. For eternity and beyond. As lasting as the boulder size rock on my finger.

Joey's stare is intense, unwavering. "What do you need, princess?" His voice thick and feral.

"I need you to make love to me," I moan. "Fuck me," I whimper when his fingers roll a taut nipple, the zing of pleasure coursing straight to my clit.

"Is that all, my queen? Cause you know you can have whatever the fuck you want." He kisses my neck, licking and biting, sucking on my trembling flesh.

"Anything... everything," I moan again, fingers digging into his massive shoulders, once more brought to the frontier of ecstasy. My pussy soaking his long, thick, hard shaft with each slide through my folds. The bulbous head rubbing all over my clit, then gliding down to my entrance, barely giving me an inch before retreating.

"As you wish, my love," Joey rumbles. Then he wraps my thighs around his waist, fills his hands with my big ass, and pushes inside me.

Slowly, deliciously, tortuously. Like It's never gonna end. Like we have all day. Like he's inside me to stay.

I let out a loud gasp when his cockhead breaches through my damp, swollen folds, my cunt contracting to suck him in further. "Haaaa, baby!"

"Yes, my love. Right. Fucking. Here," He grits between clenched teeth, punctuating each word with a slap of his balls on my bouncing ass as he thrusts wildly inside me.

The amazing friction of his dick inside me spreads through my body like a wildfire. It feels so fucking good. So right. Perfect. "Oh My God! Joey!"

He leans in and takes my mouth in a long, deep mouth-fucking, grinding into me, our pelvises connected. He bites my bottom lip and sucks the sting away. Squeezes and spreads my ass-cheeks. I feel so fucking full. Owned, possessed, taken. All fucking his. His big dick pulsating inside me, my wetness

dripping down his heavy balls, our tongues swirling around each other. Our hearts beating a mile a minute.

“I’m so fucking close,” I whimper into his mouth.

“Fuck, me too,” Joey growls back, his parted lips still pressed to mine.

He kisses me again, and I lose myself in the sensations. His big body surrounding me, the feel of his flushed skin, our mingled scents, the taste of him, his fat cock thrusting into me... I explode into a million pieces, and Joey keeps holding me tight through spasm after spasm of my orgasm. I hear myself wail, feel my body trash, but that’s all in the background of my mind. All that matters, all I’m fully aware of is the devastating pleasure coursing through every cell of my body. The blinding love filling my heart. The man loves and fucks me like no other.

And I barely start recovering from my orgasm that Joey slams into me with a rapid succession of mighty thrusts.

“fuck, baby... you feel so goddamn fucking good,” he roars, planting himself to the hilt, spurting rope after thick, hot rope of his cum inside me, sending me into another spiral of pleasure.

“Annnnhhhh! Joey!!” I cry out.

“Yes! Fuck! Maddie! Yes, baby! So goddamn good!”

His arms are so tight around me it hurts, but I wouldn’t have it any other way. My big, strong, bad boy. My lover. The man who lay down his life for me and my world a fairytale.



GIUSEPPE

I relax the tight grip of my arms around Madeleine. My breathing is still heavy, my chest rising and falling noticeably, hands shaking, vision still blurred from my scorching orgasm. Fuck.

I carefully lay Maddie on her back, wincing a little as I slide out of my happy place. As I pull out, I stare, fascinated at our mingled juices leaking out of her gorgeous cunt.

“Fuuuuck,” I whisper reverently.

Maddie moans and rolls her hips, eyes at half mast, biting her plump bottom lip. She’s so fucking hot I can’t resist. I slide my thick fingers through her soaked folds, push them inside her dripping cunt, gather my cum and rub it all over. I spread it through her pussy lips, then push it back inside her, making her writhe and whimper, rubbing slow circles over her swollen clit.

My eyes travel from her fevered gaze to her pussy, gliding all over her gorgeous body. Her silk scarf has fallen off, letting out the silky waves of her straightened hair. Another hairstyle. My lips twitch on one side. How many hairstyles can one woman adopt? And will she ever settle on one?

I take in her gorgeous deep brown skin. The elegant curve of her long neck, smooth, round shoulders and arms. Curves and soft lines everywhere my eyes fall. The big, round tits I fucking adore. the soft stomach I worship. Her incurved waist I fucking love wrapping my giant hands around. The full hips I grab and squeeze any chance I get. The long legs and thick thighs rubbing against my body as she’s squirming under my touch. And that pussy. That fucking pussy will be the death of me.

I pump my fingers inside Maddie and play with her clit, bringing more cum down and pushing it into her asshole, making her cry out. Driving her fucking insane till she comes, yelling her pleasure loud and long.

“Yeah, that’s it, baby. Fucking come for me. Suck my cum in your pretty little cunt. Shit, your taking my fingers so well. Just like that. Yes, let me fucking breed that nasty pussy.”

The sounds are indecent. The smell of sex saturates the air. Maddie’s moans, my grunts. Fuck, so fucking hot. I can’t fucking wait till she’s round with our babies.



We’re laying tangled in each other’s arms. Our hearts beating in unison. Exchanging soft kisses, slow caresses and gentle words. It feels so fucking good to be home. Cause that’s wherever my girl is.

“Babe,” I rumble into the crook of her neck.

“Mmhhh?”

“Wanna jump in the shower?”

“Hmmm,” she purrs. “Together?”

I chuckle. “Nah, babe. You go first, and I’ll throw the sheets in the washer.”

Maddie hides her face in her hands, mumbling, “oh, My God.”

I laugh harder this time. “You growing shy on me, Mrs. DeLuca?” I kiss her neck, pulling her fingers off her face. “It was fucking beautiful watching you suck my cum inside your gorgeous pussy. I fucking loved it.” I kiss her mouth. “It’s you and me. Remember, you never have to be ashamed with me. Yeah?”

Gnawing on her plump bottom lip, she nods.

“Good girl.” I kiss her again, then slap her ass playfully as I’m knifing off the bed. “Now go clean up, you nasty woman.”

Madeleine lets out a surprised bark of laughter before she picks up a pillow and throws it my way. I catch it and wink at her, grinning like the lovesick fool I am.



We're downstairs, laying on the thick rug in front of the family room's fireplace. It's a bit chilly this time of year in Monterey. The ocean breeze carries a bite of coolness. We're snuggled up in the matching plaid pajamas Madeleine got us. Drinking warm apple cider, bellies filled with the feast she prepared yesterday. Life is good and I know it's only gonna get better with this woman by my side. My girl. My family. My everything.

"Time for presents," I say, winking at her.

"Yes!" she shrieks like a little girl. My beautiful, sexy, elegant, intelligent wife is a child at heart.

I chuckle, shaking my head.

"First, you have to tell Santa if you've been a good girl."

She nods excitedly, making me laugh again.

"What are you laughing about? I'm an angel. You corrupted me." She playfully shoves my shoulder.

"That, I did," I reply, kissing her full lips.

"Okay, me first," Madeleine adds, standing to walk to the tall Christmas tree standing in a corner of the beautifully decorated room. It's scintillating with lights, decorated with garlands and snow globes. The perfect addition to the festive ambiance of our home.

She did this. All of it. Brought warmth, joy, and peace into my life. My heart.

Maddie grabs a beautifully wrapped gift box from the pile at the foot of the tree and struts back to me, her full hips swinging like a hypnotic pendulum. Fuck, I'm gonna have to tap her gorgeous ass again.

I rearrange myself, spreading my legs to give room to my growing erection in my pajama bottoms. Catching the movement, Madeleine raises a sardonic eyebrow.

“I don’t know if naughty boys deserve a present.”

I make grabby motions. “Gimme, woman.”

She giggles again, sitting across from me with her legs crossed, her expression turning shy, making my heart swell. “I hope you like it.”

I take the small box, giddy as a child getting his first bike. I shake it carefully, eyes fixed on Madeleine’s. Loving the cautious way she watches me. Her eyes glinting with glee.

I tear into the glittery blue wrapping paper, revealing a beautifully carved wooden box. I open the lid, and my breath catches in my throat. There’s an old picture laid on the deep red velvet lining.

“Baby.” My voice comes out scratchy.

It’s a photo of two teenagers holding hands. He’s tall and lean, all long, lanky form. She’s pretty as fuck, her head thrown back, mouth open on a laugh, staring up at him with something tender in her eyes. Something sweet, warm and larger than life. Something that looks a lot like love. And he stares back just as intensely. His dark gaze filled with adoration. Like he knows she’s his for that moment and through eternity. It’s a photo of us. Maybe fifteen, twenty years ago. When we were young and innocent. Full of hope. Before shit happened. Before life pissed all over our young love.

I swallow with difficulty.

“Where did you find it?” My voice comes out croaked, charged with emotion. Of all the pain I know is coming. But also of the gratitude that fills my heart everyday. Because we may have walked through fire, but in the end we found our way back to each other.

“My mom. She finally got all her stuff to Boston, and was going through it.”

Maddie cups my face, wiping an errand tear from my cheek. She kisses me softly.

“I love you, Joey DeLuca. You’re my person. I’m so happy we got a second chance.”

I kiss her back, pouring all my heart into it. “Merry Christmas, baby.”

Thank you for reading!

Maddie & Joey’s story, “Giuseppe DeLuca”, will be republished in November 2023. Stay tuned for the new purchase link!

Michele & Gabrielle

A very special Christmas present.



GABRIELLE

“Michele DeLuca!” I mock-chastise my big, tall, fucking irresistible husband, giggling and pushing away his huge hands. “Behave!”

His luscious mouth is hooked on one side into a delicious smirk I’m dying to lick. Big hands wrapped around my waist, pulling me in his lap, full mouth pressed to the sensitive skin of my neck.

“Baby, stop! I can’t get to your mom’s house all disheveled... again.”

He chuckles against my skin; the deep rumble vibrating all the way down to my toes. Fuck.

Mikey presses a button on his door, closing the partition between the driver and us, sitting at the back of the limo. He does not give a speck of attention to my protests. He just keeps feeling me up all over, kissing my trembling skin, and humming his appreciation in a low, sexy purr.

“Mikey... I’m serious,” I moan against his mouth. “You don’t know how long it took to get my hair and make-up done. And... And my dress... Oh My God!” I cry out when he pulls down the collar of my dress and bra in one motion and rolls his talented tongue around my stiff nipple, sucking in as much of my large breast as his mouth can fit. “Baby...”

Michele is a man on a mission. His stormy eyes are riveted to mine, latching on to every emotion passing over my face. Mouth on one of my nipples, one hand pulling, rolling and twisting the other, and the long, thick fingers of his other hand pushing the hem of my fitted cocktail dress up my generous hips, gliding between my quivering thighs, and inching to pull my lacy thong to the side.

“Oh, fuck... honey!”

He sucks harder, then simultaneously bites on the nipple in his mouth and pinches the other hard, sending a sharp electric

current through my body. His beautiful dark eyes glinting with animalistic hunger.

His clever fingers are gliding through my wet folds and I know I've lost. There wasn't any point in fighting this to begin with, but once my husband starts playing with my kitty, I know resistance is futile. The man is a fucking magician. A pussy whisperer.

His eyelids lower into a lazy, languorous gaze, never letting go of my eyes as he pushes his thick fingers inside me. I let out a loud gasp and thank The Lord, the partition with the front of the limo is soundproof. Cause this man has no shame!

"Michele, please, baby. Stop... Your family... You always do this to me... I can't keep showing places looking like a... Ahhhh!"

He pinches my clit, then detaches his mouth from my breast and rumbles into my neck, "like what, wife? A well-fucked woman?"

"Anhhhhh..." is my only answer as Michele starts pumping my pussy in slow, deep motions, at the same time rolling my clit with his calloused thumb, his delicious mouth ravaging mine. I'm so fucking screwed.

He alternates between tongue-fucking my mouth and sucking on my nipples, one hand gripping my waist and hips, the other relentlessly finger-fucking me. And it doesn't take long. Five minutes of this amazing treatment and I'm yelling to the skies, shaking, trembling, spasming, and gushing all over Mikey's hand. He flips me on my back and latches his mouth to my pussy, sucking, licking and lapping me till the very last quiver. And thank God for that or I would have come all over his slacks.

Michele straightens up, still grinning like the fucking sexy asshole he is. He slides his fingers into his mouth and licks them clean. I shake my head from my venture point laying on the other side of the limo's back bench.

"I hate you." My voice comes out croaked, laced with a smile.

Mikey winks, his thick, raven black hair all over the place from my fingers running through and grabbing onto it. Eyes shiny with mischief and the fire of his desire. Mouth ravaged by my own kisses. He's fucking beautiful.

"No, you don't." He leans to help me sit up and straighten my dress, pressing a hard closed-mouth kiss on my lips. "You fucking love me."

I can only stare, batting my lashes. I want to strangle him and jump him all at once. But we don't have time for either.

I pull down a mirror from the roof of the car and gasp, "Oh My God!"

Mikey chuckles at my side, gaining himself a punch on his stupid, big, hard, immovable shoulder.

"Your mom's gonna think I'm a whore."

He rolls his gorgeous eyes. "Mama loves you. She thinks the world of you. And she knows DeLuca men." He laughs again.

"Mikey! You have no fucking respect."

"No, just grew up seeing how much my parents love each other. You know my pa don't give a fuck."

I feel my face flush, thinking back on some kisses I've witnessed between Michele DeLuca Sr. and Ms. Anna. Yeah, Mikey was taught well.

I shake my head, focusing my attention on fixing my makeup with the gloss and powder I have in my clutch, and trying to smooth down my silky do. After a few minutes, I'm mostly satisfied, although it's clear that anyone who knows how impeccable I usually am will notice.

Mikey presses a soft kiss right where I know my eyebrows are bunched up into a frown. "Merry Christmas, baby."

I can't resist the man. "Merry Christmas."

I snuggle into his broad chest, running my hands over the lapels of his suit jacket. My frown returns when I see he doesn't have a hair out of place. The asshole ran his fingers

through his thick hair, wiped his mouth and hands with a wipe,
and now he looks just as fresh as when we got in the car.
Unbelievable.



MICHELE

I'm still chuckling when we ring the doorbell. Gabby is tucked into my side, her gorgeous face pinched into an adorable frown. I don't know what the hell she expected walking out of our room looking like that. Hair done in sooth, flowy waves that made my fingers itch to wrap them around my wrist. Her makeup elegant and sultry. Those big brown eyes even more luminous than usual, that beautiful face, those fucking full lips painted the perfect shade of red. And her body. Molded in a dark red, shimmery dress that hugged her full curves to perfection. She looked good enough to fucking devour. And when she rushed me out of the house laughing, saying we didn't have time to squeeze in a quickie? A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do. I needed at least a taste. And now that I've had the sweet juices of my wife on my tongue, I feel better. I'm still fucking starving for her, and my mind can't stop picturing all the positions I'm gonna fuck her in this dress, her naughty pair of skimpy underwear, then in nothing but her fuck-me heels.

My mother opens the door with a wide smile.

"Mikey! Gabrielle!"

Gabby's frown disappears instantly, and I snicker behind my hand, which gains me an elbow to the side. I move away from the dangerous woman and wrap my mom in my arms.

"Hi Mama, merry Christmas." I kiss her cheeks and keep her tight against my chest for a beat. I will never take these small moments for granted, ever again. After losing my freedom for twenty years, being forced to only see my family during short, supervised times. Every hug, each embrace, each spontaneous call and visit is a miracle, a blessing I crave and cherish.

My mom laughs when I refuse to let her go. She pushes my shoulders playfully. "Get off me, you big oaf. Let me kiss my girl."

I love how much Gabrielle and Mama get along. The way they fell in love with each other. I like to think that Gabby found the mother she lost when she was just a girl, and that my mom gained a daughter through my marriage.

They kiss, hug, and start talking animatedly about the holiday celebrations. I shake my head, walking through the vast foyer. My father may have cut ties with the business side of our family and our consequential wealth, but the man did good for himself with honest hard work. Their house is spacious and homey. The smells of holiday candle and a delicious home-cooked meals waft through the air.

My father appears at the living room entrance and we hug and slap backs.

“Mikey, how are you my boy?”

“I’m great, pops. You?”

“Hanging in there, man. Wife keeping you in line?” He teases, making me laugh.

He’s an older version of me. Tall, broad, handsome Italian-American. With an olive complexion, dark hair and eyes, and a heart of gold. He has more silver strings on his head and wrinkles on his face, but you can’t miss the family resemblance.

My uncle Matteo follows behind. Ensur more manly hugs and greetings.

“Nipote! Buon Natale,” my uncle booms in his deep voice.

“Grazie, Buon Natale a te,” I reply in the same language.

Fuck, it’s good to be back home. It’s been a couple of years now, but shit doesn’t get old. Doubt it will ever.

Sylvia, my uncle’s much younger wife, joins us. I had doubts about her at first, but she’s good people. Solid. Loves the man to death, and walked through fire to prove it. My mother and Gabby are finally done chatting in the doorway. The three women fall into each other’s arms, looking like they haven’t been together in years. They hang out at least once a week.

My father, uncle, and I look at them with warm amusement. Loving how close our women are.

We all walk into the beautifully decorated dining room and settle around the table. Everything looks fucking amazing. My mother made all our favorite Italian dishes. Everything is homemade. The garlic bread, lasagna, wedding soup, marinated seafood, Christmas cookies and tiramisu. Sylvia roasted a huge, delicious-looking turkey. And Gabby was here all day with them cooking. I see her signature candied yams and collard greens, cornbread and coleslaw. Fuck, this about to be good!



After dinner, we're all sitting in the family room, spread between the couches and cushy chairs, with a fire crackling nearby. Sipping on eggnog and enjoying dessert. The room filled with laughter, warmth, and love.

Gabby is sitting in my lap, all round and soft. Her body heat seeping into mine, her scent surrounding me, making me feel a bit dizzy. I don't think I've ever been happier in my life. All the people who matter the most to me are gathered in this room. My wife's laughter mixing with my mother's is like music to my ears. I love this woman so fucking much.

It's past one in the morning when I call our driver and we bid the family a good night. I feel so fucking good. Warm and relaxed. Fucking happy. At peace. This woman took my shit. She had my back. Fucking brought me back from the deepest darkness. Healed my heart from anger and a thirst for revenge I had been fostering for almost twenty years. Gabrielle fucking saved my soul. Brought me back to my loved ones. Despite everything I put her through, she looked beyond the beast. Saw my pain and helped me heal. I goddamn love my fucking wife.



GABRIELLE

By the time we make it home, I'm beat. I fall asleep in Mikey's arms in the car on our way back. Snuggled into his wide chest, my nose filled with his amazing scent. Leather, musk, and a hint of citrus. He felt so warm, so strong. Making me feel safe. Like nothing in the world can ever hurt me again.

It's because of this man that I now sleep at night. Thanks to him, my nightmares are a thing of the past. I no longer wake up in a sweat, rolled in a ball, crying and panting. Michele DeLuca walked into my life disguised as a villain. And all it took was love and patience to peel away the layers of his pain and suffering. To bring out my mighty knight. I gave my heart and soul to this man, and not one day in my life since has he made me regret it.

The car ride rocked me to sleep, and I woke up in Mikey's strong arms, held steadfast against his chest. My head resting on his pectoral, lulled back to sleep by the steady beat of his strong heart, a kiss on my forehead and a softly whispered, "it's okay, baby. I got you."

I did as I was told, snuggled deeper and let him take me to bed. I was barely awake as he undressed me and slid me into a sleep dress. My lips stretched into a tired smile as he clumsily tied my hair under a silk scarf. I gave him a kiss, muttering a tired, "thank you, my love." And fell asleep.



I wake up early on Christmas morning, feeling a bit queasy. Lord, I need to talk to Michele. I drag myself to the bathroom, shower, and change. When I walk back into our room, our bed is empty. I pull a thick, fluffy robe over a comfortable lounge dress and make my way to the kitchen. I find my man setting up the breakfast nook. He already has fried eggs, pancakes,

syrup, butter, orange juice, coffee, and fruit sitting, and is placing silverware and plates on our spots.

I take him in as I'm walking through the kitchen. He's so fucking tall, broad and handsome. Bare chest, the way he likes to stroll around most of the time. In a pair of low-riding flannel pajama pants, bare feet, hair askew. Looking fucking delicious with his golden tan and smothering of beauty marks all over his warm skin. And the way his muscles contract as he moves... I praise The Lord every day for bringing this man into my life. How sweet, loving, and fiercely protective he is. But also how goddamn hot! I could just fucking sit and watch my husband strut around. All day long.

"Good morning, Mrs. DeLuca," he greets me with a soft kiss at my temple, and I shiver all over.

"Mr. DeLuca." I wrap a hand at the back of his strong neck and pull him down for a kiss, at the same time I'm stretching on the tips of my toes. I savor his mouth, slow and long. Taking my fill with Michele's big hands circling my waist and holding me flush to his hard body. My curves melting into his muscles. I moan into our torrid kiss and his groan rumbles through my chest. When Mikey releases me, my legs are wobbly, my heart beats erratically, and I feel a little dazed.

He chuckles, presses one last soft kiss to my lips and wraps his big hand around mine, guiding me to the wooden bench of the nook. I slide in, my face raised to his, my eyes eating him up. Fuck, he's handsome.

"Slept well?"

"Like a baby," I giggle.

"Good. Now eat. We have about an hour before we go back to my parents' for presents."

I nod and do as I'm told, like a good girl.

Michele watches me carefully while he eats his own meal.

"What?" I ask with fake innocence.

"I don't know. You tell me what."

"Who says I have something to tell?"

He shakes his head, smirking. “I know you, woman.” He makes a circling motion with his forking, pointing at my face. “It’s written all over.”

I inhale deeply. “There’s something I want to give you in private.” His smirk goes naughty. “Nothing like that, nasty. Get your mind out of the gutter.”

Michele sets down his cutlery, still smiling, and crosses his fingers under his chin. “I’m all ears.”

I clear my throat and pull a small black-and-white image from my robe’s pocket, sliding it on the table in front of him.

His eyes grow big, cocky air melting away and giving place to pure, raw emotion. My heart beats fast. He raises his dark eyes, meeting mine, and I nod.

“You... we... you’re sure?”

I nod again, my heart swelling, my lips stretching into an irrepressible smile.

“I’m seven weeks along.”

“Seven weeks,” he whispers reverently.

Then he stands abruptly, hitting his knee on the table, but not caring. He pulls me into his arms, twirling me around.

“Mikey, stop!” I laugh.

“We’re having a fucking baby!” He yells to the heavens.

I frame his handsome face with my hands as he lets my body slide down his, sets me on my feet and falls to his knees, resting his forehead on my belly. I gently swift my fingers through his soft hair.

“Yes, baby.”

“Fuck.” He kisses me over my dress. “I love you, baby. And I’m gonna love our child with all I have. I’ll keep our family safe and care for you both, and all the kids we have after this one.”

“Okay, calm down. One at a time.” He chuckles. I lean to kiss the top of his head. “I know you will, baby.”

“Thank you, Gabrielle,” he says with emotion, his beautiful eyes shining with unshed tears. “Thank you for teaching me to love again. For giving me a beautiful life. For making a family with me.”

“Oh, baby.”

My throat is clogged with emotion and I can only hold him tightly, thanking The Heavens for this man, and all the gifts he’s brought into my life.

Thank you for reading!

Gabby & Mikey’s story, “Michele DeLuca”, will be republished in November 2023. Stay tuned for the new purchase link!

The End



Enjoyed this story? Be sure to leave a review! You can also preorder “Owned By My Husband” A forced marriage bratva romance <https://amzn.eu/d/2UAmUsT>.



USA Today bestselling author Imani Jay lives in sunny California. Her OWNED Short Steamy Romance Series is a fan favorite. And you can always count on Imani to bring you fun, hot, swoony stories of strong women who meet their hunky alphas.

When she is not writing, Imani is working the darn day job (*just kidding, boss!*), hiding from her family (*just kidding, honey!*), watching K-Dramas, but mostly reading (*romance, of course!!*).

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ALMOST NEVER
BENIAMINO DELUCA
BY JADE ROYAL



ABOUT ALMOST NEVER: BENIAMINO DELUCA



Forever doesn't begin when you decide it does. It's predestined, and you're put on a path filled with obstacles to overcome. It's a choice to push through or give up. Only one of them pays off in your favor.

For Beniamino and Simone, they're about to experience some of those hurdles. Their love will be challenged, their patience tested, and most of all, their loyalty to one another.

Can they conquer their fears?

Listen to the tune of their hearts? Or is this just another reason why they shouldn't be together?

In *Almost Never*, you'll get the answer to all those questions. Do you believe in fate? You'll need it for this story.



BENIAMINO

“Boss, we’ve got a problem.” The caller said.

“Paulie?” Groggily, I’d picked up the phone without checking the caller ID. This phone only rang when business needed to be handled in Italy.

“Yeah. There was a deposit made.”

From ... I sat up on the edge of the bed, trying to get my head together. Deposit ... Deposit... Deposit...

“There is one made every month on the same day. The amounts vary, but the day is consistent.”

Tommaso, my father, has been dead for about a month. There’s no way that it was him. I saw the body. It’d be impossible for him to still be alive. I’ve heard of the head of mob families faking their deaths. This wasn’t how this story went. The business we conduct over there is a withdrawal ... connected to another account. I’ve been meaning to get a closer look at what we do in Italy but hadn’t gotten around to it. However, it ran like a well-oiled machine. It was time to make that a priority since I couldn’t identify the solution to this problem immediately.

“Who made it?” I asked.

“We’re checking into it now. Who has authorization to access the account?”

“Focus on finding out who made it. I’ll worry about who has access.” I got up and walked into my office, closing the door.

Logging into the account, I saw the deposit he mentioned. The deposit slip had a signature I couldn’t make out. Too close to my father’s handwriting, I wondered who it could be. I’d been introduced to everybody on payroll over there. Nothing was adding up right now, and it made my thoughts spiral. Who was this motherfucker?

Sadly, I didn't think I was going to get the answers I needed while being in Florida. I dialed a number and waited for the familiar voice.

"Ami?" Disoriented from being awakened before her nap was over, Martina answered.

"Yes, did you get a chance to go through that box of documents I left for you?"

"I started. Ami, it's a mess. Who drops important papers and folders into a 27 x 20 x 20 size box? There's no organization in there and no matter who you are, you can't make sense of it. It's full. FULL! So, no, I haven't gone through it in the manner in which you're asking. I've sorted it. But there is a lot of shit."

Smoothing the space above my eyebrows, I took a deep breath. "Martina. Get it done. I need information, and I'm positive that it's in your hands."

"I have a deadline, Ami. It'll have to wait until tomorrow."

I growled, letting my anger boil from my gut through my mouth. "Don't, right now. I need that information like last week. If somebody is fucking me over, I'm taking it out on your ass. It's my job to lead this family. That means it's your job to be fucking supportive, however I need you to be. I don't trust anybody but you with this. Quit dragging your ass. Find. It. Martina."

"You don't have to be mean, Ami." Her voice was so low that it tethered on the edge of a whisper.

"I'm not. I can't make sure you're safe if I don't know what's coming. Help me keep this shit on point. I hate repeating myself and you know it. I'm not being mean. I'm demanding you to do your part. Do it the first time that I ask, and I won't have to get 'mean'."

"Understood. There's just so much—"

"You wanted to help. This is how you do that. Handle things when I ask you to."

"What are you even looking for?"

“Something I don’t already know. I get that you probably won’t know what I mean until you see it. Once you get a system, it’ll be easier to see if something sticks out. If you don’t find it, I’ll be able to look through the organized version.”

“I can handle that. I’ll get it done.”

“Good. I need to leave town. Don’t be alarmed if you don’t see me for a few days.”

“Okay. What about Simone?”

“She’ll be fine. It’s not like the two of you won’t hang out. Fast friends and all.”

“I’ll keep her busy.”

“I bet you will. Don’t max out any credit cards.” I warned her.

“We do more than shop.”

“Sure. Get it done, Martina.”

“On it.” She exhaled and ended the call.

Now I needed to tell Simone and hope that she didn’t freak out about me being gone for an unforeseen amount of time. Then I could focus on who in the hell this mystery person is.



SIMONE

Three weeks later

Beni insisted that it was time for my mother to meet his family, but I wasn't sure about that. She was big on tradition, and I hadn't introduced the two of them yet. She wasn't a fool. My mother was going to see straight through his expensive suits and smooth demeanor, then ask me why I was bringing him into her home. She'd know exactly what he was about in less than two point four seconds.

Beni wasn't slick either. I knew why he wanted to meet her. I found the damn ring when I was cleaning up. At least it better be for me. Thinking about it being for another woman made my baseball bat twitch. I wish a chick would think she's taking his fine ass away from me. He was too perfect by my side and together we were like magic, fairy dust and all. That's why I was standing outside my mother's door, pacing on the porch, trying to figure out the best way to tell her that I was serious about a man and wanted her to meet him.

"Simone?" The familiar voice stopped me in my tracks and had me spinning around to figure out how I hadn't noticed her open the door.

"Mommy," I exhaled and pulled my bravado from my toes. "I need to talk to you."

"Well, yes. It's either that or you're out here to wear down the wood."

I giggled, releasing the tension from my shoulders. "I met somebody."

"Me too. A few somebodies. Every time I go to the supermarket." She smiled at me, and it actually met her eyes.

Overwhelmed, I hugged her tight and didn't let go. "I love you, Mommy."

"I love you, too. Now come in and tell me about the man who made you forget all about that lying fool, Marcus."

“Mommy, you know he was murdered.” I reminded her gently.

“Because he finally messed with the wrong person. Now, come in here and tell me about...”

“Beni.” I beamed.

“Short for?”

“Beniamino.” I followed behind her as we entered her house.

“Italian?” she asked, stopping to see my face.

“Yes.”

“Handsome?”

“Very.”

“Well mannered?”

“Mhm...”

“Rich?”

Shit. “He doesn’t have money troubles, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“It’s not, but we’ll circle back. How’s his relationship with his mother?”

“She’s deceased.”

“Father?”

“Recently deceased.”

“Did he kill them?”

“No, Mommy. Listen—”

“Sisters or brothers?”

“One of each and they adore him. His niece, too.”

“You’ve met them?”

“Yes. I go to Sunday dinners with them.”

“And now he wants to meet your beautiful mother.”

“Yes. He needs to see where I got all this sass from.” I walked around her and sat at the dining room table. I smelled food and wasn’t passing up anything she was making.

“Is he here now?”

“No. He wants to have lunch with you soon.”

“How’s your club?” She walked into the adjoining kitchen.

I raised my voice to make sure she could hear me over the movement of pots and pans.

“Doing well. I hit another milestone this week.”

“My baby is killing it.” She smiled at the pot as she stirred whatever was in it. “I’m so proud of you, girlie. I can’t believe that your dreams are coming true.”

Me either. Five years ago, I was in a completely different era of my life. This season was winning in all things, and I wore it on my face every day. Even the hard ones.

“So, when is my date?” My mother turned and put her hand on her waist, reminding me a lot of myself. I see why he wants to meet her. It’d give him an idea of what I’ll be like in twenty-five years.

“With Beni? When are you free?” I asked, hoping that I had time to prep him on etiquette with my mother. She was friendly enough, but she wouldn’t beat around the bush about anything she wanted to know.

“Now. Call him over for dinner. I’m making spaghetti and meatballs. He can bring the wine.” She turned toward the pot, dismissing anything that I could say.

“Mother.” I sighed.

“You only call me that when you’re not happy with something that I’ve said. Call the man over Simone.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I huffed out of the room and pulled my cell from my purse. I dialed Beni’s phone number, but didn’t expect him to answer.

“Hey, Firefly.”

“Hello ... I’m at my mother’s house and she wants you to come over now for dinner.”

“I was on my way to Martina’s...” He mumbled something away from the phone and then came back. “What’s the address?”

“Beni, you don’t have to.”

“Address, Firefly?”

I rattled it off quickly, and he repeated it, probably to Denny.

“I’m on my way. He says we’re only ten minutes away.”

“She said to bring wine.” I paced in front of the TV, wondering why I’d even brought it up today. Why couldn’t she have said next week?

“White or red?”

“She’s making spaghetti.” I mumbled.

“Risky. She’s making spaghetti for an Italian. Is it from scratch?”

“Doubt it. This wasn’t planned. You’ll be nice to her and eat whatever she’s serving.” I threatened playfully.

“The woman could be making peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and I’d eat it. She’s gotta have a special touch. She made you, and you’re the best thing I’ve ever eaten.”

“Beni! Denny’s right there.”

“He’s heard me say worse things.” He chuckled, and I rolled my eyes, grateful he couldn’t see it.

“I’ll see you soon. Make sure that you look nice.”

“Don’t I always?” His voice dropped an octave, and I melted right here in my mother’s living room.

“Always isn’t usually meeting my mother.” I retorted.

“I’ll see you soon. I love you.”

All of my fears and concerns evaporated with just those three words. I knew he did, and that’s why all this was going

to be okay. He loved me and, therefore, would love my mother. Same for her.

“I love you, too.” I exhaled and firmed my shoulders. All was well.

“Be good.”

“Always.” I disconnected the call and turned to see my mother standing in the doorway watching me. “Mommy!”

“If he’s anything like that smile you are sporting, he’ll be alright in my book. Now, get in here and help me get dinner finished so I can spend time getting to know the Italian man that has my daughter’s heart.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I moved to the kitchen, where we finished cooking together.

It’d been a long time since we’d done this and I hoped that things were looking up for her, since she seemed to be in a really good mood.

What gives?

I wanted to ask but didn’t want to sour her mood by prodding. Instead, I enjoyed it. The questions could come later. For now, I’d bask in her glory with her and hope that more days like this were in her future. She didn’t need the sadness of my father’s death haunting her for another moment. She’d grieved long and hard. My mother deserved peace more than anybody. The reprieve was rightfully earned.

I said a silent thank you to the heavens for making everything align for this meet and greet. I had a feeling it’d go well, and I held onto it until Beni knocked on the door.

Showtime.



BENIAMINO

Wine. I stood inside the aisle with so many bottles of Pinot Noir bottles facing me. It was the perfect wine for pastas, but which brand to buy? I could go with one that I loved, but I didn't want Mrs. Flowers to think that I was trying to show off. I wanted to impress her but not by getting something expensive and showy. She wasn't that kind of woman, from what I understood. If she was anything like her daughter, she'd see right through that and view me differently. I couldn't offend her palate by getting something cheap or common either.

"Hey, how are you?" A man walked up, looking over the selections similar to me.

Tall, dark skin, with a clean-shaven head. It was impossible to look at him and not smile back at him. Hazel eyes twinkled my way, and I felt drawn to his presence.

"I'm fine, trying to choose a pinot noir for dinner tonight." I admitted.

"What's the occasion?" He asked.

"I'm having dinner with my future mother-in-law. I'm meeting her for the first time, and I want to leave the right impression." Stalling, I pick up the brand that I usually drink.

"Mind if I help?" He asked.

"Not at all." He was older. Maybe he could offer me an opinion from a different point of view.

"What are you having for dinner?" He asked.

"Spaghetti."

"Oooh, Italian. Can't go wrong with pinot noir. There's something special about a Riesling though. He walked around to the next aisle, and I followed. "I know of one that always did the trick for my wife. I would bring it home when she had friends over. The first time I did, they sent me back for more. It's her favorite and worked like a charm to keep me out of

trouble. They were always eating pasta with it. I promise you can't go wrong."

Looking at the bottle, he handed me. The script was elaborate with gold letters on a black label. The year was printed on the bottom, but it didn't offer anything else. I don't know about this.

"I know. I know ... don't ever disregard the underdog, though."

The price surprised me. It wasn't cheap at all, but not the most expensive bottle that I've ever purchased. If it tasted good, the price was right. The only thing that made me pause was the label wasn't encouraging.

"Thirty years..." the man pointed to the bottle. "Never steered me wrong."

Fuck it. "Thanks, man. I really appreciate it."

"No problem. Good luck tonight, man."

"Thank you. I feel like I owe you. Anything I can help you with?" I asked.

"Yes, in fact, there is." He spoke.

"Name it."

"Have a good time tonight. Relax and let the evening take you where it will."

It was an odd request, but I had nothing to lose by granting it.

"I will. Do you have plans tonight?" I asked as we walked toward the register.

"This is it. Hey, I left something back there, but don't forget what I said. Be yourself and enjoy the night. Take care."

"I will and you, too." I turned to choose a line. When I found one with no one in it, I turned to look for the man, but he was nowhere to be found. I was going to pay for his wine in appreciation...

Taking another look at the bottle, I hoped he was right. It could be the thing that made or broke my night.



Though the noodles weren't made from scratch, Mrs. Flowers knew her way around the kitchen. The meatballs were veal, and the chunky sauce was a combination of fresh vegetables, apples, and herbs. I'd never had it that way, but she swore the natural sweetness required the tangy apples. It didn't matter because after three bowls, I was full and ready for a nap.

Simone ate my salad, and I almost forgot about the bread on the table. Who needed that when the star of the show was so damn good? Did I forget the freshly shredded parmesan? My sister didn't even shave the cheese at the table.

"Quit looking at my mother as if you'd trade me in for her." Simone whispered to me while we washed dishes.

We'd already put away the food, cleaned the counters, and I'd taken out the trash. Honestly, I'd do a lot more if it meant I could have a plate to go. Gutters, windows, cut the grass, leaky pipes...

"I just can't believe you don't have any of those skills. Did you taste that spaghetti?" I asked her without simmering down my tone of voice.

"It tastes like it always does." She shrugged.

"You grew up with that as your spaghetti?" I was baffled because food came from the can or restaurants while I was growing up. We didn't have authentic Italian until Martina learned to cook much later.

"Yes. My mother is a housewife. It was her dream to take care of a home. I didn't have those same goals. What I appreciated was that she allowed me to be my own person. She didn't force caretaking down my throat."

"And now your skills end at warming up food." I teased.

"I can make some things." She insisted.

“Toast does not count.” I said immediately.

“It does.”

“Neither do instant foods.”

“Cooking is cooking.”

“Save that same energy for a conversation with Martina about meals.” I warned her.

“No, thanks.” She huffed.

“Exactly.”

“Almost finished?” Mrs. Flowers asked as she walked into the room. She walked over to the oven and took out freshly baked cookies.

I nodded my head but watched her every move. I swore my stomach growled, but there was no possible way when I was as stuffed as I am. Macadamia white chocolate chip oatmeal cookies were sitting on the counter glaring at me. I’d never heard of such a thing until she said it. They were golden brown and smelled buttery good.

“Finish up and I’ll get these on the table.” She pulled down a plate and disappeared. When she came back for milk and glasses, I hurried to wash the last dish.

I dried my hands and Simone giggled.

“There will be some there when you get to the table.”

“There better be.”

When we got in there, we all sat at the table. Between bites of her masterpiece, I asked Mrs. Flowers about Simone as a child.

“She was born feisty. A social butterfly that always had friends around. Simone has always been great at throwing parties and helping with get-togethers. It didn’t surprise me when she told me that she wanted to get into event planning. That turned into her running a nightclub and being exceptional at it.” Mrs. Flowers beamed.

“She is.” I looked at Simone and she seemed to squirm under all the attention.

“Okay,” she cleared her throat, “moving on.”

“Never could take a compliment.” Mrs. Flowers laughed full belly.

“Some things never change.” I kissed her cheek and Simone leaned into me.

“You two are cute. How did you meet?” She asked.

I froze. How do we explain that to her?

“Marcus. He gambled away part of my club. I’m happy that it was Beni who received it. He’s a businessman and helped to elevate it before I made enough money to push him out.” Simone laughed. That’s not the complete truth and we both know it, but the less Mrs. Flowers knew, the better.

I couldn’t handle wondering if Simone was being nice to me to get her club back. Used to people trying to take advantage, I needed to know if things were so great because I held the keys to her club. When I signed it over to her and nothing between us changed, the walls defending me from deeply feeling her affections fell hard. I tested her loyalty, and she passed with flying colors. Her submission became even sweeter, and I felt the love from her countries away. Italy, to be exact. While I was there, she made sure that I knew I was never far from the front of her mind.

“That’s one hell of a story.” Mrs. Flowers glanced at me. “What do you do at the club now?”

“Besides stalking Simone? Nothing. It’s all hers.” My cell rang, and I checked the caller id. “It’s Martina, excuse me.” I stood up and walked onto the porch to get some privacy for the call.

“Thank goodness you answered. I was going through that paperwork that you dropped off to me. Do you know who Tammara DeLuca is?”

“No, I don’t.” I exhaled. “Where are you going with this?”

“There’s a lot of stuff that has his name on it. Most of it in Italy, but it seems as if father was trying to sue a woman. Tamaro’s name is listed on the document a few times, but the top of the paperwork is missing. I tried researching it online and the document could be a few things.”

“He’s probably one of our cousins. Keep looking. Let me know if you find something worthwhile. Until I find out exactly what Pop was into, I need everything you can find. I’d hate to be caught off guard again.” That’s what happened when I found out that he had two properties that he wasn’t paying the taxes on. They were safe houses and my men had gotten nervous when they showed up to post the delinquencies.

“You got it. Love you, Ami.” She said quickly before she hung up.

“Guess it doesn’t matter if I love her, too.” I chuckled to myself. When Martina got into something she was interested in, there was no stopping her. I’d cleaned out the office in Italy, bringing her documents. I’d give her until tomorrow before she had it figured out all the way down to his favorite color and brand names he wore.

“Is everything okay?” Simone said from behind me.

“Indeed.” I smiled at her before going over and getting the kiss I’ve been waiting for all day.

Simone relaxed against me, melting into my arms and accepting my kiss. “Take me home.” She whispered to me, breaking the fevered give and take of our lips.

“Say less.” I stole another chaste kiss before leading her back inside.

Mrs. Flowers smiled at us while sipping tea on her couch. “I suppose our time is over?” She asked us.

“Yes, Mommy.” Simone leaned down and hugged her tightly. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Okay. It was nice meeting you, Beni.” She nodded her head, dipping it toward me.

“It was. Can I speak to you for a moment?” I asked her.

“Sure.”

We both looked at Simone and she rolled her eyes.

“Regardless of what you two think, I’m not going to culinary school. Private conversations about it won’t change my mind.” She winked and backed away. “I’m going to the car.” Simone blew a kiss to her mother and left us alone.

“You want to marry her.” She said to me before I could give her my rehearsed speech.

“I do.” I swallowed, more nervous than I’ve ever been in my entire life.

Beniamino Tommaso DeLuca wasn’t afraid of anything worth mentioning. I didn’t get stage fright. I went into everything weighing the pros and the cons, knowing the likely outcome of every situation that I went into. Except ones that included Simone. She threw me off kilter all the time, and now I knew exactly where she got it from.

“Why?”

“Because not doing so would ruin my entire world. Firefly–Simone is–”

“You call her firefly?” She sat her teacup down. “What brought that about?”

“Whenever something is thrown her way, she shines brighter. I’ve never seen anything that would hold her back for long. It’s difficult to not see her and what she’s capable of. Yet, she’s delicate and needs protection in a way that helps her flourish. Not overbearing and controlling, but in a way that boosts her while having her back. Then there’s the way she metamorphoses as she levels up. It’s beautiful to see.”

“So not predatory and toxic?” She asked.

I laughed. “Well, she doesn’t mess around about things that belong to her, and her love of coffee should be dangerous.”

Mrs. Flowers joined me in chuckles, and I sat beside her.

“Things between us are so easy. As if we were made to be together. I only want to see her happy and love her like she deserves.”

“And you’re that man?” She peered directly into my eyes, and I never wavered when I responded.

“I am.”

“I’ll leave that decision up to Simone. You’ve got to prove yourself to her, not me. Though you chose well with that wine. What made you get it?”

“It was suggested at the store.”

“Well, the person who helped you gave you great advice. It’s my favorite.”

Damn, now I wished that I really had paid for whatever the man wanted at the store. Being her favorite? I’d have never guessed that. It did pair well with dinner, too. I was going to go back later and get some for my leftovers that Mrs. Flowers had packed up for me.

“Listen, I’ll support Simone in anything she decides to do. If she says yes, you have my blessing.”

It took everything in me to hide how pleased I was with her response. “I’d also like it if you came to Thanksgiving dinner. That’s when I plan to ask her if you’re okay with it.”

“At your sister’s house, I presume?”

“Yes.”

“What time should I be there?” She asked, picking up her teacup again.

“Five o’clock.” I beamed.

“I’ll see you there.”

And that was how I got my stamp of approval to make Simone my wife.



BENIAMINO

When we got home, I didn't waste time with niceties. I undressed Simone quickly and got to the love making business. She quivered around me, and I fought to hold on to the orgasm that ached to be free. Three orgasms ... and she owed me two more for being sassy. She was tired and whimpering, but I couldn't back off. Besides, we both knew that she loved to be pushed in this way. Her back was to me, and I took a moment to kiss up the column of her neck.

"Please," Simone begged, "I can't."

"You can and you will."

She sounded almost regretful. It stirred the sadistic urges that threatened to take over, but we both knew she didn't want that. I tweaked each of her nipples before stroking over her body. She purred, and I knew that she wasn't really done. She needed some help to get to where I wanted her.

"I'll make a deal with you. If you come once more, and I mean a good hard orgasm, I'll forgive the last one. If not, I expect both of them."

"But..."

"No buts."

I picked up the wand that lay on the table beside us. I turned it on low and moved it over her body.

"Ah!" Simone shivered in shock. It was close to its limit, and I recognized that, but there was more to give.

I placed the wand on her clit and stroked it lightly. Her hips bucked towards the sensations, forcing her to ride my hard shaft.

"Yes," I whispered. In my element, I focused on the feel of her slipping up and down my length. Her hot, wet, velvet grip had me in a chokehold, and I loved it.

The sensations were mind blowing, and I longed for more. The wetness sucking me in and out of her body had me gasping for air. Simone gripped me tighter, making every stroke of her cunt over my erection painfully good. I felt every quiver, every thrust, and how slippery she was. It was fucking amazing, damn near bringing me to my knees. When she gave me that orgasm that I craved, it would set us both off into a whirlwind of pleasure.

Indescribable sounds left her lips like the sweetest melody. Strangled moans, half groans, and pathetic cries implied how much her body loved this. Simone needed this as much as I did. I clicked the wand up two speeds and those sounds grew louder. I wound my hips into her as she pushed into me. The spasms shook her so hard that she could only hold on to the cuffs that kept her in place. Without them, she'd have collapsed long ago. Her hold on to my hardness loosened a little, and I knew it was because of the greed that I'd stirred. Her pussy was a needy girl and loved my ruthless charm.

"It. Hurts." Simone cried out.

Aaaaah. Now we're getting somewhere. "Good." I turned up the speed on high and she screamed. "Time to make you cry."

I held the wand firmly in place as her body shook hard. There was no need for me to move, since she'd tightened around me again and the spasms gripped me in the best way. Vibrating around me, I was on edge, too. It was time. Simone's moans took everything out of her, leaving her gasping for each breath. Fuck! I grabbed her hips, holding on to the last of my resolve.

Simone's orgasm ripped forward, and she growled like the fiercest cat in the wild. I'd tamed her into embracing that animalistic nature when it called. She took hold of the beast and didn't let go. Her hips moved violently, fucking me eagerly as she took that ball of lust and rode it hard—good. I gave her as she gave me. My body was a mess of spasms that manifested and released into her. I howled, letting go of everything and it was fucking unreal how good I felt.

We were soaked in everything us, and I cared not. I removed the wand from Simone's clit and slowly withdrew from her folds. I stumbled backward, realizing I was just as fucked up. She was floating, and it gave me the time to find some sort of balance. Beautifully spent, I carried her to our bed and pulled the duvet over us. Off on my own high, I let us ride out the feelings until we were both competent.

I woke to her nibbling my lips, and I smiled. "Hey there."

"Mmm ... Hello, Beast." Simone paused to respond and then went back to her kissing fest.

"How are you feeling?" I asked.

"Well used." She laid her head on my chest, and I cuddled her closer.

"Good. You wore me out." I confessed.

"That makes two of us. Thank you, Beast."

I rumbled in approval. "Welcome. Sleep with me, Firefly."

She nodded and mumbled. "Yes."

When I closed my eyes, I saw Simone in a wedding dress, walking down the aisle to me. She wore a beautiful off-white gown, and my focus was on her. We got married and I couldn't stop smiling. We had a small reception, and then time sped up, showing me our three children. Two girls and a boy.

One step at a time, DeLuca.

Except my future with her was like a constant freight train coming at me full speed. I needed to either take the wheels and drive or get the hell out of the way. There was only one choice for me.

I'm not a fucking coward and I wish somebody besides me would try to drive this son of a bitch. This was my goddamn train and owned the fucking track, too.

Try to stop me.



SIMONE

Dinner was amazing, as usual. You'd think with as many people present as there were, that there would be nothing left. Nope. She'd barely made a dent in these pans. Everything was served in the long, deep foil pans. Every surface in the kitchen had food on it. Counters, the stove, the island, and even the smaller table that was in there where Beni and I had eaten breakfast for the first time.

In the dining room, she'd extended the main table and then added another beside it. I'd never seen anything like it. The food was divided into sections, giving the desserts their own area. That's where Beni snuck up behind me and kissed along my neck while wrapping his arms around me.

"I think your mother likes my family." He whispered.

"Agreed. She's sweet on Amina and Max." I giggled.

"I know. If I didn't know any better, I'd think that she was flirting with him."

"No, that's just her southern hospitality. Friendly to everybody. I'm surprised that after my father passed that she didn't go back to Alabama where she's from." I used to wonder if she'd only stayed here because I was here. Though I didn't want her to leave, I did want her to be happy.

"Have you thought about taking her back to visit? Sometimes a week or two is enough to cure that homesick feeling so that you can go back to living."

"I hadn't asked her in a while. I can only try."

"Yes."

"Ami," Martina waved Beni over.

He nodded, and then he pulled my hand to lead me into the living room. Everybody had moved in there, and Max and Martina were busy pouring wine into glasses. Immediately, Beni directed us to the center of the room, and I grew shaky. Wait ... he was doing this now? I figured I had time to let the

shock wear off from finding the ring, but it didn't look like that way.

“Can I have everybody's attention?” he asked, though his eyes were on me.

I looked over to see my mother sitting nearby, and I searched her face for answers. Poker faced as usual, she didn't let on to anything. Had he asked her permission first? I know that was usually reserved for fathers, but...

“Like the name I've given her, Simone has come into my life, brightening up my entire world. In some of my darkest times, her strength has carried me through. She doesn't know how to take no for an answer, always looking for a way to get through the cracks and be seen. That's what this moment is about.” Those words had been spoken to the room and now he was back to being hyper focused on me.

Suddenly confused, I had no clue what he was talking about. Afraid that I had this all wrong, I tugged at my bottom lip with my teeth. Was there something wrong?

“Simone Lashay Flowers, I've seen you since day one. The way you shield yourself from pain, pushing forward so it doesn't sting as badly. The way your entire body lights up when you smile. You give to others without expecting a damn thing in return and when you do get something back, you treat it with care. The way you love me, my family, and friends ... Firefly, the way you breathe, sets me on edge, ready to be there for you however I can. You're so selfless and courageous. Fragile, yet the strongest person that I know. The best part is that you've trusted me with your vulnerability, giving me the chance to show you that if you live in your soft femininity, I'll protect you in all the right ways. I'll be your strength, carrying us in my masculinity. I know that you've got me, and I've got you. The only thing missing is that symbol to the world that you're mine and I'm all yours. Let's change that...”

Beni got on his knee and pulled a red velvet box from his pocket.

“Oh, my.” I spoke involuntarily, unsure that I could handle this moment.

“Are you ready to honor our commitment of being together forever? I am.”

Stunned stupid, I was speechless. The ring was platinum gold, with interwoven-braided vines that made up the band. The leaves were diamonds, four on one side, and on the other, there was a firefly with a gold tear shaped diamond. In the center of the band, the two sides met at a beautiful cathedral setting, cut cornered princess cut.

Lord of Mercy.

The room remained silent, and I stared at the ring. Could I live up to the pressure of being a wife for the second time? I don't think that I could handle the pressure of failing again.

“Simone?” Beni swallowed, and I looked up into his eyes.

I knew what our son would look like at that moment. Nervous that he'd done something wrong with every intention of doing it for the right reasons.

“Beast, you make it hard to breathe. You take up so much room inside that sometimes I can't tell where I end, and you begin. Life feels impossible without you, too.” A tear fell from my eyes, and I knew I was forever doomed. “I love you too much for there to be any other option besides yes. I can't let you go, ever.”

The entire room let out the air that they seemed to be holding as Beni slid the beautiful ring onto my finger quickly, as if he thought I'd change my mind. I wouldn't. Couldn't possibly do that. This man had my whole heart.

He kissed me like it was our first time. Soft and sweet, like a promise we could never forget.

“Salute!” Max shouted proudly to the room and echoes followed.

When Beni finally let us come up for air, we were surrounded by family and friends trying to get hugs. There was

a knock at the door, and two of the guards moved toward the door with Martina.

“God, I love you.” Beni spoke directly into my ear, giving me chills.

“You’ll show me later?” I asked, wrapping my arms around his neck.

“Or now...” He moved to go toward the steps, but the room went silent, catching our attention.

We looked at the man who walked into the room commanding attention in the same way that Beni and Max did. He favored them, almost a younger spitting image of Beni’s father.

“Beni...” Martina swallowed, almost as if she was preparing for a war right here in her living room.

Max stood next to her, staring at the man like he’d seen a ghost. Martina’s eyes shifted to me, and I held Beni tighter to me. What the hell was happening?

“Hello, I’m Tamaro DeLuca. Beniamino, Massimo, and Martina’s brother from Italy.”

Beni moved to go toward him, and I pulled him back, turning his face to mine. I could feel the anger rolling off him in waves. I wasn’t afraid of him like this. Couldn’t be when I knew I was the last person in the world that he’d hurt.

“It’s fucking disrespectful.” Beni hissed at me.

“I know ... I know. Breathe for me.” I coached him.

“You see this shit...”

“Beast ... please. There is a house full of people and my mother is one of them. I need you to stay calm. If you take him outside to beat his ass, that’s fine, but not in here.”

His lip curved upward in a smirk. “I can beat his ass, though?”

“You can. Fists, no guns.” I emphasized. I knew he carried one. “Our child needs their father.”

Beni froze. “Are you...” he looked down at my stomach and then my face.

“I was going to tell you later tonight, but yes.”

Beni roared, picked me up off my feet, and twirled me in circles. He kissed me again, this time urgently and full of excitement.

“Now, go see what’s going on and show him which DeLuca brother runs things around here.” I kissed him and I saw everything inside him calm. The storm in his eyes died and in its place was determination.

“Go show your mother your ring. I’ll be outside. Stay in here until I come to get you.” He studied my face until I nodded in understanding.

“Good girl.” He kissed my forehead. “Don’t let Martina follow us out. Until I find out what the hell this is about, I don’t need either of you near this fucker.”

“Yes, Beast.” God, I wanted him right now.

I stepped back, letting him go. He winked and went to go handle his business.

“Martina!” I yelled at her.

She looked, and I waved her over. She glared at Beni, knowing she was set up. Then she made her way over just as I got to my mother.

“Let me see your ring.” Mommy said to me.

I held my hand out to her. Martina gave me a big ole’ kiss on the cheek.

“Sister-in-law.” She smiled. “How’s it feel to be a part of the family?”

“I thought I was from the way you’re always feeding me.” I joked.

“You were. Now, it’s official. Can we talk about that ring?” She swayed on her feet, making me laugh.

“It is beautiful.” Mommy said.

“Thank you.” I beamed, loving how personal it was.

Beni had made it unique, much like who he was. I looked toward the door he'd exited from and hoped that he remembered exactly what I'd told him. He, Max, and the new brother had disappeared through the front door with a few guards in tow. Whatever was about to happen was serious. Beni needed to keep his cool so he could remind everybody exactly who the boss around here was. Like it or not, that meant that he always had to be in control. Even if he wasn't.

I was here to remind him of that.

He had this. No matter how much he wanted to smash Tamaro's face in.

He couldn't.

Family always took care of family. Even I knew that.



BENIAMINO

Outside, I looked at the birth certificate that authenticated Tammaro's story. He was Tommaso's son, alright. Born a few months before Martina. He'd cheated on my mother and given this bastard a key to our dynasty. He was the fucker making cash drops every month.

"What exactly do you do for him?" I asked.

"I make the deposit from his properties." Tammaro folded his arms as if this whole thing annoyed him.

"What properties?" I squinted. My father had never shown me any properties in Italy.

"You knew about us this whole time?" Massimo asked.

"The ones he owns. He uses them for short and long-term stays."

"You mean a legit income?" I guess it was a night filled with shocking information.

"Yeah. How do you think you're paying for shit over here? Those vacation stays make big money. Charging renters three to five times its value. It brings in big bank monthly. One property brings in thirty thousand a month."

"How many properties are there?" I asked.

"Currently? Twenty. Not all of them are big. Some only average around six to seven a month. Regardless, it's a passive income that makes it easy to hide cash. Rotating it over to the bank account, it keeps the accounts low over there."

Massimo stepped up in Tammaro's face. "How long have you known?"

"All my life." His answer made something snap inside Massimo. I saw the rage contort his face.

"Take a walk, Simo."

He did, and two guards followed behind him.

“How long have you been working for Pop?” I asked him.

“Since I was a teenager. I went to school for business and learned how to work real estate. Been valuable to him ever since then. Even the elders approved of what we’re doing.”

“You know them, too?” I asked.

Not everybody got a chance to meet the elders. I knew Massimo hadn’t. I understood why he was upset. Pop had skipped him in succession and passed on part of the business to his illegitimate son—a man who shouldn’t have even known the dynasty existed. Instead, he did, and we were working side by side together and I didn’t know.

Tamaro nodded. “He told me that he wasn’t going to tell you guys about me. That it was better that you didn’t know. When he died, I decided that it was time. I needed to work up to it, and when Martina called asking questions about who I am, I knew it was time to show you.”

Bad fucking timing.

“What is it that you want?” I asked him. “Now that you’re here, what exactly did you hope to gain from it?”

“Not much. Thought we should all meet. Sometimes it’s shitty being over there alone, not having family. I thought I’d come and meet mine to see what it’s like to have all this.”

“I don’t trust you.” I admitted.

“Nobody in their right mind should. I’m a DeLuca.”

He was. From the way he spoke, walked, and even held his own regard, it was obvious that he was Tommaso’s kid. My brother. His uncanny resemblance made it unquestionable.

My cell rang, and the tone indicated that it was a call from Italy. I rarely heard from them, and now it seemed as if they had my number on speed dial.

“Paulie.” I said.

“The elders want to see you here. Plan to be here for a few weeks.” He hung up the phone, and I growled before smashing

my phone. If the caller didn't wait for a response, it meant the line could be compromised.

"I guess we're going to Italy." I said to Tammaro.

"Guess so."

Until we left, I was keeping him in sight. Massimo walked up just in time.

"I need you to hold it down here while I go to Italy to see what the call I received a few moments ago was about."

"And him?" He nodded toward Tammaro.

"He's going back with me. We'll talk more about it tomorrow." I turned and both of my brothers followed me back inside.

When we entered, Cara was here talking to Simone.

"Beni!" Cara came over and hugged me quickly. "Congratulations."

"Thank you."

"I hope you're ready for what I overheard." She mumbled.

"What did you—"

"Beni! Think you can handle a Christmas wedding?" Martina yelled out.

A lot of the guests had gone. We'd been in the backyard, so we'd missed their departure. Only two of my cousins, Mrs. Flowers, Cara, Denny, Simone, and my siblings, were in attendance. In the kitchen, Martina was making plates for some of my men.

"How'd you know it was me and I hadn't said anything?" I yelled back at her.

"Easy, I felt Simone light up and that could only be because you came back in."

I chuckled. "Good save."

"Why, thank you."

“Whatever Simone wants.” I shrugged. We could have gotten married tomorrow if she wanted. She was already my wife. It didn’t require a big ass party to announce it.

“Really?” Simone asked. “It’s my favorite holiday and—”

“What ... ever... you... want.” I said to her directly. “You said yes. Whatever you want now is already yours.”

She smiled, unable to get up because Amina was asleep on her lap. I went over and kissed her before sitting next to her.

“Hey, I’m Cara.” She said to Tamaro.

“I’m Ro.” They shook hands but didn’t immediately let go. Their eyes stayed on one another as if they both wanted to say something but didn’t.

“Simone, baby, I think it’s time for me to go.” Mrs. Flowers chimed in.

“Okay. I’ll see if Denny can take us. Beni, I can meet you back at—” Simone said but was immediately cut off by her mother.

“I’d rather Beni take me. You wanted to talk to Martina some more, and Amina is holding you captive.”

“I can do that. It’ll give me time to get some air.” I didn’t know what was up, but obviously she wanted to talk to me about something.

Why else would she want me to go with her instead of having the familiarity of Simone. We’d have to get used to one another anyway, so digging in was the only option. Some alone time would be good for us. Besides, we’d talked the other day at dinner, and it went well. Today was amazing, and I saw no reason for any of the conversations between us to go badly.

“Okay, well, I’ll see you back here soon.” Simone smiled.

I leaned down and gave her a kiss. “I love you.”

Simone nodded. “So much, Beast.”

The exchange was quiet, something reserved for the two of us.

“Get a room!” Martina yelled from the kitchen.

We both giggled, and I kissed her forehead before putting on my sweater. I retrieved Mrs. Flowers’ coat and helped her into it. She’d already said her goodbyes and hugged Simone while I’d grabbed our things. I helped her to the car and closed the partition, but chose not to isolate the sound from Denny. When we were in motion, I interrupted the silence to see if I could get a feeling of what was bothering her.

“How did you enjoy dinner?” I asked.

“Dinner was fine until I found out what I was really doing there. I appreciate the song and dance, but we should get to the point. You can’t marry my daughter.”

The car grew smaller by the second, taking the air with it as it shrunk. “Excuse me?” Because I’d already asked and gotten my yes, if this was a sick fucking joke, it was cruel. I wasn’t letting go of Simone without a fight.

“The debts my husband had with you were paid off before you decided to murder him. Even after he did, you still killed him. I’m not letting you have my daughter because you DeLucas can’t get over your pride.”

“You didn’t know my name before today, did you?” I asked about putting the pieces together of this baffling puzzle. I didn’t know anything about her husband or how he’d died.

“No. Simone had only told me that your name was Beniamino, and that you were Italian. I wouldn’t assume that every Italian is a DeLuca.”

“Regardless, I don’t know your husband and wouldn’t have used his death as leverage to marry Simone.”

“Eddie Flowers doesn’t ring a bell to you?” She studied my features, and I knew she was looking for something to resonate with me, but the name wasn’t familiar.

“No. I don’t know why it would.”

“Because your family killed him three years ago. He had finally paid off his debt and you wouldn’t let him walk away. That junkie that you let take the fall for it probably had no idea

what hit him when he was arrested. What'd you do, give the money to his family?" She scoffed.

"Mrs. Flowers—"

"Don't! I know what you're up to. The least you could do is own what you're up to. My Simone has nothing to do with any of this! You marrying her is out of the question. Even if I believed you for a second, how could I let this happen when we both know that the past can't be changed. You took my husband. I refuse to let you also have my only child! I don't know what you need to do or say to her to make this wedding go away, but you'll do it. So, help me god, if you don't I'll find a way to get rid of you myself."

"Boss," Denny chimed in, hearing the threat.

"Stand down." I warned him.

I never doubted any opponent, not because of weight, size, or sex. Anger and revenge could make the smallest threat mighty. That wasn't why I didn't need him. It was because I respected her stance. If my family was responsible for the death of Simone's father, I deserved whatever she was going to give me. She was driven by her heart and good intention. This wasn't greed. That fearless attitude of hers is the thing that I loved most about her daughter. I couldn't hate it inside the woman who birthed her just because it looked different.

"You got it." The speaker still hummed in the distance, not obvious to anyone who wasn't looking for it. He was still listening, ready to do whatever he needed.

"Mrs. Flowers, again, I don't know what you're talking about. I can investigate it to see what I can find out, but I don't know your husband. Simone isn't a pawn in a game."

"Do you think I'm playing?" Her face was ice cold, showing exactly how serious this situation was for her.

I respected and admired her for it.

"Not at all. Understand that I'm not either. Whatever happened isn't something I'm willing to let stand in the way of my relationship with her."

“You won’t have to. When she finds out the truth, you won’t have to leave her. She’ll do it for you.” She paused. “I’d rather leave sleeping dogs where they lie, because she doesn’t need to know how deceitful your family is—how damning you truly are. Leave her alone and I won’t tell her the truth. Try to proceed with this marriage and I’ll make sure she knows everything that I know.”

The car came to a stop, and I realized that we were at her house. She didn’t waste time getting out of the car and slamming the door shut, ending the conversation. That pissed me off since I’d learned nothing about what she was accusing me of. What debt? Simone’s father was murdered three years ago. I was already running things. I never forgot the name of my enemies, because I never knew when I’d need it or when it’d come back to bite me in the ass. Like now. The partition came down, and I glanced up to see Denny peering at me. Concern laced his features, but I had no words.

“I didn’t kill Simone’s father.” I insisted to him.

Denny liked Simone. So, I hoped he understood that even though I’ve done some shit to protect my family, I was innocent of what I was being accused of.

“Want me to see what I can find out?” He asked.

“Yeah. I’ll call Massimo to see if he knows anything. Flowers...” I searched my memory for the name and the only thing that came to mind was Simone’s face.

“Do you want to go back to Martina’s?” Denny asked.

That’s where I was supposed to be, but I couldn’t bring myself to face Simone when the accusation stained my soul. What if what Mrs. Flowers said was true? Eddie Flowers. I couldn’t think of a single person with that name. I’d never heard it before she spoke it. Now, though, I’d never fucking forget it.

“No. Take me to the water.” I needed to clear my fucking head.

First Tammaro, issues in Italy, and now Eddie Flowers. Today was supposed to be a good day. I was engaged and

Simone was pregnant. There was no way that I was letting her go now that I had everything that I wanted. I hadn't killed her father, but it didn't escape me that my father could've been responsible. If he died at the hand of a DeLuca, Mrs. Flowers was right and I'd already lost Simone. The past had already decided it before we'd even begun.

Fuck!



BENIAMINO

“Boss...” Denny’s voice caught my attention.

I turned away from the ocean to see what was so important that he had to interrupt me.

“This better be good.” I said

“It’s ... not.” He shifted his weight to his other foot, then he spoke. “Eddie Flowers called in a favor to your father. He was having issues getting enough money to pay for some medical stuff for his wife to help her get pregnant. He was old friends with Tommaso, so going to him made sense. However, he couldn’t pay him because the bills kept racking up. He borrowed more, and he got in over his head. He started working for us to pay things off quicker. Dropping packages minimizes the risk. I guess Mrs. Flowers found out and wanted to end it all. When she inherited a large sum of money, she paid Tommaso off. He didn’t like it. I guess it’s why he had him killed.”

“That wasn’t his call!” I shouted.

“It gets worse.” Denny swallowed. “Do you remember Stone?”

“Yeah, Pop said he was skimming money.” I squinted at him. “Why?”

“Stone is Eddie.” He waited me out, but he didn’t have to wait long.

“I ordered the hit.” Lead dropped in my stomach, rooting me to the spot that I was sitting in. “Massimo handled it.”

“You got it now.” He shook his head. “Turns out that Stone wasn’t skimming. Max checked into it later. The hit was ordered because Tommaso didn’t want to let him out of the deal. Stone was good at getting things done without being noticed.”

“He used me.” I blurted.

“He lied to get you to do what he wanted.” Denny corrected.

“He. Used. Me.”

“Yeah, Boss. He did.”

“Get my brother on the phone now and tell him to get his ass here! I need to know how he found out that Stone wasn’t skimming.” I clenched sand in my fist, letting the pricks of the sand dig into my skin, hoping to ease my frustration.

When Denny was far away, I finally took the cap of my emotion and let it erupt. “FUUUUUUCK!” I cursed.

The feeling of never having something to myself that I can keep and call my own surfaced. The last time I felt like this was when my mother died. Hopeless. Fucking insane. My world was crashing and burning while I was still in it and there wasn’t a goddamn firefighter in sight. This time, it was going to pull me in and suffocate me alive, and I had no motherfucking clue how to get out.

Mrs. Flowers was right.

I was the reason that her husband was gone.

I was also the reason that Simone lost her father.

Now ... my unborn child would never know their grandfather. Hell, neither of them. And that was my fucking fault.



SIMONE

Beni texted me to see if Cara could take me home. She'd said yes, and then I tried to wait up for Beni to get home, but he didn't, not until almost seven a.m. Then he showered and packed for his trip to Italy. He didn't know how long he was going to be gone. Apparently, there was business that needed to be handled over there that couldn't be done by phone. He was also taking Tamaro, his newly found stepbrother, back home.

Beni didn't look like he'd slept at all. He smelled of the ocean and his clothes were covered in sand dust. His sentences were clipped, and he insisted that he'd sleep on the plane. He'd allowed me to talk him into showering, but declined when I asked if he needed company. I got the feeling that he didn't want to be alone with me, but I couldn't figure out why. When I asked what happened with my mother, he told me that they chatted before he dropped her off, but that was the end of that conversation. He wouldn't elaborate, and it made me wonder if she'd said something about the wedding to him.

Was I jumping into things too quickly?

I didn't think so, but now I was curious why he wasn't offering more information.

"Babe, I'm just tired. We can talk about it soon." He said, when he got out of the shower.

Babe? He'd never called me that a day in his life.

"Unh, huh." Anxiety whirled inside, looking for a place to fester more doubts. "Are you sure that you want to do the wedding at Christmas? I know it's soon."

"Whatever you want." He kissed my cheek and got dressed. His bags were in the living room by the door, but at some point, somebody must've retrieved it.

When he was dressed, he kissed me quickly and tried to leave. I got in his way and pulled him in for a deeper one. I didn't know when I'd see him next. A peck wasn't going to

help me deal with him being away. He kissed me back, but as soon as I slowed the pull of his lips down, he pulled away.

“Simone, I need to go. Martina will be around to help you with anything that you need. Max has a key and will be stopping by here and the club to make sure that you’re fine. If you need anything, let him know.”

“Will I not talk to you at all?” I jutted out my hip and perched my hand there. Usually, he’ll go on and on about him being only a call away. For me to try his cell before reaching out to Max. What gives?

“You will.”

“Then...” I waited for him to elaborate, but he seemed like I was bothering him. Pestering him even.

“Simone, this is different from before. Bigger. I don’t know if I’ll have access to my phone the way I usually do. Try Max first. Denny will be around to drive you wherever you need to go. You won’t take money from me, unless I send Martina with my card when you’re shopping. What else do you need?”

“Uh, to talk to you? To hear that you’re alright.” I pushed. Why was he being a dick?

“Like I said, I don’t know if I’ll be available for that kind of stuff. I’ll call you before bed. I know with the time difference, it can be hard. We’ll figure it out.” He kissed my forehead and left out the front door.

Gone.

What in the actual fuck?



BENIAMINO

Three days later, I returned to town with every intention of breaking up with Simone when I stepped off the flight. My heart was heavy, feet dragging with every step. I stood to exit the plane. Crisp air opened my nose, and I watched the sunrise from the bottom of the staircase.

“Hey, son.” I looked over to see the man from the grocery store. He was unloading my luggage from the plane.

“What are you doing here?” I walked over to him as he slung a bag onto the cart.

“You tell me.” He joked, and we both laughed. “You alright?”

“Yeah, just...” I looked up at the sky, wondering how to convey everything that I was feeling into a simple phrase. “I feel like I’m about to lose my entire world.”

“That’s a lot to put on one set of shoulders. Too big a burden to carry alone. Did you do all you could?”

“I think I have, but when you didn’t have all the details, it was hard to stand strong on a decision.”

“There’s always more to the situation. People say that there are always two sides to a story. I believe that the perception is up to the beholder. Everybody always has something to gain in the situation and something to protect. You can’t be about to lose your entire world, because if you were, I’d see you fighting harder than you are. Maybe you’re stunned because you took an unexpected blow. Now you’re in shock and it hasn’t worn off yet.”

“There’s no fixing this.” I shook my head. The wise man in front of me had no idea how bad this shit was.

“Sounds like you don’t have the right tools.”

I snorted and shook my head. “What kind of tools can one possibly have to change a woman’s mind about the death of her husband?”

“Maybe his death was about the sacrifice for his woman. Their child.”

I nodded. The situation was definitely that. Eddie gave up his freedom to give his wife a baby girl. He had sacrificed. Did he know what he was doing when he asked my father for that favor?

“And now I have one on the way and no clue how to give them things that were taken away from them forever.”

“They don’t need those things to survive. I told you, sacrifice. Things are the way they are because they’re supposed to be. Usually when you lose something, something better comes along to replace it.”

“You can’t replace people!” I turned toward him, frustrated and tired of the word games.

“Every action has a reaction. If the first thing didn’t happen, would your dilemma even be possible?”

The first thing ... Eddie borrowed the money, which helped his wife to become pregnant. Simone...

“No.” Because she wouldn’t be alive for me to meet and fall in love with.

“Exactly.”

I don’t know if knowing that made me feel better or worse.

“Still stunned, I see.” He chuckled. “How’d the dinner go?”

“Damn good. That wine you recommended was a win. I owe you for that.”

“No, I’m the one that owes you.” He smiled to himself.

“Why is that?” I squinted.

“I got to do it one more time.”

“Do what?”

“Did you ask her yet?”

“Simone? Yes. She accepted.”

“So, her mother liked you?” He looked at me as if I was missing something.

“She did.”

“Still stunned.” He chuckled. “Maybe you should return to the scene of the crime.”

The alley Eddie was murdered in. No way. I heard a car in the opposite direction, and I turned my head to see Denny pull into the carport.

“Her mother’s house.”

I turned toward the man to find him gone. I checked the area and didn’t see him anywhere.

“Boss?” Denny had walked over to see what I was doing. He was reaching for his gun, ready to shoot.

“It’s nothing.” I checked the area again with only my eyes. For him to be an older fellow, he was quick on his feet.

I walked to the car and got in when Denny opened the door. My eyes kept looking for the man even as I sat there.

“Where to?” He asked.

Her mother’s house.

“Simone’s mother’s house.”

“On it.”

As we pulled away, I couldn’t help but realize how familiar the man’s presence felt. I’d never seen him before the night I purchased wine and now I’ve bumped into him again. That’s twice I’ve seen him, and he’s given me sound advice. I hoped he was right about going to Mrs. Flowers’ address. The last thing I needed to do was make this worse.



I pulled up to find a man standing on Mrs. Flowers porch talking to her in what seemed like a heated argument. What was it about?

“You’ve seen him before?” I asked Denny.

“That’s one of Cecil’s boys.” He nodded toward where they stood. “That can’t be good.”

“My thoughts exactly.”

“Have you checked out Mrs. Flowers to see what she’s into? Could be that she’s not as clean as she seems.”

He had a point. On paper and to her daughter, she had a clean sheet. What did the streets have to say about her, though?

Maybe it was time to dig into her a little more.

Sounds like you don’t have the right tools.

Information was valuable in order to accurately determine the odds and whether or not they were in your favor.

Everybody always has something to gain in the situation and something to protect.

The old man was on to something. I couldn’t take this situation on when I didn’t know everything.

Did you do all you could?

No, I don’t think I have. It was time to change that. I refused to live in Tommaso’s shadow and his filth. Now, I’d approach this situation my way. I couldn’t bring Eddie back, but maybe it wasn’t too late to give his family peace. Even if Simone was the only one that reaped the benefits. I didn’t know if her mother was crooked or not, but I’d sworn that I wanted forever for her. It was time that I started acting like it.

After the man left, Danny looked at me through the rearview mirror. “Want me to follow him?”

I was about to answer that when my phone rang. The one reserved for calls from Italy. “No, I need to get back to Italy.” I didn’t need to answer the phone in order to know that.

Pissed that I hadn’t seen Simone, I also knew that I wasn’t ready to face her.

I told you, sacrifice. Things are the way they are because they're supposed to be. Usually when you lose something, something better comes along to replace it.

I'd get my time with Simone. Clearing the air was more important. Seeing her right now wasn't the best idea. I needed to figure this out so I could be completely present for her. Sacrificing didn't always feel good. I hoped that I wasn't doing more damage than good.

When I got to the airport, I felt lighter because my thoughts were moving. Unstuck from the place I'd been in for three days.

Stunned.

Now, I was no longer in shock. I had a purpose that included getting my woman back. Convincing her mother that the only option was this wedding was my number one priority. The rest would follow, reacting to the moves that I was about to make.

Renewed energy buzzed on my skin, and I was once again grateful for my conversation with—

Damn, what was his name?



SIMONE

It's been twenty-one days since Beni walked out of this house to leave me to go to Italy. We talked on the phone whenever he could, but he didn't seem as annoyed as he was when he was here. Though it still felt like it was asking for too much to have conversations with him. Did he truly have that much going on that he was so stressed and moody? I knew his brother coming here was a shock, but what else did he have going on?

"Simone?" Martina called to me while waving her hand in my face.

"Sorry." I'd zoned out again and couldn't focus on this shopping day that she had planned for me.

"We have to finish getting the rest of your accessories together for your dress."

You mean the one that I haven't found yet?

I'd been to multiple stores and hadn't been able to find anything that I liked. My mother had been busy every time that I'd called her and was unable to go with me to find a dress. Defeat was trying to work itself into my head and never let go. I couldn't get married without a husband or something to wear. What kind of wedding would that be?

Tears pinged the back of my eyes and I closed them, hoping that I didn't break down right here and now. I could handle this. I had to...

"No, no, no! Simone..." Martina pulled me aside and out of the way of others at the mall.

"Why did he propose if he didn't really want to marry me?" I asked her sincerely. "It's like he's been a completely different person for the past three weeks. Did his proposal create an alter ego that hated the thought of marrying me or having this child?"

“Stop that. Listen, Beni is a jerk and needs a reality check. There is no reason why you should be here planning your wedding alone, dealing with his shit, and being super busy growing a baby inside you. You can’t get yourself worked up about things because it’ll hurt the baby. I need you to be calm and as relaxed as you can be.”

“We get married in eleven days. How calm can you really ask me to be? I don’t even have a groom to say I do to if he doesn’t get back soon. I’d get up there on that altar and agree to be his forever in joggers and pumps, if that is what it took. I don’t care about the dress. It’s Beni that I can’t live without.”

Martina pulled me into her arms, and I fell apart, unable to hold back the tears. I cried so hard that my eyes burned, my head ached, and the skin on my face burned. I didn’t need this shit.

“The wedding is off.” I said to her, breaking for the hold she had me in.

“Simone, no.”

“Yes. I’m tired of second guessing myself. If Beni wants to marry me, he’s going to have to fix this and do better. Until then, I can’t marry him.”

I knew it seemed abrupt, but I meant every word that I’d said. I can’t do this like this.

Now I had to call Beni to make sure he knew. He was going to be pissed, but I couldn’t do this alone. He needed to provide some support beyond monetary contributions.

Until then...



BENIAMINO

I've been here with the elders, stuck in this house for five days without a phone. They didn't allow them here because the location would be compromised. Tired of debating with them about if I should be left in control in Florida was driving me fucking nuts. They'd gotten wind that I had no idea about the Italian side of things, and it left a gap in my knowledge base.

Tamaro had made it his job to make sure that I saw every damn corner of everything we did over here. I was surprised at how much he knew and even more impressed that he didn't seem intimidated by my presence. As far as I knew, he wanted nothing to do with the drug trade system we ran back home. He liked staying on the legal side of things and was even there with me to make sure that the elders saw things my way.

"Beni, trust me. I think it could do us both some good if you let me speak to them. I've dealt with them when I convinced them to venture into real estate. They're stubborn, but usually fair. They respect family and loyalty. You're building on that now. They'll see that you're taking your role seriously." He leaned forward and rested on his knees, but his eyes were trained on me.

Was this all a ploy?

"Talking to them makes you look good."

"Except I've already told you that I don't want to do what you do. I'm fine where I'm at."

"It sounds good, but the moment that you go in there talking a big game, all eyes will be on you."

"Then let it. The way dad set it up, we can't exist in this business without the other. I wash money quicker than anything you do over there. I know you don't know me, but at some point, learn to trust me. We're brothers and this would work out best for us both if they saw things the way we want them to."

“Try any funny business, and I’ll kill you the moment we step off this compound.” I warned him.

“Don’t threaten me, DeLuca. We have the same blood running through us both. I’m not some punk bitch that you can threaten, and I’ll bow at your feet. I’ll challenge you every step of the way.”

“I meant what I said. I’ve worked too damn hard, and I won’t let you try to step in. When we go in there, stick to the script.”

“Glady.”



Coming out of the meeting, I was fuming. They agreed to leave me in charge in Florida as long as Tamaro came with me to check on progress. They also expected me to do the same for him here in Italy. We were working together for the unforeseeable future. Right now, I was happy that I could go home. I had a wedding in four days to get to, a mother-in-law to talk to, and a fiancée to make up with.

When I got to my phone, I had over fifty missed calls and so many text messages that it had the plus sign next to the number. I went to Simone’s messages first.

Since you’re refusing to answer my calls, I wanted you to know that I’m calling off the wedding. When you’re ready to discuss what’s happening with you or why I haven’t heard from you for four days, I’ll be here waiting.

“Where to?” The driver asked.

“Home.” I didn’t give a damn about all my things that were at Tamaro’s place. I was about to lose the most important thing of all if I didn’t haul ass. I still needed to talk to Mrs. Flowers, too.

I looked down at the mobile in my lap. It was a gift from Enzo DeLuca, wishing me luck on the baby. It felt like an omen. A gift to wish me well. I held stock in the promise of

something fruitful and hoped like hell that it wasn't too late to make this right.



DELUCA

BENIAMINO

I knocked on the door of Mrs. Flowers' home. When she peeked out to see me, she took her time to open the door.

"What are you doing here?" She asked.

"I came to talk. Mind if I come in?"

"I do, but I don't want everybody in my business." She sighed.

I entered, and we sat down in her living room to chat.

"Listen, you're right. Mr. Flowers did die at the hands of my family. I had no idea who he was, or that he was bridging the gap in both of our families. I can't go back in time and make it all go away. I can say that I'm sorry that any of this happened."

"That's supposed to make it better?" She scoffed.

"No. I wanted to apologize and to also let you know that I've taken care of your problem."

"What problem?" she asked skeptically.

"Seems that my father isn't the only mob family that your husband approached. You're still paying them and they're harassing you about more money. I put an end to all that. They won't be coming around here asking you for anything. You're square, settled as long as you don't go looking for more."

"I don't need you sticking your nose in my business." She defended.

"Simone would never forgive me if she knew that her mother was in too much over her head. Your husband's death only shifted his debt over to you. Cecil verified that for me. They planned to kill you when they came back. Now, you don't have to worry about that."

"This doesn't change what happened. I'm still not allowing you to marry my daughter." She stated.

Standing up, I knew this conversation was over. “You’re right, it doesn’t change the past. You told me when we sat right here in this room that you’d respect her decision. I’ll tell her myself when I get home. If she wants no part of me, then I’ll walk away willingly. If she does, you’ll have to keep your word. No disrespect, but I can’t allow this to hold me back from happiness. I love Simone and this drama between our parents has tainted that. I’ve allowed it to keep me away from the best part of me. Your daughter.”

I walked out of her house without waiting for a response from her. It wasn’t up to her whether or not Simone became my wife. I wished that things could have been done differently, but I had to deal with the hand that I was dealt. Facing Simone was the next step, and I had more than a little making up to do to her. The distance between us was about to dissolve.



Walking into our home, I found Simone sitting in the middle of the floor, going through a box. Stunned stupid by her beauty and how much I missed her, I stood watching her before I made my presence known.

“My mother wants you to call her.” She said.

“When did she tell you that?” I asked.

“About ten minutes ago. She called to see if you were here yet. I guess you stopped at her house on your way here?” Simone looked up at me. “What kind of game are you playing at?”

I was about to answer her question when her phone rang.

She sighed. “It’s my mother again.” She answered the call with more than a little annoyance in her tone. “Yes, mother?” She looked up at me again. “My mother wants you.”

I took the phone from her and waited for me to talk. “Hello, Mrs. Flowers.”

“There’s no need to tell Simone about any of this. I’ve always wanted to keep her so far away from all this.”

“You have. There’s no need to doubt yourself now.”

“I called Cecil to see if you were telling me the truth. Turns out that you are. My debt has been wiped clean and I’m free to live my life.”

“That’s good for you. I’m glad it worked out.”

“I wanted to say thank you.” She responded. “And that I won’t stand in the way of the two of you getting married.”

Surprised, I stuttered over my words, but eventually, I responded. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I don’t think my Eddie would have liked to see us at odds in this way. And if she knew the truth, it would destroy her. I don’t want that for her.” She paused. “But I’ll let you go back to Simone.”

“Okay. Have a good night. Thank you, Mrs. Flowers.” I said gratefully. Not that I was glad that I didn’t have to tell her. I was happy that she understood that it wasn’t one another that we were hurting. By telling Simone she’d be the one in pain.

“You, too.”

I disconnected the call and when I went to give Simone her phone, I noticed a photo sticking out of the box.

“Who is this man?” I asked her.

“My father.”

Couldn’t be. Her father was dead and when I saw him, he was alive and well. The grocery store and the airport. There was no way that this was the same man.

“Why do you look like you’ve seen a ghost?” She asked.

Because I had. That or I hadn’t gotten a good enough look at the man.

“Does he have any other children?” I asked.

“No. I am their only child, and he didn’t have any outside of their marriage.”

What she was saying made sense, but eyes hadn’t deceived me. Or had they? Because if that was the case, he’d given me

his blessing on that first night at the store when he'd coached me on what kind of wine to bring his wife.

I got to do it one more time. Now I understood what he meant. She'd smiled when she'd seen the bottle at first.

"Are you ready to get married?" I asked her.

"Only if you're ready to talk." The way she looked at me was as if she didn't expect me to do it.

I sat on the floor next to her. All in, I was ready to talk to her. I kissed her briefly, drawing luck from her lips. "I'm ready when you are."

I meant every word.



BENIAMINO

When we finished talking, Simone confessed that she hadn't found a wedding dress. With only six days until we were to be married, I took her to Italy with her mother, Martina, Amina, Tammaro, and Massimo, in tow. The girls spent most of their time away on their mission. The three of us guys got better acquainted while Tammaro gave us a tour of what we were doing out here without all the pressure.

Massimo thought we could manage the same thing back home, and we started planning our method of attack. The day before our wedding, Simone came rushing inside with tears in her eyes and a smile.

"You found it." I said to her.

She nodded a lot, and I pulled her into a hug.

"Max, tell everybody it's time to go!" I shouted while holding her tight. I leaned toward her ear. "Time to make you my wife."

Simone was so emotional she couldn't speak. More nodding happened while holding on to me. She didn't have to say a word. I knew how moved she was.



I walked into a hall that reminded me of a winter wonderland. Our colors were frost and red. It was like everything was frozen in time. I still couldn't believe that she'd gotten so many people in one place at the same time, with only thirty-two days' notice. They sat either to the left or the right as I walked down the aisle. I followed the red train sprinkled with artificial snow until I got to my place in the front. My suit was black with a red tie and trim down the lapel.

"You look sharp, brother." Massimo said, standing in as my best man.

“Thank you.” I exhaled, nervous as shit.

“I think you look like you’re going to shit bricks.” Tamaro said from beside him.

“Shut up. Just be happy I invited you.” I joked back. The three of us laughed in sync and it felt good.

The lights blinked, and I figured that was our cue. A woman in a sparkly dress stood off to the side of the officiant as the melody to “If I ain’t got you” by Alicia Keys was played without the words. Cara came first, and I noticed how she couldn’t keep her eyes off Tamaro. He was just as focused. Yolanda, Simone’s attorney, was next. Then her best friend Asia. Last but not least was Martina. When the song started over, the singer spoke into the microphone.

“Please rise for the bride.”

Amina walked in, dropping winter white roses as she came toward me. The singer dropped the first verse of the song as Simone stepped into the room. Her voice was powerful and fit the emotion coursing through me as I watched her come toward me. Escorted by her mother, she looked beautiful. Her dress was satin with a sweetheart neckline. Her chest, shoulders, and arms were covered in a very sheer lace. The satin material fit her like a second skin down to her thighs. Lace flowed from there to the ground and train. Her veil was also lace and hid her face from me. My fingers itched to take it off so I could see her fully.

Midway down the aisle, her father appeared. He stepped out and stood beside her, escorting her down the rest of the way. Understanding his presence now, I was choked up with emotions. He smiled brightly, with tears in his eyes. He touched her arm and Simone’s step paused as if she could feel him. I held my head up higher when she continued on. It was the perfect sight. Both of her parents bringing their daughter to me. I had to remember this moment, capturing it as best as I could since nobody else could see it this way. They’d think I was crazy if I told them otherwise. When she stood in front of me, her mother offered me Simone’s hands. I paused when

Eddie got to his knees and kissed Simone's stomach. He then stood next to his wife, and I held Simone's hands inside mine.

While the last of the song was sung, I stood looking down at Simone. Then we turned toward the officiant while he did his thing. I massaged her hands through the satin gloves she wore, lace on the underside all the way to her fingertips.

"Now we'll hear vows from the couple."

Fuck! I knew I'd forgotten to do something. I'd written mine down but left it in my bag.

"Beni, I only wanted to take a minute to remind you of how far we've come. From the perfect bet to standing here today, I've always been drawn to you. Your take charge demeanor led us to our first argument, but you never gave up on me. Persistent, you pursued me religiously. Thank you for that, because it's the best gift you've ever given me. Your ability to always show up for me, even when I fought you. I've known that I could count on you to always be here. To always fight for us. It's what I've always needed. A partner, somebody who won't let me give up. Someone who helps me rise to my full potential every day. You take what you dish out, allowing me to love you back in the ways that lift you up as well. Our styles work so well together in perfect harmony, that's how I know that today was premeditated. We were destined to stand here today as man and woman because our hearts already knew the way. I love you and love the way that you love me back. Thank you for being you, Beast. I truly needed you in my life."

I wiped the tear that managed to break free. Shit. I sniffed and then cleared my throat.

"I don't know if I can beat that."

The crowd laughed as I heard more sniffing out there. I saw movement and watched as her father came to stand next to me.

"Speak from the heart, son."

Son ... it was the second time he'd called me that.

“Speaking of destiny...” I started. “It was your scent for me. It reminded me of my favorite woman in the world. I know that’s a tall order, but you shined through. Making it yours, replacing the memories of the only other woman I’ve ever loved as strong. I noticed that the same fierceness that I once used to send her away was directed to you. Old wounds never healed, you smoothed your love over them like the best healing balm. Teaching me to trust, love, and even to respect you in a way that I didn’t know existed. You’ve surrendered to me in some of the sweetest ways, showing me that it’s safe to be vulnerable here...” I moved my hands back and forth between us, “with you and no one else. Firefly, nobody brightens a room the way you do. Your energy is unmatched, and it draws me to you even when I hate it. It’s impossible to compete with. That’s how I knew that our forever was already here. With or without rings and a license, you were already my wife. My soulmate. You’re right, baby, we were already written in the stars.” Unable to help myself, I pulled her in for a kiss, marking this moment as ours. I didn’t need somebody else to pronounce us as man and wife. We fucking were.

“That’s it, son. Claim what’s yours.”

I chuckled against her lips, and she smiled back, understanding too.

“If anybody has a reason why these two shouldn’t be wed—”

My brothers stepped forward, guards too, and challenged the crowd. Cheers sounded through the room as her bridesmaids joined the ranks. Her father stood in line as well, and it solidified my decision.

“Before he pronounces us as man and wife, can we take a moment to thank our angels for helping to make sure this was possible?” I said to the room. Everybody hung their heads and was silenced. “Anna DeLuca, Tommaso DeLuca, and most importantly ... Edward Flowers.” I nodded to him as Simone gasped. “Without his sacrifices, today wouldn’t have been possible. I know he’s here. They’re all lending us their strength and being supportive of this day. Thank you.”

“Amen!” somebody side from the back.

“Thank you, Beast.” Simone sniffed some more, and I kissed her cheek.

We turned back to the officiant. “Let’s pronounce them man and wife. I present to you, Mr. and Mrs. Beniamino Tommaso DeLuca. You may kiss your—”

I didn’t need his permission. I kissed Simone, gathering all the love I felt for her, and I channeled it to her lips, pouring it into her soul.

Whistles sounded, and I pulled her even closer. Her arms circled my neck, and I felt more complete than I could have imagined.

Mine.

And that was the best Christmas gift I could ask for.



SIMONE

Beni was gone from me for twenty-six days in Italy. He was making that up to me in aces. A twenty-six-day honeymoon with no destination in mind. We followed our whims and traveled to wherever felt good. My favorite was his home in Italy. It was where his parents wed.

He'd left Massimo in charge, and I'd left Cara to keep the club going. We knew it was the right decision when it took us so long to think about our life back home. We were lying in bed together when I felt a flutter across my stomach.

"Beni!" I shouted, though he was right next to me. I took his hand and put it to my stomach. Half asleep, he was completely lost on what was happening.

"What's happening?" He groaned.

"Feel." The flutter happened again, and he pulled his hand away.

"Is that what I think it is?" He asked.

I nodded and tears dropped onto my chest. The baby...

He rested his head on my stomach and wrapped his arms around me.

"You're going to be mighty, just like your grandfather." He said.

"Both of them." I whispered.

"No, I don't want him to be anything like my father. If he was the wisdom of yours and the grace of my mother, he'll be unstoppable. That's all I wish for."

I hugged him to me, letting him listen to my stomach.

"When you're done, can we have pasta?" I asked him.

"Mhm..."

"And ice cream ... with chocolate covered turtles."

"You mean the candy, right?"

“Yes. Ooh ... and pizza.”

Beni chuckled and kissed my stomach. “Whatever you want, Firefly, it’s already yours.”

God, I loved this man.



Thank you for reading the next installment in the Beniamino DeLuca journey. If you haven’t read the first part, make to do so. It’s free in Kindle Unlimited [here](#).

If you’re interested in [Massimo’s](#) story, you can preorder it today. Did you notice the chemistry between Tammaro and Cara? Don’t worry, they’ll be in the third season of the Savage Bloodline Series. Preorder [Tammaro DeLuca](#) to make sure that you’re ready for its release.



I'd like to say thank you to everybody, friends, and family, who have supported me during this journey. It's been a long time coming.

A very special thanks to my team; beta readers, editors, assistant, cover, and media designers. Without you guys, who knows what these pages would've held.

To the little girl who never thought this day would come, we made it! The journey is here. The time is now.

To my potential readers and loyal supporters, thank you for giving me a reason to breathe life into these words.

Forever bound,

Slave to the Pen,

Jade Royal



When the voices begin to speak, Jade Royal sits down in her lab to tell the tale. Each story unfolds when she listens to her instincts, bringing the words to life. Jade has always expressed her creative nature artistically, especially by writing. She refers to herself as “Slave to the Pen” because it’s difficult for her to resist the call to write.

Jade resides in Cincinnati, Ohio where she was born and raised. Always traveling, she looks for the next adventure in everything she does. Coffee is always part of her plan with shenanigans thrown in the mix and music of all genres blasting from her playlists. Jade Royal has never met a stranger and once you’re part of her pack, she holds on tight keeping those in her fold protected.

Jade Royal is the author of the “Limits of Love Series”. The series focuses on love, romance, and the eroticism of the two combined. She writes interracial romance in lots of sub-genres including; BDSM Romance, Paranormal Romance, Suspenseful Romance, and more. She also dabbles in non-romance genres of Thriller and Suspense.

As an author, Jade pulls her readers in to experience raw stories that readers can relate to on various levels. The emotional roller coaster bestowed will hopefully make her readers stalk her words and indulge in her realm of fun.

Queen of her world, Jade Royal pushes the envelope of idealism, bringing you something a little different than you’re used to. To explore her domain, follow her on her website and social media avenues. www.authorjaderoyal.com

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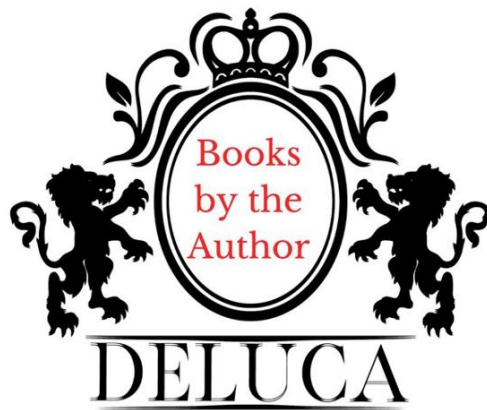
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AN UNFORGETTABLE CHRISTMAS
BY SHANI GREENE-DOWDELL



ABOUT AN UNFORGETTABLE CHRISTMAS



Vito DeLuca's father's disloyalty is the gift that keeps on giving this holiday season. Vito learns a close family member is in danger, and that leads him down the path of mystery, mayhem and bloodshed just a week before Christmas.

Determined to put an end to the threat and make it home to enjoy the magic of the holiday season with his wife and son, Vito DeLuca is a man on a mission.

Catch up with Vito and Nicole and their newfound family in a thrilling holiday adventure that will have you on the edge of your seat.



Nicole

Let it Snow

Our home had transformed into a Christmas wonderland, enveloping us like a holiday dream. I stood in the doorway, taking in the warm glow of twinkling fairy lights that adorned our living room. The tree towered over us, adorned with sparkling ornaments and shimmering tinsel, its star winking down at us from above.

“Nicole, what do you think?” Vito asked, his deep voice barely audible over the mellow Christmas music playing in the background. He stepped closer, sliding an arm around my waist and pulling me tight against him. I could feel the strength in his embrace, the safety and security that only he could provide.

“Vito, it’s beautiful,” I murmured, leaning against his broad chest, feeling his heartbeat beneath my fingertips. “You always know how to make everything perfect.”

He chuckled softly, his breath warming my ear. “Only the best for my queen,” he whispered, pressing a tender kiss to my temple. “I want this Christmas to be unforgettable for us.”

We stood there for a moment, lost in the magic of the scene before us. The world outside ceased to exist; it was just the two of us, cocooned within our own little festive paradise. As Vito’s fingers traced lazy circles on my hip, I felt a wave of

gratitude wash over me. How had I been so lucky to find such a loving and devoted husband?

“Let’s get started on the gingerbread house, amore mio,” Vito suggested, his eyes twinkling with mischief. “You were pregnant and out of it last year. I’ve got a feeling this year’s gingerbread house will be our masterpiece.”

“Are you sure you’re up for the challenge?” I teased, grinning up at him. “I seem to remember last year’s being more of a... disasterpiece.”

“Ah, but that was then,” he countered, wagging a finger at me. “This year, I’ve been practicing my icing skills. You just wait and see.”

We began preparing the gingerbread house, mixing dough and rolling it out, cutting shapes, and carefully placing them onto baking sheets. Vito’s laughter rang through the kitchen as I playfully flicked flour at him for making jokes about my baking skills. The love between us felt soft and gentle, yet strong like a living entity that filled the room and wrapped itself around us like unbreakable armor.

“Vito,” I said softly as we sat at the table, decorating our gingerbread house together, each delicate swirl of icing and carefully placed candy reflecting the love and care we held for one another. “Thank you. For everything.”

He paused, gazing at me with those piercing eyes that seemed to see straight into my soul. “Nicole, there is nothing I wouldn’t do for you and our family,” he murmured, sincerity shining in his gaze. “You are my world, and I will always be here for you. Remember that.”

As I looked into his eyes, I knew without a doubt that he meant every word. In that moment, surrounded by the warmth of our home and the man who had stolen my heart, I felt truly and deeply blessed.

“I still thank you, Vito,” I whispered, my voice thick with emotion. “For rescuing me from my past and giving me this beautiful life.”

The screeching sound of his chair, followed by Vito standing and coming to wrap me up in his embrace comforted me. He picked me up and my legs instantly wrapped around his waist. Vito pressed another tender kiss to the top of my head.

“You don’t have to thank me, amore mio,” he murmured, “From the moment I laid eyes on you, I wanted to move heaven and earth for you. Once you became mine, I knew for sure that was my destiny. You are my everything, and I will always protect you – no matter what.”

As Vito held me in his arms, I looked up into his deep brown eyes, feeling my heart swell with love. His rugged features were illuminated by the soft glow of the Christmas lights, making him look even more handsome than usual. Without a word, he captured my lips in a gentle kiss, his warm breath mingling with mine.

I melted into him, my body responding to his touch with a fierce passion that took my breath away. As he deepened the kiss, I felt his hands roam over my body, tracing the curves and contours with a familiarity that spoke of countless past intimate moments. Tingles of pleasure raced through me, and I found myself lost in the sensation of his touch, every nerve ending alive with desire.

Breaking the kiss, Vito leaned his forehead against mine, his breath coming in ragged gasps. “Nicole,” he whispered, his voice husky with desire. “I love you so much.”

“I love you more.” I looked into his eyes, and my past fears melted away, replaced by a sense of security and warmth that only Vito could provide.

He kissed me once more before placing me back in my seat and going back to his. I didn’t think anything more magical could happen, but as I watched him walk away, I noticed light snowflakes outside of the kitchen window. It was as if the world itself had decided to sprinkle us with the magic of Christmas.

“It’s snowing,” I said, barely able to hide the excitement in my voice.

Vito glanced at the sprinkles of snow just outside the window. “Perfetto, mia bella. It’s like Mother Nature is giving us her blessing for little Antonio’s first Christmas. Well, at least the first Christmas where he will understand what’s happening.”

“That’s so true. Last year, he was a newborn, but this year he’s able to understand more of what’s going on, so every little detail matters this year. Like the gingerbread house that looks amazing by the way!” I beamed.

“I told you it would be a masterpiece,” Vito bragged. “It’s perfetto.”

“Gingerbread house down. Now, we’ve got a tree to decorate, lights to hang, and presents to wrap,” I rambled off from my long Christmas to-do list.

Vito glanced toward the living room where Antonio slept in his playpen. “Well, let’s get started. Team DeLuca, ready for action!” he said as he flexed his muscles, making them bulge out of his black t-shirt.

We went into the living room and started decorating. Vito grabbed a box of ornaments from the corner and handed it to me. As I handed him a sparkling red ornament to hang, I couldn’t help but marvel at how effortlessly we worked together.

“Amore mio, do you remember the story behind this ornament?” Vito asked, holding up a small glass angel that seemed to shimmer in the soft glow of the Christmas lights.

“Of course,” I replied, feeling a wave of warmth sweep through me as I recalled the memory. “It was the first decoration we bought together last year.”

“Exactly,” he said, his voice tinged with emotion. “It symbolizes the new beginning we found in each other.”

“Vito,” I whispered, resting my head on his chest as he draped an arm around me, “I can’t believe how much our lives have changed since the first day I saw you in the grocery store. I never thought I’d find happiness like this.”

“Me neither, mia bella,” he murmured, kissing the top of my head. “But life has a way of surprising us, doesn’t it?”

“It really does,” I agreed, pulling his lips to mine for a tender, lingering kiss to express the gratitude, passion, and promise of a future filled with everything we dreamed.

Vito gazed into my eyes, a soft smile playing on his lips. “You are my greatest gift, amore.”

As the snow continued to fall outside, we remained embraced. The small glass angel in Vito’s hand seemed to shimmer even brighter, reflecting the radiance of our love. I couldn’t help but feel a sense of awe at the world we had created together. The darkness of my past seemed so far away, replaced by the love and warmth that filled every corner of our home.

“Let’s finish decorating, amore,” Vito suggested, breaking our warm embrace. “We’ve got a magical Christmas to create for our little man.”

“Sounds perfect,” I agreed, picking up another ornament and adding it to the tree. As we worked side by side, our laughter and love filling the air, I knew that this Christmas would be one to remember – not just for Antonio, but for all of us.



Vito

All I Want For Christmas

I stood on the balcony overlooking the snow-covered streets. I took a deep breath, inhaling the cold fresh air.

The holidays were always a time for family, and yet, I never felt this loved and connected when I was growing up.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. Glancing at the screen, I saw my mother's name flash across it. We saw less of each other since she left my father and moved back to Italy to be closer to her father, Don Costa. But we had made it our business to speak to each other at least weekly.

"Hello?" I answered hesitantly. Though we had a much better relationship these days, I couldn't help but tread lightly whenever it came to my parents.

"Vito, my son," her voice was heavy with emotion, tinged with urgency. "I know the holidays are approaching and it's all about family and good times, so I hate to call you with this, but there is something you must know. So, I will get right to the point..." She paused and proceeded to not get right to the point.

"What is it, Mama?" I asked, leaning against the railing, my heart beginning to race. She never called and started a conversation on a bad note, so whatever she had to say was about to put me in a bad mood.

“Your father...he had another son,” she confessed, pausing as if waiting for me to react.

My grip tightened around the phone, my knuckles turning white. Of course, if there was bad news, it had to be about my father. Alfonso DeLuca. The itch to my scratch. The illness to my medicine. Everything associated with my father was bad news, but another son? How could that be? I had been my parents' only child all of my life.

“Another son?” I managed to choke the words out into reality.

“Yes. Alfonso has never been a faithful man as most of our friends and acquaintances know. He had a child by one of his mistresses when you were only a toddler.” Her voice cracked as she revealed more. “And you know him.”

I shook my head, my heart wanting to reject everything my mother was saying, but my mind knew there was a good chance she spoke the truth. “Who is he?” I asked in disbelief.

“Marcello,” she said solemnly.

“Marcello DeLuca, the capo?” I clarified. “Marcello?” The name fell from my lips like a curse. A long-lost brother, hidden in plain sight from me all these years by my own family.

“Yes. The man you think is your cousin, is actually your brother. He lived as Ramani's child, so no one would know he was truly Alfonso's son. It was a secret we kept, even from you.”

Betrayal coiled in my chest like a serpent, its venomous bite seething with anger and hurt. My mother's words hung heavy in the air between us, a revelation that threatened to shatter our reconciliation, our new understanding, and everything I knew.

“Vito, please understand,” she implored, her voice trembling now. “Your father wanted to protect his image and your brother. The mafia world is unforgiving, and if anyone found out that Marcello was his son and unprotected by the DeLucas, they could have harmed him.”

“So, he grew up ignorant of his true lineage. That’s protection?” My voice was cold, barely concealing the bitterness festering within. “By keeping him in the dark? By not letting me know I have a brother?”

“It was your father’s product of infidelity and his choice,” she said softly but with a bit of a bite. “I’m only telling you now because I have been informed Marcello is in danger, and even though I have no reason to care for my husband’s illegitimate child, he is your brother and I care about you.”

“Is there anything else you’ve kept from me?” I demanded, my heart pounding against my ribcage, threatening to break free.

“Nothing, Vito,” she insisted. “This is the only secret. I swear it on your grandfather’s grave.”

Part of me didn’t want to know, but another part of me had to ask, “Did Don Ermano know?”

“Ramani and your father kept this information from the Don. Neither Don Ermano nor Don Enzo knows about many of your father’s mess-ups. Your father had a few loyal friends and family that helped cover up his mistakes so that he wouldn’t be exiled from the family,” she divulged.

I breathed a sigh of relief. I shared everything with my grandfather, so it would have hurt to know that he kept this from me. It would have hurt even more to know Enzo was keeping this from me.

The line went silent, leaving me to grapple with the bitter pill I was forced to swallow. A brother, hidden away like a dirty secret. And now, as the snowflakes fell gently around me, it didn’t feel like a winter wonderland, it felt like a brewing storm as my family’s deceit threatened to crush me beneath its icy grip.

“I’ll talk to you later, Mama,” I said, disconnecting the call without any of our usual goodbyes. She would normally talk to Nicole and then babble with Antonio as he cooed for her, but the news of Marcello being my brother weighed too heavily on me for niceties.

I stood on the balcony deep in thought. Accepting this revelation would mean allowing a stranger to barge into my life – a life I had spent years building and protecting from the treacherous world of the mafia.

“Is everything alright?” Nicole asked, stepping out onto the balcony to stand consolingly beside me.

“Yeah,” I lied, the word heavy with the burden of unspoken truths. “Just some family business.”

Her brow furrowed, sensing my turmoil. “Want to talk about it?”

“Everything’s fine,” I reassured her, my voice strained.

Before she could press further, the sound of tires crunching over the fresh snow caught our attention. A sleek black car pulled up in front of my house. The door opened, and out stepped Uncle Ramani, his steely eyes finding me and Nicole on the balcony and locking onto mine with an intensity that sent shivers down my spine.

“Ramani,” I muttered under my breath. What was he doing here?

“Hello, Mr. DeLuca,” my head of security, Russell, was saying to Ramani as I stalked downstairs with Nicole close on my heels.

“Hello, is Vito home?” Ramani began. As soon as I entered the room, he started talking. “Vito,” he greeted, striding toward me with purpose. “Your mother told me she would speak to you about Marcello. Did your mother tell you the truth about him?”

My jaw ticked. “Yes, she told me.”

“Your brother needs help against the pestering Grecozi cartel, Vito,” Ramani implored, his voice laced with urgency.

“Brother?” I scoffed, bitterness seeping into my words. “It’s interesting how resolved you are in calling him my brother when you have presented him as my cousin my whole life. Hiding the truth from me for all these years?”

“You have a brother?” Nicole asked, shock covering her gentle features.

“Apparently, Marcello is my brother, and tonight is the night everyone has chosen to let the truth come out,” I retorted, barely able to look at her for fear that she would sense the storm brewing inside of me.

Her hand slid down my arm until she caught mine and held it. Our day had been going so perfectly, and now I had to deal with a new sibling and apparently the war another cartel was waging against him.

“Vito,” Ramani said, his voice softening but still resolute. “I understand your anger, but we did what we believed was best for everyone. Now, more than ever, Marcello needs his brother.”

I stared at him, my heart warring with my mind. I would help Marcello anyway because he was a DeLuca and nobody fucks with the DeLucas and lives to tell the story. But would I be able to trust my mother and Ramani again, knowing they had lied to me for so long?

“Fine,” I finally acquiesced, gritting my teeth against the bitter taste of betrayal. “I’ll meet with Marcello to find out more about this threat against him. I need to see for myself if the capo, my brother...is really in danger.”

Breaking contact with Nicole, I walked over to my bar. My hands shook as I poured a glass of whiskey, the amber liquid sloshing over the edge. I downed the burning liquid, welcoming the pain that momentarily silenced the chaos within me.

“Vito, you need to understand,” Ramani began, his voice wavering with concern. “Marcello and Safia are in grave danger. Safia’s family owed the Grecozis before they were killed, and they’ll stop at nothing to get her so she can pay their debt. Learning that she has the heart of a DeLuca only sweetened the deal.”

“Must I remind you that Marcello is a capable capo that has always been able to handle himself?” I paced the room,

my thoughts racing as I tried to make sense of everything. “What makes this rival so different that he needs my help?”

“Vito,” Ramani said softly, interrupting my internal debate. “I know you’re hurting and angry, but I promise you that he is up against the hardest challenge of his life. This family doesn’t go by old Italian rules. They are mostly out-of-towners who have paid the locals to do whatever they tell them. They have no respect for the DeLuca name, so we have to show them who we are.”

“You don’t have to convince me to fight for the DeLucas. You should know that by now,” I said as I watched the crackling fire lick at the logs in the fireplace, remembering how the DeLuca mafia had saved my ass many times, including the day I ended Desi’s life and saved Nicole.

“And you should know that I would never ask you to do anything that wasn’t necessary. Marcello needs more help than those surrounding him right now. Something is awry in his camp. He needs you,” Ramani replied firmly, his eyes meeting mine. “And I would never ask you to put your life on the line for something I didn’t believe in.”

“Enough,” I said finally, my jaw clenching as I made up my mind. “Give me all of the details you know about this family that’s threatening them.”

“Thank you, Vito,” Ramani replied, his relief evident. “You won’t regret it.”

“Give me the details, Ramani.”

Nicole stood silently by my side as Ramani told me all he knew about the Grecozi family that was after Safia. Everyone knew that if you came for Marcello’s high school sweetheart, Safia, you were essentially coming for him and therefore the entire DeLuca mafia.

After divulging what Marcello had been up against, Ramani left with my word that I would help my cousin. My heart skipped a beat as I corrected myself. I would help my brother.

Tending to mafia business could put my own family at risk. Only time would tell whether my faith in family and loyalty would condemn me or save us all.

I clenched my fists, feeling the cold glass against my knuckles, as I weighed the risks and benefits of helping Marcello.

“Vito,” Nicole’s soft voice broke through my thoughts, her warm hand finding mine. “That was a lot and it came at you fast. Talk to me. What are you thinking?”

“If I help him, our family could be in danger,” I confessed, my heart heavy with the weight of responsibility. “But if I don’t... I’ll not only have failed my brother but the DeLucas.”

“Your loyalty runs deep, Vito,” she said gently, understanding in her eyes. “But so does your love for us. I know you’ll make the right decision.”

“Every choice comes with its price,” I murmured.

“Then, let’s face it together,” Nicole replied, her determination unwavering. “Me and Antonio will stand by you, no matter what.”

“Alright,” I said, finally turning to meet her gaze. “I’ll meet Marcello and Safia to find out what’s going on. But only because I can’t turn my back on my own blood.” I turned to Russell, standing against the wall waiting for orders on how he could help. “Russell, call Marcello and ask him to meet me at the safe house.”

“I’m on it,” he replied.”

In the bittersweet moment, I leaned in to kiss Nicole’s cheek, tasting the salt of her tears. “We should prepare,” I said to Nicole, my resolve solidifying. “There’s no time to waste.”

As I went into my weapon room and chose my companions, I couldn’t shake the fear that gnawed at the pit of my stomach. It was ten days before Christmas, and I had chosen to help my brother, including going to war with another cartel if that’s what it led to. The consequences of that decision loomed over me like a dark cloud. The bond of brotherhood, something I only knew with my cousin, the new

Don Enzo, tugged at my heart. I had a brother. Not someone like a brother, but a real brother. No matter the cost, I could not abandon Marcello to his fate.

When I entered my bedroom, Nicole was dressed and packing her bag. "Please be careful, Vito."

"Always," I replied, my hand resting on cold steel. My hands moved deftly as I loaded my gun, the cold metal an unnerving reminder of the battles me and my weapon had faced before.

"Do you think everything will be okay?" Nicole asked for reassurance, her voice barely audible above the sound of zipping bags and clattering weapons.

I glanced at her, my heart aching at the worry etched on her face. "I don't know, but that's why I'm going to help them to make sure everything will be okay."

Nicole nodded, a determined glint appearing in her eyes. She picked up a small knife, testing its sharpness before sliding it into a hidden sheath within her coat sleeve. When I met her, she wasn't a fighter. But the woman standing before me never ceased to amaze me.

"Alright," I said, ensuring every weapon was accounted for and secure. "Let's go." I walked into the living room, went over to my son's playpen, and scooped him up. "Come here, little man," I said, cradling him in my arms.

His bright eyes sparkled as he peered up at me, a soft giggle escaping his lips as I kissed the top of his head.

"You're going to be brave for me, aren't you?" I whispered softly, smiling as he nestled against my chest.

Cooing, he smiled back at me, then reached out and grabbed onto the lapels of my coat. Here was my family - the one thing that kept me grounded amidst the chaos around us. I held him close to me, savoring this momentary respite even as I prepared myself for what was to come.

Nicole stepped forward and gently ran her fingers through our son's hair before resting her hand on my shoulder. "I'll protect him," she said firmly, her gaze steady and determined.

I nodded in agreement and pressed another kiss to his cheek. “I know you will, mia bella.”

As we stepped outside with Russell and two more guards flanking us, the frigid air bit at our exposed skin, a harsh reminder of the unforgiving world we were entering. Snowflakes swirled around us, painting the streets in a blanket of white – a deceptive beauty masking the darkness beneath. All I wanted for Christmas was to make it back home safely with my family, so we could play in the snow, drink Egg Nog, and any other Christmas traditions we could think of starting for our family.



Nicole

Do They Know It's Christmas?

Vito and I stood side by side, our eyes scanning the safehouse's living room as we waited for Marcello and Safia. The anticipation was tangible as I strained to hear any sound beyond Antonio's cooing.

"Stay close, Nicole," Vito whispered, his hand resting protectively on my lower back. I nodded, feeling an uneasy knot forming in the pit of my stomach. The anticipation was unbearable.

And then, just as suddenly as a storm breaking through the clouds, he appeared. Marcello stepped into the room, his stature as imposing as his brother's. His scowl menacing like impending doom. His demeanor mirrored the danger that had brought him to this meeting with Vito.

"Vito, Nicole... thank you for meeting us here," he said, his voice raging with anger that belied the sincerity of his greeting. "I know your family is preparing for the holidays, and this is the last thing you should have to deal with, but it's time for the DeLucas to come together on one accord."

Vito rose to his full height so that he was eye to eye with Marcello. "I have always been on one accord with the DeLucas. I am the DeLucas," Vito corrected.

"Of course, you are. Now, we must stand in one accord as Alfonso's sons," Marcello countered, his voice steady and

determined. “We’re family, and family sticks together no matter what.”

“That’s why I’m here,” Vito replied, placing an arm on his shoulder before pulling him in for a hug.

As I stood there, witnessing the bond between these two hulking men, I couldn’t help but feel a swell of pride for my husband. Vito was a pillar of strength and loyalty, the kind of man who would go to the ends of the earth to protect those he loved. And now, faced with this new threat, he was reconnected to a brother he never knew he had.

“Thank you,” Marcello repeated, his voice thick with emotion. “I won’t forget this, Vito.”

“Neither will I,” I murmured under my breath.

“No need for thanks, Marcello. Let’s get to the bottom of who’s after you guys,” Vito said.

The moment Safia entered the room, I could feel the air shift as if she carried an aura of mystery and danger. She was a vision of dark beauty, her raven hair cascading down her back like ink spilled across a midnight canvas. Her gaze flickered around the room, scrutinizing every corner and crevice for any sign of lurking shadows. It was clear she didn’t trust easily.

“Vito,” Marcello began, his voice strained with urgency. “I hate to admit it, but we’re in deep trouble. The Grecozis always seem to have the one up on me. I don’t know who I can trust because apparently, they have someone working for them inside my organization.”

Vito’s jaw clenched, his piercing eyes narrowing. “Tell me everything you know about the Grecozis,” he commanded, his tone leaving no room for argument.

Marcello hesitated, shooting a wary glance at Safia. She remained silent, her expression unreadable, but the tension in her posture spoke volumes. When she finally spoke, it was with the same caution that seemed to shroud her entire being.

“We don’t know much,” she admitted, her voice soft yet edged with steel. “But they’re relentless, and they won’t stop until they capture me.” She paused as she sucked in her

emotions. “From what I understand through the rumors I heard as a little girl, Azil Grecozi is the man who ordered the hit on my family when I was fourteen. They made it look like an accident, but the plan was to kill my entire family. They didn’t know I survived because my uncle brought me here to Columbus where we lived under an alias with no problems until now.”

“Then, we’ll have to get rid of your problem,” Vito replied, his voice low and determined. “You’re under my protection now. Both of you.”

“I can keep us safe,” Marcello retorted.

Vito quirked a brow. “Then, why am I here, little brother?”

“Because we’re stronger together,” Marcello said, his resolve strong. “And I knew we could count on you.”

I smiled at Marcello, starting to love my brother-in-law already.

“We need every detail you have about the Grecozis.” Vito’s voice was laced with urgency.

Safia began, “They go by the name ‘The Serpents.’ They’re known for being ruthless and relentless when it comes to hunting their prey.”

“Anything else?” Vito pressed, his tone urgent. “Any indication of why they’re after you?”

Marcello’s gaze flicked to Safia before settling back on Vito. “We think... it has something to do with her father’s debts, but I don’t know how true that is. Safia had no indication that her father was connected to the mafia, and definitely, no indication that her family was in debt to them.”

“Then, we’ll find out the truth. Who do you have on it?” Vito asked.

“Someone breached my home security last week, so I don’t know who to trust. I have my right hand, Romeo, that I trust with my life. He’s outside with the guards now, but I have stopped communicating with the rest of my team until I figure

this threat out. That's why Ramiri told me the truth and came to you for help," Marcello revealed.

Vito spoke in a low, steady voice. "It's okay to work alone, but I have a trusted team. You can trust and believe there are no snakes among them. I'll call them over, and we'll figure this out. I won't let anything happen to you or Safia."

Marcello looked at Vito with a mixture of awe and relief. His shoulders relaxed ever so slightly, and even though there were no words spoken, I could almost feel the bond between the brothers solidifying, growing stronger with each passing moment.

My gaze shifted to Safia who looked as if she had allowed herself to relax. She hesitated for a moment before looking directly into my eyes, and I saw something there that I hadn't expected: vulnerability.

"Nicole, I just want to say... thank you. For standing by Vito in welcoming me into your family for protection." Her eyes filled with unshed tears.

"Safia, we're in this together," I assured her gently. "Vito's family is my family."

Just as we were all getting a complete understanding of the road ahead, Russell entered the room and announced that Vito's team, Ishmael, Casper, Prosper, and Teddy, had arrived.

Ishmael walked over and gave Vito and I a hug, then turned and greeted everyone.

Prosper didn't speak. He just found a vacant table and began setting up his equipment.

Teddy scowled as he stalked into the room. "Who in the hell do we have to kill?"

"Damn, right. You would think they would wait until New Year's to sign their death certificates," Casper fussed. "Do they know it's Christmas time?"



Vito

White Christmas

I could feel the tension radiating off of my trusted allies – Prosper, Teddy, Ishmael, and Casper – as they gathered around me, their eyes reflecting both concern and determination. Safia, Nicole, and little Antonio were in the den, well-guarded by Russell and his team.

The weight of the situation pressed heavily on my chest, making me remember why leaving the capo position behind had been a great choice for me. Although it was a role I could easily dominate, the hot seat was always hot.

“Alright,” I began, my voice low and steady. “We’ve got a serious problem on our hands, and we don’t have much time to deal with it because we all want to be home for Christmas.” I glanced around at each of them, making sure I had their full attention. “Prosper has gathered intel on the men after Marcello and Safia. They aren’t just after them. They’re targeting Safia’s entire family.”

I could see the shock register on their faces, but they remained silent, waiting for me to continue. “Safia’s father got involved with some dangerous individuals in the past, and it cost his family their lives. He owed money to the Grecozis before he died, but some of the investments he made with the money have skyrocketed, making her a billion-dollar target. The man orchestrating the attacks is Jack Dunner, a stock market analyst who knows her worth. He has promised the

Grecozi family that they can get what her father owed them if they bring her to him so that he can get control over Safia to access her inheritance. Chances are the Grecozis have no clue of how much she's worth and don't know they're getting played by Dunner."

"Son of a bitch," Teddy muttered under his breath, clenching his fists tightly.

"I will rip Dunner apart limb by limb," Marcello barked.

"You will get your chance to do that, but we have to find him first," I agreed.

"Seems the Grecozis are keeping him protected, like one of their assets," Prosper acknowledged. "I haven't been able to get a location on him."

"So, he's something like a ghost," Casper asked.

"Don't start with your ghost analogies," Teddy warned.

"Am I missing something?" Marcello asked, looking confused.

"Inside joke about his name. You ever heard of Casper the Friendly Ghost?" Teddy asked.

Marcello frowned. "We don't have time for jokes."

I nodded. "Marcello is right. We need to gather as much information about Jack Dunner and his plans as possible. We'll use any means necessary, legal or otherwise." Turning to my trusted intel guy, I said, "Prosper, I want you to dig more into Jack Dunner's background. Find any weaknesses or vulnerabilities we can exploit."

"Consider it done, Vito," he replied, his voice smooth and confident.

"Teddy," I continued, my gaze falling on the burly man with a hint of gray in his beard. "Reach out to your contacts in the criminal underworld. Gather any intel they might have on Dunner and his associates."

"Got it, boss," Teddy said, nodding solemnly.

“Ishmael,” I addressed my sharply dressed business partner and best friend, standing next to Teddy. “I need you to work with Prosper and investigate Safia’s family’s past. Look for any clues or connections that might shed light on this situation.”

“Understood, Vito,” he responded, his eyes sharp and focused.

“Teddy, while you’re reaching out to your contacts, you’ll also stay at the safe house and guard Safia, Nicole and Antonio.” I could see the determination in his eyes as he nodded in agreement, and I knew Nicole would be safe under his watchful eye.

“Casper,” I turned to the youngest of the group, his sandy hair slightly disheveled and a nervous energy about him. “Trail the team and blend in with the background as usual. Keep a close eye on what’s going on around us and let us know if there are any threats around at all times.”

“Of course, Vito,” Casper said, sounding confident in his ability to remain like a ghost.

“And Marcello,” I turned to my brother and began to speak but he cut me off.

“I’m ready for whatever,” he groaned, apparently feeling the gravity of the situation.

I stared into the eyes of each man on my team – Prosper, Teddy, Ishmael, and Casper – men whose loyalty had been tried and tested through many dangerous situations before. “Listen,” I said, my voice low and urgent. “It’s crucial that we maintain discretion and secrecy during this investigation. If we draw attention to ourselves, it could jeopardize everything.”

They nodded in agreement.

“Vito,” Teddy spoke up, his voice steady despite the worry lurking behind his eyes. “You know we’ll do whatever it takes to bring down this Jack Dunner and keep our family safe.”

“Yes,” Casper chimed in with steely resolve. “We are with you, every step of the way. Ready to turn this white Christmas into a red Christmas.”

I swallowed the lump that had formed in my throat.
“Grazie. my friends.”

“Alright, then,” Ishmael said, clapping his hands together.
“Let’s get to work.”

And just like that, the meeting came to an end. Each man took a deep breath, steeling himself for the challenges ahead, and set off to carry out his assigned task. The room grew quiet as they dispersed, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

As I stood there in the dimly lit room, a cold shiver crept down my spine. And with that, I too left the room, ready to delve deeper into the investigation and bring down Jack Dunner once and for all.



Vito

O Christmas Tree

“Did you find anything?” Marcello asked as he entered the safehouse’s computer room that had become our command center.

I sighed, hating to admit defeat. “Nothing new yet. These bastards are covering their asses like the Secret Service. We’re going to have to try a new approach, and I know exactly who to call.”

Marcello nodded. “My team has been trying to figure out how to get to anyone associated with the Grecozis for months and haven’t been able to find anything. I thought it was because my team was compromised.”

“Well, that could be true,” I admitted as I opened my cell phone and dialed Uncle Ramani’s number.

His voice crackled through the phone line, his gravelly tone instantly recognizable. “Vito, my boy, what can I do for you?”

“Uncle, we have found out who is targeting Marcello and Safia. It’s Jack Dunner. We need your help locating him, though,” I explained urgently.

“Say no more,” Ramani replied without hesitation. “Now that you’ve given me a target, I will figure out the rest. You know you can always count on me and the rest of the family. We’ll be there to back you up.”

“Thank you, Uncle. We just need his location and we can handle the rest.”

“Consider it done, Vito. We won’t let those bastards harm your brother or his girl.”

“Marcello, gather whatever weapons you have,” I ordered. “As soon as Uncle Ramani sends us a location, we’re going to take the fight to the Danners.”

“That’s what the fuck I’m talking about. Let’s suit up. We’ve got a war to win,” he replied, his eyes filled with fire as he disappeared inside the safe house.

As we loaded our guns and buckled on bulletproof vests, Uncle Ramani called back with an address.

“The odds are going to be against you going in. The Danners are cunning and ruthless. Add the Grecozis and you have a formidable enemy even for the DeLucas. So, I’m sending a bunch of friendly faces your way. They will all be wearing the DeLuca crest.”

“Thanks, Uncle. Just know there is nothing I won’t do to protect Marcello and Safia. They are my family, and no one messes with the DeLucas.”

“That’s why I trusted the information about your brother with you,” he said sincerely. “Now be on your guard,” he warned.

“Will do, Uncle.” I ended the call and gave the team the same warning. “Be on your guard. We don’t know what we’re walking into.”

Before leaving the house, I planted the longest kiss on Nicole’s lips, followed by a peck on my son’s cheek. More than ever, I was determined to make it back home to her and my son.

As we climbed into different vehicles and pulled off, headed to our destination, my phone buzzed with a message.

Prosper: Based on the intel coming in, Jack knows we’re on the way there. Someone working with us has informed them.

“Dammit,” I muttered, my heart pounding as I read the words again. “They know we’re coming.”

“What?” Marcello’s voice cracked, unbelievably. “How the fuck do they know we’re coming?”

“Change of plan.” I glanced around, paranoia creeping through me. The only people in the car with me and Marcello were Ishmael and Romeo, and Romeo was the driver. The rest of the team trailed us in a different car. I kept an eye on Romeo as I decided, “We’ll split up. We’ll go in hot and Prosper and his team will come in as reinforcement. Uncle Ramiri also has sent some soldiers to back us up.”

“I like it because backing down isn’t an option,” Marcello agreed.

Fate had other plans. Romeo slowed the vehicle just as a sudden eruption of gunfire shattered the silence, the deafening sound echoing through the deserted streets. Ishmael and I dove for cover, our hearts pounding in our chests as we scrambled for our weapons. I expected Marcello to do the same, but he didn’t move.

“Marcello!” I shouted, desperately trying to reach him while also firing back at the car riding beside us. “Are you alright? Answer me!”

“Vito... they got us.” His voice was barely audible, choked with fear.

“Marcello, stay calm,” I said, my own voice wavering. “You’re going to be fine. You’re going to make it.”

As I looked into Marcello’s eyes, I saw my own fear mirrored there. The stakes had never been higher, but surrender was not an option. I would save Marcello, or die trying.

Romeo slowed to a creep and then stopped the car altogether, making us sitting ducks. It just so happened that luck was on our side, and an eighteen-wheeler came down the road causing the car that was beside us on the road to have to speed ahead and get into the correct lane. They overcorrected

and crashed into a row of Christmas pines on the side of the road.

I could hear gunshots ringing out behind us and realized it was Prosper, Casper and Teddy exchanging fire with men in another vehicle.

“Let’s move,” I ordered, leading Ishmael and Marcello out of the car and into the night with the main objective of finding and taking down the men who’d ambushed us.

Driving away and leaving Prosper, Casper, and Teddy alone in battle wasn’t an option, and leaving the men behind who had shot my brother also wasn’t an option. Where they brought the fight to us was where our battle would ensue.

Marcello had sustained a gunshot to his shoulder and leg, but not once did Romeo try to help him. I pulled my brother out of the car, but he was determined to walk on his own.

“Why did you stop the car like that? You could have gotten us all killed if they had not crashed,” Marcello asked, glaring at his right-hand man.

“I was trying to get away from them,” Romeo replied with a look of terror in his eyes, making it hard to determine if he wasn’t built for this life or if he was being deceitful.

Ishmael and I crept forward toward the Christmas tree lot, our weapons at the ready as we scanned the rows of trees for any sign of the men. Snowflakes drifted down from the inky sky, settling on the fragrant branches like a dusting of powdered sugar.

“Jack! So, you heard I was coming for you. I am!” I shouted into the crisp air, my voice echoing through the lot. “We know you’re behind this! Stop being a pussy and show your face.”

“Or what?” A sinister laugh rang out from behind a nearby tree, sending shivers down my spine. “You think you can take us on?”

“Damn right, we can,” Marcello growled, raising his gun.

I shook my head, silently asking him to let me take the lead on this one.

“Hurry up.” He growled but acquiesced.

“Now, Jack. Why would we be coming for a stock market analyst? You have no business out here pretending to be a gangster,” I mocked. “But oh, that’s right, you come from a family of criminals. The analyst is what you’re pretending to be.”

“Bold words, DeLuca,” Jack sneered, stepping into view with his weapon drawn. “But can you back them up?”

The man matched the images Prosper had shared with the team earlier that night. He was definitely Jack Dunner.

“Try me,” I challenged.

“Vito, now!” Ishmael yelled, launching himself at Jack.

I took aim at the man stepping up to stand beside Jack, my heart pounding in my ears. At that moment, it was kill or be killed, and I knew which side I had to choose.

“Vito!” Marcello’s voice strained against the cold air. Desperation seeped through his tone, urging me to act quickly.

The sound of gunfire filled the air as adrenaline coursed through my veins. I took down Jack’s man with a well-placed bullet. The thud of his body hitting the ground seemed to echo through the Christmas tree lot.

Ishmael finally wrestled Jack into submission, pressing his weapon firmly against the man’s temple. His breath came in ragged gasps, but his eyes burned with determination. “Got him,” he said, a grim satisfaction in his voice.

“Good work,” I replied, adrenaline still coursing through me.

Shot in the shoulder and leg, Marcello ambled over to where Ishmael held Jack down. “This one is mine,” Marcello groaned. “He has caused me and my woman too many problems, and it ends today.”

Jack laughed. “Do you really think this ends with me? If you kill me, more men will come for you and Safia. She is a billion-dollar payout that’s marketed on the black web. People worse than me, including the men her family owed, will never let this go.”

“Oh, you will leave her alone and so will they. If I have to stalk each one of them down and give them the same fate you have today, they will not touch what is mine!” Marcello yelled. “I can guarantee you that.”

“You always let her come before business. She’s worth a billion dollars. Just sell the bitch to them,” Romeo growled as he lifted his gun and pointed it toward Marcello.

I dropped Romeo with a bullet to the back of his head. At the same time, Ishmael stepped away from Jack, and Marcello aimed, shot, and sent him on to glory.

Marcello went and stood over Jack and emptied out his clip before turning to Romeo.

“Thanks for taking out my trash for me, brother. I’ll make sure it never comes back,” he said, reaching for another gun in his thigh holster and pointing it at Romeo. “When we got the call that someone had told them we were on the way, I saw the deception in his eyes when he looked at me. I just didn’t have it in me to kill someone I had considered like a brother to me.” Marcello emptied out another clip into Romeo for good measure.

“Well, now you know the difference between real brothers,” I said, smiling at Ishmael and Marcello. We all stood in the red-covered snow with splatters of blood covering our clothes – Ishmael my brother by bond, Marcello my brother by blood.

Marcello offered me a genuine smile. “Yeah, there’s a huge difference when you can trust your brother. Let’s get out of here,” he urged.

We walked back toward our vehicle, finding Prosper, Casper, and Teddy approaching. They had been in a battle with the Grecozi men that accompanied Jack.

“I already called for clean up,” Prosper informed as the six of us walked away from the scene and got into our vehicles.

We were embattled but that came with the last name DeLuca, whether associated with a DeLuca by blood or bond. We didn’t go around starting wars, but we could damn sure put an end to one.

Hours later, I stood before the door of the safe house, my heart pounding in anticipation. The moment I’d been waiting for was finally here – reuniting with Nicole and our son. Stepping inside, the warmth of the room enveloped me like a comforting embrace.

Nicole was sleeping on the couch. She jumped at my touch and produced her tiny switchblade. “Vito!” she cried as she recognized me. Sheathing the blade and bounding into my arms, she pressed her lips against mine. Her eyes sparkled with relief and love, and I felt myself exhale for what seemed like the first time since this nightmare began. “You’re alive... you came back.”

“I promised you I would,” I murmured, cradling her face in my hands.

Marcello encircled Safia into his arms as tears of joy slid down her cheeks. “You’re safe now,” he assured his high school sweetheart turned lifetime lover. They looked so relieved.

“You did it again, Vito. Wrecked some shit and protected your family,” Nicole whispered.

“Where’s our son?” I asked, eager to hold him.

“Right here,” she said, moving back the oversized blanket she was lying under and picking up our son. She gently placed our baby in my arms. His tiny fingers curled around mine, and I felt an overwhelming wave of love and protectiveness wash over me.

“Look at him,” I breathed, marveling at the miracle in my arms. “We have another chance to make the best of the rest of our lives, Nicole. A new beginning. And more babies.” I smiled at my wife.

“We do,” she agreed, resting her head on my shoulder as we stood together. “And our family has grown,” she added as she glanced at Safia who was determined to tend to Marcello’s wounds, no matter how many times he told her not to worry and that the doctor was on the way.

The safe house glowed with warmth and life. We had all made it back safe, minus Romeo – a rat whose final resting place would be amongst the Christmas trees on the side of the road. His deceptive actions landed him the main character in a clean-up job.



Nicole

What Christmas Means to Me

I straightened out the garland draped across the counter. I glanced over at Vito, who was carefully arranging the plates and silverware on the dining table. I watched as he meticulously lined up each fork and knife, making sure they were all equidistant from one another. Seeing his domesticated side was such a contrast to when I first arrived at his home, and he relied on servants to do almost everything for him. Now, I could see that he took such care with everything he did, even the smallest details. His attention to detail was part of what made him so formidable in the business world, and yet, it was also what made him the loving husband and father that he'd become.

“Vito,” I said softly, stepping towards him. “You know Marcello and Safia won’t judge us by how well we set the table, right?”

His eyes were dark and stormy, betraying the tension coiled within him. “It’s their first Christmas with us since I found out Marcello is my brother. I want it to be perfect.”

“Love, it will be.” I reached out and touched his arm gently. “We’re together. That’s all that matters.”

“Mia bella,” Vito murmured, pulling me into his arms. We stood there for a moment, wrapped in each other’s embrace until he released me with a sigh. “You’d better be glad they’ll

be arriving soon. Otherwise, I would rip that clinging red dress right off your body and take you on this exquisitely decorated table.”

I glanced at the table again. “That sounds tempting.”

Vito bit down on his lip and groaned. “Get back to work.”

Giggling, I returned to hanging the last few ornaments on the tree, making sure they were evenly spaced between the lights. Meanwhile, Vito placed the gleaming wine glasses around the table. Stepping back to admire our handiwork, I couldn’t help but feel this would be a Christmas unlike any other we’d ever known.

I decided it was time to add some warmth to the atmosphere. I retrieved my collection of scented candles from the cupboard and began placing them strategically around the house. The rich aroma of cinnamon and vanilla filled the air, creating a warm, inviting ambiance.

“Nicole,” Vito called out softly, “they’re here.”

My heart skipped a beat as my stomach twisted with anticipation. I hurried to the door, smoothing down my dress and taking a deep breath to calm myself. As I opened the door, the cold December wind swept in, stinging my cheeks and making me shiver involuntarily.

“Marcello! Safia!” I exclaimed, opening my arms wide for a hug. They each embraced me warmly, their smiles radiant despite the chill. I felt a sense of connection to them both that went beyond mere family ties. We were all survivors in this dark world we had each been thrust into.

“Come on in,” Vito said, stepping forward to greet our guests. He too embraced Marcello and Safia, his strong arms enveloping them in a protective gesture that spoke volumes about his loyalty to those he loved.

“Thank you for having us,” Marcello said, his voice slightly hoarse but sincere. “It means a lot to be able to spend Christmas Eve with family.”

“Of course,” I replied, guiding them further into the house. “We wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“Everything looks so beautiful,” Safia murmured, her eyes taking in the festive decorations with appreciation. “You’ve really outdone yourselves.”

“Thank you,” I said, smiling. “We’re trying to make it a festive holiday.”

“I promised her it would be different than any Christmas she has ever experienced,” Vito agreed, his eyes meeting mine for a moment before returning to our guests.

“Let’s make this a Christmas to remember then,” Marcello suggested, his eyes sparkling with sincerity. “For all the right reasons—family united.”

“Here’s to that,” Safia echoed, raising an imaginary glass in a toast.

“Agreed,” Vito and I said in unison.

“Where can I put this?” Safia asked for the gift boxes in her hand.

“You can put them underneath the tree,” I replied, pointing to the massive tree in the living room.

“Wow, that’s a tree!” Safia exclaimed when she returned.

“Thanks,” I beamed as Vito and I led her and Marcello into the dining room.

Vito had outdone himself. The table was a masterpiece of elegance, adorned with fine china and gleaming silverware that seemed to sparkle in the dim light. In the center, a beautiful floral centerpiece stood tall, its deep reds and greens a testament to the season.

“Please, have a seat,” Vito gestured toward the chairs, his eyes momentarily roaming over my red dress for another quick assessment.

“Thank you,” Safia said softly, her eyes wide with admiration as she took in the scene before her. She and Marcello sat down at the table, their amazement palpable.

“Everything looks amazing,” Marcello added, giving me a grateful smile. “You two really outdid yourselves.”

“Thank you, but Vito prepared the table,” I replied, unable to keep the pride from my voice. “We wanted this to be a special night for all of us.”

“Brother, you did all of this?” Marcello asked. “I’m impressed.”

“Take lessons, little brother,” Vito retorted, causing everyone to chuckle.

As we settled into our seats, I couldn’t help but notice how different this Christmas felt from those of my past. There was a sense of unconditional love floating in the air. A sense of different souls that had experienced pain or deceit at the hands of those who should have loved them. And we had overcome it all.

“Shall we begin?” Vito asked, his voice filled with forced cheerfulness. He reached for the carving knife, skillfully slicing through the golden-brown turkey that took up residence in the middle of the table. As he served each of us a portion, I couldn’t help but admire his ease and precision. Yep, my man was fully domesticated and I loved it.

“Tell me, Marcello,” Vito began. “What are your plans once things settle down?”

Marcello hesitated for a moment, seemingly caught off guard by the question. “Well,” he began slowly, “Safia and I have talked about it a lot, actually. We’d like to start our own business – something small, but meaningful.”

“Really?” I asked, genuinely intrigued. “What kind of business?”

“Something that helps people in need,” Safia chimed in, her eyes alight with passion. “Maybe a community center or a shelter of some kind.”

“Sounds like a wonderful idea,” I said, my heart swelling at the thought of helping others.

“Indeed,” Vito agreed, his gaze lingering on Marcello for a moment before returning to his food. “I’m sure you’ll do great things.”

Marcello clarified, "I'll still be capo, but I'm going to spread my wings a bit."

"Our grandfather would approve," Vito assured him.

The conversation transitioned between lighthearted and profound topics, woven together in our own unique fashion. Antonio babbled in his high chair as we shared stories and memories from our pasts. The laughter that rang through the room felt like a balm to my soul, easing the emptiness of not having my mother for another Christmas. We momentarily forgot about the ills that plagued our lives and highlighted the good times we shared.

"Here's to new beginnings," Marcello proposed, raising his glass in toast.

"To new beginnings," we echoed, letting the clink of our glasses serve as a reminder of the hope that still remained, even in the face of the unknown.

The warmth of our laughter still lingered in the air as we moved from the dining room to the living room. The Christmas tree stood tall and proud. Its lights casted an array of colors on the walls. Ornaments glinted like precious jewels.

"Wow," Marcello breathed, his eyes wide with wonder as he took in the floor to ceiling tree. "You two really went all out, huh?"

"Anything for mia bella," Vito replied, a hint of pride in his voice. "It took us a week to get all of the ornaments on there. A couple times I second-guessed trying to do it ourselves, but we finished it."

Safia's eyes sparkled as she approached the tree, reaching out to touch a delicate glass ornament. "It's beautiful, Nicole," she said, her voice filled with awe.

"Thank you," I said, feeling a surge of affection for this woman who had become so important to my brother-in-law. "We wanted everything to be perfect for your visit."

"It's perfect," Safia assured. "We have to put up a tree like this next year."

Marcello wrapped an arm around her, pulling her close. “Whatever you want, babe,” he replied, smiling down at her.

“Here, Nicole,” Safia said, passing me one of the beautifully wrapped presents she had placed under the tree when they arrived.

“Thank you, Safia,” I murmured, carefully unwrapping the gift. Inside was a stunning hand-painted silk scarf, the colors swirling together like a sunset over the ocean. “It’s absolutely gorgeous.”

“Marcello told me you like sunsets,” she replied, a shy smile tugging at her lips.

Marcello beamed. “I got that intel from Vito.”

I glanced over at Vito, who was handing Marcello a small box. “For you, brother,” he said, his voice steady and sincere.

“Thanks, Vito,” Marcello replied, opening the box to reveal an exquisite silver pocket watch. He looked up at his brother, his eyes glistening with unshed tears. “It’s perfect.”

We continued exchanging gifts. Marcello gave Vito a platinum tie clip and I gave Safia a crystal bowl.

“Here’s to us,” Vito said, raising a glass in toast. “May we always find light in the darkness.”

“Salute!” Marcello said, echoed by me and Safia.

Moments later, we were sitting in the living room when Vito suggested, “Alright, how about we play some holiday games?” His eyes twinkled with mischievousness, making me wonder what he had up his sleeve.

“Sounds fun,” Marcello agreed, leaning back in his chair with a grin. “What do you have in mind?”

“Let’s start with something simple – a Christmas-themed charade,” Vito proposed, his voice confident and lighthearted. I could tell he was trying to keep the mood light, for all our sakes.

“Great idea!” Safia chimed in, her enthusiasm contagious. I couldn’t help but notice the way her eyes sparkled when she

smiled at Marcello.

We divided into teams, with Marcello and Safia on one side and Vito and me on the other. As the game began, we took turns acting out various holiday-themed words and phrases, each more ridiculous than the last.

“Come on, Nicole! You can do it!” Vito encouraged me as I flailed my arms, attempting to portray a snowflake. I could feel the heat rising in my cheeks as laughter spilled from my lips.

“Uh... a reindeer caught in a snowstorm!” Marcello guessed, his own laughter joining mine.

“Close enough,” I conceded, collapsing onto the couch in a fit of giggles. Vito wrapped an arm around me, his strong presence a constant reassurance.

As the evening wore on, we reveled in the friendly competition, teasing and jesting with one another.

“Alright, Vito, it’s your turn,” I said, handing him a slip of paper. He furrowed his brow as he read the prompt, then stood up, ready to act it out.

“Wait! Isn’t that cheating?” Marcello accused playfully, pointing at Vito’s attempt to mimic a Christmas tree by standing tall and motionless beside our tree.

“Hey, I’m just using my natural talents,” Vito retorted, smirking as the room erupted in laughter once more.

Amidst our laughter, I caught sight of our son, nestled securely in his bouncing chair nearby. His eyelids drooped heavily, struggling to stay open as sleep pulled him under.

“Vito, I think it’s time for us to put the little guy to bed,” I whispered, nodding towards our drowsy child.

“Of course,” he replied softly, his gaze lingering on our son with unmistakable affection.

We excused ourselves from the game, promising to return shortly. As we entered our son’s nursery upstairs, I couldn’t help but feel a sense of peace wash over me. I gently placed our sleepy son in his crib, the soft fabric of his blanket

cradling him like a cloud. Vito stood beside me, his strong arms wrapped protectively around my waist as we watched our child drift toward slumber. This quiet moment shared between husband, wife, and child was intimate with only the faint glow of nightlight shining on us.

“Sleep tight, little one,” I whispered, brushing a tender kiss on his forehead. Vito followed suit, his lips lingering just a moment longer as he let out a silent prayer for our son’s safety and happiness.

“Goodnight, mio tesoro,” he murmured, his voice low and soothing. Even in the darkness, I could see the love shining in his eyes.

We stepped away from the crib, our hands intertwined as we made our way to the door. My heart swelled with an indescribable warmth, the kind that could only be ignited by love. As we stepped out of the nursery and closed the door behind us, the way Vito’s hand lingered on mine, the way his gaze seemed to linger – it was as if the intimacy of the moment with our child had ignited an entirely different kind of passion within us.

I could feel my heart racing, my breaths quickening as we made our way down the hallway. The tension between us was palpable, thick with desire and need. My mind, body and soul remembered the way his lips felt on mine, the way his touch sent shivers down my spine. As we reached the stairs, I knew it wouldn’t be long before we gave in to the overwhelming passion simmering beneath the surface.

Back downstairs with our guests, I could feel Vito’s gaze on me, the unspoken longing that held us captive in its grasp. Our guests’ laughter and conversation continued around us, but our focus remained solely on each other.

“Nicole,” he began, his voice barely above a whisper as he pulled me close to him on the couch. “When I get you alone tonight, it’s going to be a movie.”

I chuckled, my heart swelling with emotion as I looked into his eyes. “I love you too, Vito.”

The warmth of Vito's hand enveloping mine felt good. We were determined to finish the evening on a high note. We laughed and conversed until finally, the energy began to dwindle and Marcello and Safia said their goodbyes.

I savored the sensation of Vito's hand around mine as we saw Marcello and Safia to their car, with a good time had by all.

"Vito," I whispered, my voice barely audible above the soft hum of music that filled our home. He didn't reply, but kept me close as we ascended up the stairs towards our bedroom, preparing ourselves for what would come next.

"Vito," I whispered, my voice barely audible above the soft hum of laughter and music that echoed from the dining room. He once again didn't reply, but the firmness of his grip spoke volumes.

As we entered our bedroom, the gentle glow of candles scattered throughout the room. I couldn't help but shiver at the sight – the flickering flames casting shadows on the walls, creating an intimate sanctuary for us to escape to.

"Nicole," he murmured, his eyes never leaving mine as he closed the door behind us, effectively sealing us into our cocoon.

"Vito," I breathed, taking in the essence of my desire, which was suffocating, intoxicating, and utterly overwhelming all at once.

"Let's not speak," he suggested, his voice low and urgent. "Not tonight."

I nodded in agreement, allowing myself to be swallowed whole by the heady combination of passion and desire that coursed through my veins. This was the calm before the storm, and I intended to savor every moment of the calm and the storm.

Slowly, oh so slowly, we began to undress each other. Our movements were deliberate, almost reverent, as if each article of clothing removed was another layer of armor stripped away. With each button undone and zipper lowered, my heart raced

faster, our connection deepening as the barriers between us crumbled.

“Nicole,” he whispered again, his breath hot against my ear, sending shivers down my spine. I knew he was seeking reassurance to take me roughly.

“I thought you said we wouldn’t speak,” I whispered back, my voice trembling with the weight of our love. He didn’t have to ask for permission to take what he needed from me.

Our eyes locked, and the world around us faded into nothingness. The music, the candlelight, our heavy breaths – all ceased to exist as passion consumed us. For one perfect moment, it was just us: Vito and Nicole, bound together by a love so fierce it defied explanation.

“I just have to let you know that I love you so fucking much,” he said, breaking his silence.

“Oh, Vito.” I touched the side of his face. “Never let me go, Vito,” I pleaded, my voice heavy with emotion. “Promise me, no matter what happens, you’ll always be by my side.”

“Always, Nicole,” he swore, his eyes locking onto mine with a fierce determination that left no room for doubt. His love for me was always so reassuring. “Nothing can tear us apart.”

As our passion flared, matching the intensity of the flames that surrounded us, I felt the weight of his arousal against my stomach. Vito lifted me until I was suspended in the air and lowered me onto his erection.

Our bodies moved with a fierce urgency, fueled by an insatiable hunger that could only be sated by each other. Vito’s touch was like fire, his hands tracing every curve and dip of my body with a reverence that left me breathless. I moaned as his lips found mine, his kiss a perfect blend of passion and tenderness that left me yearning for more.

After he slowed our pace and laid me on the bed, we lost ourselves in each other. The only sounds were our ragged breaths and the soft rustle of sheets as we moved together, perfectly in sync.

My nails dug into his back, a physical manifestation of the ecstasy that coursed through my veins. He growled in response, pressing harder against me, his hips moving in tandem with mine. I could feel the heat building between us, a slow burn that threatened to consume us both in its wake. And when we finally crashed over the edge, our release was like a tidal wave.

Just as we began to calm down, I heard the sound of our son crying. It was a shrill, piercing cry that startled me so badly that I tensed at the sound.

“Shh,” Vito soothed, his hand brushing my hair back from my forehead. “He needs to know we’re here – that’s all.”

He kissed me lightly on the forehead before climbing out of bed to tend to our son. I could hear his movements as he slid open the door to the nursery, his lilting melody never failing to soothe our child. A few moments later, Antonio’s cries subsided, and the door slid shut once again.

I could hear Vito’s steps as he made his way back to our bed, his presence a comforting weight beside me. “I know you have told me many times that I don’t have to thank you, but thank you,” I whispered, my voice choked with emotion. “For everything.”

“Always,” he replied, his voice just as choked as mine. “I will always be here for you, for us, for our son.” And with those words, came more kissing and lovemaking and more promises that we would stay together forever. “Nothing can tear us apart,” he professed as we lost ourselves in the depths of our love. His hot whispers against my ear as he ravished my body sent shivers down my spine, igniting a fire within me that burned brighter than any flame.

As I clung to Vito, our bodies still joined in the most intimate of ways, I allowed myself to bask in the warmth of our love. “Forever, Vito,” I murmured, my voice heavy with emotion as I gave myself freely to my husband. “Together, forever.”

“Forever, mia bella,” he agreed, sealing our promise with a hungry kiss.

For this one perfect night, we basked in our special thing, our make it last forever, our something truly magical - a love that could conquer all, a love that would see us through the most difficult of times. This was our unforgettable Christmas.

The End



Merry Christmas & Happy New Year from the DeLucas.

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MY SAVAGE VALENTINE
SAVAGE BLOODLINE SERIES
BY M'RENEE ALLEN



MY SAVAGE VALENTINE



Don Enzo DeLuca is determined to make his first Valentine's Day with Eve perfect. He refuses to allow enemies or even his family to get in the way of his plans. But planning the perfect day for the woman you love is hard when you're the don of a crime family and your enemies want to end not only you but the woman you love. Will Enzo be able to pull off the perfect date night, or will his enemies turn this into a bloody Valentine's Day for him and Eve? Find out when you read My Savage Valentine.



ENZO

It was after midnight, and time was winding down for Enzo to make Valentine's Day unforgettable for Eve.

Seated behind the desk in his home office, Enzo stared down at his computer, wondering what he could do to make his first Valentine's Day with Eve perfect. He'd already ordered a red dress, matching heels, and exquisite jewelry that would accentuate Eve's slender yet curvy figure.

But he wanted to gift her with something more personal, something to represent his unwavering love and devotion. So far, he hadn't been able to come up with anything. He typed into the computer, *what's the perfect gift to give the perfect woman?* As he scrolled through countless suggestions, frustration welled within him. None of those gifts were worthy of his angel.

"Damn it," he muttered under his breath, running a hand through his tousled hair.

Eve wasn't materialistic. She'd be happy with anything he gave her. That was one of the things he loved about her. She loved him for him, not for what he could do for her. However, just because she didn't crave material things didn't mean he didn't want to shower her with them. Especially since this was their first Valentine's Day together.

"Come on, Enzo. Think!" he chastised himself.

As ruthless as he was when handling the DeLuca family affairs, he found himself at a loss when it came to matters of the heart, especially with Eve. Should he get her a gun? A pink gun with diamonds on it? No! Shaking his head, he pushed that thought aside. He'd already given her a pink diamond-encrusted gun with a knife to match.

Enzo leaned back in his chair, rubbing his temples. Should he get her a purple diamond-encrusted gun instead? *Fuck!* What was he thinking? He couldn't keep giving her the same

shit in different colors over and over again. She'd get tired of that. She'd get tired of him. And he couldn't have that.

As he racked his brain for gift ideas, memories of their time together surfaced. He thought about the late-night talks, and tender kisses they'd shared. And the way he would gently coax her away from the kitchen, sparing them both from her disastrous culinary attempts. And he couldn't forget the mind-blowing sex. Eve was the only woman who'd ever made him moan her name.

They'd experienced more in their few weeks together than some couples did in a lifetime. And despite having seen the ugly side of his life, including seeing a member of his own family betray him, Eve was still willing to remain by his side. How could he not cherish her?

They'd only been together a short time, but he felt like he'd been waiting his entire life for her. Perhaps he had. Maybe that was why no other woman had ever interested him the way she did. His heart had been waiting on her and wouldn't allow him to love another.

"This is our first Valentine's Day together. I need to give her a gift that lets her know how much she means to me," he whispered to himself, his fingers drumming against the desk. Other than giving her the actual world, what could he give to show her that she was his world?

"I know who can help me." Enzo grabbed his phone and dialed Stefano's number. *Come on, pick up.* Stefano answered on the fourth ring.

"Hello," Stefano growled into the phone, sounding half asleep.

"I'm in my home office. I need you here, now," Enzo barked into the receiver before hanging up, leaving no room for questions.

He knew Stefano would come without hesitation. Less than fifteen minutes later, the motion detectors in front of his home sent him an alert. Stefano had arrived. A minute later,

the front door opened and slammed shut, sending a tremor through the otherwise still house.

Stefano's heavy footsteps echoed through the hallway, accompanied by the sound of a gun being cocked as Enzo's right-hand man hurried to his office. The door to the home office flew open, banging against the wall, revealing a wild-eyed Stefano, ready for battle.

"Enzo! What's wrong?" Stefano shouted, gun in hand, eyes scanning the room for any signs of danger.

"Everything is wrong. Sit down," Enzo ordered, gesturing to the chair opposite him, his voice tense with frustration. "I need your help."

Stefano's gaze flickered between Enzo and the computer, irritation etched on his face. "Did someone break in and steal something?" Stefano asked. "Some files, maybe?"

"Worse," Enzo muttered.

"Is Eve in danger?"

Enzo shook his head. "Nothing as bad as that."

"Then what the hell is it?" Stefano yelled.

"Shhh," Enzo hushed him. "She's sleeping. Have a seat, and I'll tell you what's wrong."

Stefano inhaled deeply and exhaled slowly. "Fine," he grumbled, walking into the room while placing his gun back in his holster. He sank into the chair across from Enzo. "What do you need, Don Enzo?"

"Valentine's Day is coming up, and I can't find the perfect gift for Eve."

Stefano's hands clenched into fists. "What?"

"I've already bought her a dress, shoes, and jewelry, but it doesn't feel like enough. I need something that will show her how much she means to me."

"Are you kidding me?" Stefano snapped, his eyes narrowing in disbelief. "You dragged me out of bed at this hour for a Valentine's gift?"

“You know how important Eve is to me,” Enzo reminded him. “This isn’t just about some frivolous holiday. It’s about expressing my love and devotion to her.”

“I was sleeping, Enzo.”

“This is important.”

“So is sleep.”

“This is my first time being in love. This is my first Valentine’s Day. I can’t fuck this up.”

Stefano swiped his hand over his face. “Alright, alright,” Stefano sighed, relenting under Enzo’s intense stare. “Let me think.”

As Stefano mulled over ideas, Enzo watched him closely, appreciating his friend’s help despite the late hour and unusual request. The clock on the wall ticked away the minutes, each second adding to Enzo’s growing anxiety. Finally, Stefano looked up.

“Listen, Enzo, you’ve already bought her all the material things she could want. You even brought her things she didn’t want.”

“Whoa! What did I buy her that she didn’t want?” Enzo asked.

“Glass slippers. What is she going to do with glass slippers, Enzo? And you only gave her one. Where the fuck is the other one?”

Enzo chuckled. “You know nothing about love, and it shows.”

“I know if I give anyone shoes, I should give them the complete set, not one shoe.”

Enzo shook his head. “Let me give you a free lesson in romance. Pay attention to the things that make your woman smile. One day, I saw Eve watching a cartoon about Cinderella. She was smiling and saying something about how sweet the prince was.”

“And that made you jealous, right?”

“Hell, yeah. Fuck that prince. But that’s not the point. I researched Cinderella and learned all I could about her. Then, I ordered Eve a pair of glass slippers like the ones Cinderella had. Eve has one, and I have one.”

“Still, you only gave her one slipper. And why do you need the other one? Does that even make sense?”

“Of course. Because in the cartoon she was watching, Cinderella lost a slipper, and the prince found it. I’m Eve’s prince. Get it?”

“No. The shoes aren’t even safe to walk in.”

Enzo shook his head. It was pointless trying to explain this to him. “I feel sorry for the woman you fall in love with. You don’t know how to be romantic.”

“It’s a good thing I have no intention of falling in love. Let’s get back to you and Eve. You should get her something that carries a deeper meaning. She already knows you love her. Give her something to let her know you understand her.”

Maybe Stefano wasn’t so hopeless when it came to love after all. Enzo leaned forward, intrigued by Stefano’s suggestion. “Go on.”

“I’m done.”

“That’s it?”

“Yeah,” Stefano nodded.

“I need more than that. What gift expresses deeper meaning? What gift will show her that I understand her?”

“How am I supposed to know that? You live with her, not me.”

“It was your suggestion.”

Shaking his head, Stefano pulled his phone from his pocket and began typing in something.

“The gift suggestions online aren’t worth shit,” Enzo complained, slumping back into his seat.

“I’ve got it!” Stefano announced.

Enzo sat up straight again. “You do?”

“Give her a friendship necklace –” Stefano began, but Enzo cut him off before he could finish his sentence.

“I am not her friend. I’m her man.”

“I wasn’t talking about a friendship necklace from you to her. But for her friend, the one she has me looking for.”

“Sienna?”

“Yes. Eve misses her. To show her that you understand how important her friend is to her, and how determined you are to reunite them, you should give Eve a friendship necklace. They come in pairs. Eve can give one necklace and charm to Sienna once we find her and keep the other for herself. It’s a symbol of their bond, as well as yours with Eve. It shows that you listen to her, and you care about what and who she cares about.”

Enzo let Stefano’s words sink in.

“Stefano, that’s brilliant,” Enzo exclaimed. “Maybe you’re not such a lost cause when it comes to love after all. I’ll have to tell Eve that we may not have to take care of you in your old age like she thought we would.”

“We’re all around the same age. When I’m old, you both will be old too.”

“Yeah, but she and I have each other. If you don’t get your act together and find someone to love, you may need us to take care of you.”

“No matter how old I get, I’d never turn to you and Eve for caretaking.”

“Yeah, yeah. Anyway, a friendship necklace is a great idea.”

Enzo began typing, searching online for a friendship necklace. He found one with two intertwined hearts, each adorned with a sparkling diamond. Engraved on both charms was the word *sisterhood*. It was perfect for his angel. Without hesitation, he added it to his cart and completed the purchase, selecting overnight delivery so it could arrive in time.

“It’s done,” Enzo stated, rising from his seat to walk around his desk. “Thank you,” Enzo said, clapping Stefano on the shoulder. “It’s perfect. And I know she’ll love it.”

“You’re welcome, boss. Now, if you don’t mind, I’m going home to get some sleep. Don’t call me again unless something is wrong.”

“Go,” Enzo agreed, waving him off. “And thank you again, Stefano. But if Eve asks, tell her the necklace was my idea.”

“Yeah, yeah. Don’t call me again tonight.”

As Stefano left, Enzo allowed himself a moment of excitement – not just for the gifts he’d purchased, but for the opportunity to make Valentine’s Day unforgettable for Eve. The thought of her reaction brought a smile to his face.

A few moments later, Enzo turned and headed downstairs to make sure the front door was locked. The lights of Stefano’s car shone through the windows as he drove off. Enzo waited until he could no longer see those lights before checking the other exits in the house to make sure they were secure.

Sure, he’d done this earlier tonight. But he’d made a habit of double-checking ever since Eve had come into his life. With the house secure, he strode back upstairs, heading toward his bedroom. Entering the room, he found Eve in the same position he’d left her in. Lying on her side. However, she’d managed to kick the covers off her, a bad habit of hers.

If he wasn’t around to pull the covers up over her whenever she did that, she’d stay catching a cold. Shaking his head, he shrugged off his pajama top and draped it over a chair before slipping off his house shoes and approaching the bed.

He paused for a moment to just stand there and listen to the sounds of Eve’s steady breathing. Moonlight streamed through the window, bathing her sleeping form in its soft glow. Enzo smiled at the bonnet she was wearing to protect her hair. It was purple, her happy color, the same color as the pajama top she had on.

A top that must've gotten pushed up over her hips when she'd kicked the covers off. Now he could see another full moon. *That ass.* And it was bare, no panties, because he'd promised to eat her for breakfast, and she hadn't wanted him to have to worry about removing his breakfast wrapper to eat what was inside.

Those were her words, not his. Enzo chuckled. His little angel said the craziest shit. And he loved it. Enzo felt his heart swell at the sight of her, this beautiful woman who had unexpectedly become his life and changed it for the better.

He carefully slid into bed behind her, taking care not to disturb her rest. As he pulled her into his embrace, her body instinctively curled into his, molding perfectly against him. The familiar scent of her skin filled his nostrils, soothing and intoxicating all at once.

“Mi amore,” he whispered, pressing a gentle kiss to her temple. His voice was low and deep, yet tender.

He was still amazed at the emotions this woman brought out in him, even when sleeping. Eve stirred slightly in his arms, a soft sigh escaping her lips as she nestled deeper into his embrace. A hint of a smile graced her face as though she sensed his love and devotion even in her sleep.

“Nothing is going to ruin our first Valentine's Day together, my angel,” Enzo vowed.

In the quiet darkness, his thoughts turned to his enemies, those he knew about and those he didn't. His enemies were the only wild card in his plans. He didn't know if they'd decide to attack on Valentine's Day or not.

He had Terzo and Lino listening out for the word on the streets. He had Stefano getting his guards ready for that day. But he could make all the perfect plans, and some stupid motherfucker could still try to ruin it. Enzo's expression turned grim.

If a stupid motherfucker dared fuck up Eve's Valentine's Day, that stupid motherfucker and his entire stupid motherfucking family would have February fourteenth

engraved on their tombstones right next to their birthdays. Eve shifted in her sleep. Enzo pushed thoughts of murdering motherfuckers away and focused on the woman in his arms.

“Sleep well, my angel,” he whispered, tightening his hold on her. “I’ll be here to protect you while you sleep.”

With those words, Enzo allowed himself to drift off into slumber, cradling the woman he loved against his chest.



EVE

Eve needed help. Not just any help.

She needed the help of someone specific if she was going to get Enzo the perfect Valentine's Day gift. And it had to be perfect. This was their first Valentine's Day together. And though they hadn't been together long, this would be the one they always remembered because it was their first.

Which was why she was obsessing over what to get him. Tomorrow night was their date night, and she still didn't have anything ready. That was why it was time to call in the big guns. *Wait. Big gun.* Should she get him a big gun? *Nooooo.* He had enough guns to last a lifetime. Eve clutched her phone tightly as she dialed Stefano's number. The moment he answered, her voice came out quick and urgent.

"Yes, Eve," Stefano's monotone voice came across the line.

"Stefano, you need to come over right now."

Before he could even ask why, she ended the call and resumed pacing the polished marble floor of the living room. Her mind raced, trying to come up with the perfect gift for Enzo – something that would make his eyes light up with genuine happiness and show him how much he meant to her.

And he meant everything to her. Before him, she'd never known she could love someone as much as she loved him. Sure, she loved her bestie, Sienna. But what she felt for Enzo was different. It was all-consuming. It was a passionate love that burned brighter than the hottest fire.

It was both beautiful and frightening at the same time. It was beautiful because it was reciprocated, and she felt his love whenever he looked at her. It was beautiful because when they were together, the darkness around them faded away, and they were able to bask in each other's light and love.

But it was frightening because she was always worried about him. He was the don. His life was always in danger. She,

herself, was used to being in danger. But losing him scared her more than the thought of something bad happening to her.

If she lost Enzo, she didn't think she'd ever be able to love anyone like that again. Her savage had spoiled her for any other man. Now, it was her turn to spoil him on Valentine's Day. Eve stared down at her phone to check the time. Stefano should be there soon.

She paced back and forth. Her heels clicking against the floor was the only sound in the room. Then, the motion detectors out front sent an alert to her phone. Stefano was there! The front door burst open, and Stefano rushed in, his face etched with concern.

"Why are there no guards outside?" he roared.

He glanced around the room, taking in the scene. Most of the on-duty guards were seated in various spots in the living room, their eyes following Eve's every step as she paced. Stefano's gaze finally settled on her, his brow furrowed in confusion. Eve smiled and waved at him. He sighed before facing the guards again.

"What are you all doing in here?" he asked, addressing the guards.

One by one, they nodded toward Eve, who continued to wear a path into the floor with her relentless pacing.

"What's going on, Eve?" Stefano asked, sounding frustrated.

Why was he frustrated? She was the one going through a crisis. Eve stopped abruptly and faced him.

"I need help figuring out the perfect Valentine's Day gift for Enzo," she admitted. "It has to be something special, something unforgettable."

Stefano's jaw clenched. Why did he always look so angry? She hated it for the woman he would one day fall in love with. No woman would be able to put up with a cold man like him. She had a feeling she and Enzo would have to watch over him for the rest of his life.

“Is that what you called me over here for?” Stefano asked, voice gruff, as usual.

Eve nodded, biting her lower lip nervously. “I need your help.”

Stefano mumbled something under his breath, but she couldn't quite make out his words. It sounded like he was saying she and Enzo were just alike or something.

“What did you say?” Eve asked.

“Nothing,” Stefano replied curtly. He didn't seem eager to help, but Eve wasn't about to let him off the hook.

“Have a seat, Stefano,” she insisted, motioning toward the couches where the other guards were seated.

Reluctantly, Stefano swiped his hand over his face and joined them. Giorgio, one of the guards, stared at Stefano and shook his head. Stefano shook his head, too. Eve didn't miss the look that passed between them. She was not about to let them deter her from her goal.

“Alright, everyone,” Eve announced, standing before the guards Enzo had left behind to watch over their home and the newest member of *Team Perfect Valentine's Day*, Stefano. “I need your help figuring out the perfect Valentine's Day gift for Enzo.”

A chorus of groans met her request, but she ignored them. This was important. Enzo deserved nothing less than perfection. She needed their insights, their knowledge of the man they all served so loyally. Surely, they could offer some ideas she hadn't considered yet. They'd known him longer than she had.

“Come on, guys,” she pressed, folding her arms over her chest. “We're all in this together, right?”

Stefano's chuckle irritated her, but she let it slide.

“You all look hungry,” Eve observed. “Should I go make a quick snack to get you all energized for this meeting?”

That got everyone's attention and had them sitting up straight.

Stefano leaned back against the couch, exhaling heavily. “Fine,” he conceded, rubbing the back of his neck. “But let’s make this quick. We all have to get back to work.”

“I tried telling her that,” Giorgio muttered, staring down at his security device that showed all the screens revealing what was happening outside.

Eve’s eyes darted between Stefano and Giorgio, noting their frustration. She shook her head, refusing to let their annoyance distract her from her mission. Her lips pressed into a determined line as she addressed the assembled men.

“Alright, you all know why we’re here. Let’s hear your ideas for the perfect gift for Enzo,” she demanded, hands on her hips, her gaze sweeping across their faces. “And remember, it has to be something truly special.”

The guards exchanged uncertain glances before offering their suggestions.

“How about a new custom-tailored suit?” one proposed.

“Or an expensive bottle of whiskey?” another chimed in.

“Maybe a rare, antique gun?” suggested another guard.

She dismissed each idea with a shake of her head. They were all thoughtful gifts, but none of them struck her as unique or meaningful enough. Plus, Enzo had most of those things already. Frustration bubbled inside her, threatening to boil over.

“Come on, guys,” she insisted, desperation creeping into her voice. “Think harder!”

Her gaze fell on Stefano, who had been unusually quiet throughout the discussion. A sudden thought came to her, and her eyes lit up with excitement.

“Stefano,” she said, latching onto the idea. “Enzo mentioned once that he’s never had red velvet cake. What if I bake him one? I could look the recipe up online. It’s just a cake. It should be simple to make, right?”

Stefano’s eyes widened in horror at the suggestion. “No!” he blurted out, shaking his head vehemently. “No baking. No

cooking. Don't go near the kitchen."

Eve rolled her eyes. "Alright," she conceded. "What do you suggest then?"

Stefano rubbed his chin thoughtfully before speaking. "Give him something money can't buy," he suggested, meeting her gaze. "Something only you can give him."

Eve's eyes narrowed as she mulled over Stefano's words. "Something money can't buy, huh?"

Her mind briefly wandered to a more explicit interpretation of something money couldn't buy. *Pussy*. But her pussy already belonged to Enzo. That would be like regifting a present, and she wasn't a fan of regifting.

And she already planned to give him the pussy anyway. In fact, she had every intention of putting her pussy all over him after their dinner date. And technically, money could buy pussy.

Back in Chicago, when she'd been making a living by killing whoever her mentor, Maureen, ordered her to, some of her friends had been making a living by fucking. So, yeah, money could buy pussy. But she was pretty sure pussy wasn't the gift Stefano was referring to.

"Maybe a rare bottle of wine?" another guard chimed in, probably thinking Eve's silence meant she hadn't liked Stefano's idea.

"Or a custom-made knife set?" added another.

"Enzo has plenty of those," Eve dismissed with a wave of her hand. "I want it to be something special, something unique."

As the suggestions continued to pour in, Eve's thoughts kept circling back to Stefano's idea. Money couldn't buy everything. But trying to make money every day could cost you everything. Focusing solely on money could cost you time with your family and friends.

It could put a strain on relationships and even end them. And with Enzo, money wasn't the only thing that could strain

a relationship. His title of don carried so much weight that sometimes she could see it weighing him down. And though he never buckled under the pressure, she knew it was a large burden for him to carry.

And even while carrying that weight, she knew he was just as determined to make their first Valentine's Day special as she was. Enzo didn't need a gift. He didn't need anything money could buy. What he needed was to be cherished. He needed to be shown that he was special, loved, and worthy of being spoiled.

It was always him cherishing her on his off days, showering her with attention, and doing all the things she wanted to do. He deserved a night to be cherished. Hell, he deserved to be cherished every night. Not fucked, which she planned to do. But cherished the way he cherished her.

That man didn't leave any room in their relationship for her to question his love. He never did anything to make her feel like she was less important than his duty. In fact, she wouldn't tell his guards this, but she felt if she asked him to, he'd leave it all behind for her.

She'd never ask that of him, but she was confident that if it came down to it, he'd choose her. He gave her that confidence. And she wanted to show him that it was appreciated. *He* was appreciated. Eve spun around with an excited glint in her eyes.

"That's it! I'll give Enzo a perfect night-in after our date at the restaurant," she declared, fixing her gaze on Stefano and the guards.

"A night-in?" Giorgio questioned. "It sounds like you're taking the cheap route."

"It's not about the money," Eve assured him. "It's all about Enzo. And I want him to have a special night where he's being cared for instead of him caring for everyone around him, including you all, his family, *your* families, his associates, and the bastards at Tower D. You do realize that all of you got a Valentine's Day bonus because Enzo wanted you to treat your significant others to something special. And he told me that for Christmas, like the previous don, he plans to send out gifts to

his uncles, cousins, and family members all around the world. Enzo is always taking care of others. I want to take care of him for a change.”

Stefano smiled, and so did a few other guards, including Giorgio. They seemed to approve of her plan. *Good*. Because now it was time for them to earn their participation award.

“But I’ll need your help to set everything up,” Eve told the guards. The guards exchanged glances. “You all don’t want to help me, do you?” she pouted.

“It’s not that,” Giorgio rushed to say. “It’s just that we have to guard the perimeter.”

“Okay. We can plan in shifts. How about that? Come on, guys. If you help me with this, I won’t force you to watch soap operas with me for a month.”

“Make it two months, and I’m in,” Luca bargained.

Eve gasped. “Luca! I thought you liked *As The World Spins?*”

“I do. But my girl wants me to watch it with her, and she gets mad when I’ve already seen an episode before she has.”

“You get on my nerves. But I understand. If you help me with this, you won’t have to watch it with me when I’m bored. Now, let’s start planning. Tomorrow is V-Day, so we don’t have much time. I want everything to get set up while Enzo and I are at dinner. First, we need candles. Lots of them. Red and white candles. Unscented. And soft music playing in the background. Preferably jazz or maybe R&B music,” she instructed, her mind already picturing the romantic atmosphere she wanted to create. “And someone needs to prepare a delicious meal. No, a dessert. We can get it from Enzo’s favorite shop. I want a chocolate mousse with cherries on it. Everything has to be perfect.”

“Consider it done,” Luca replied. “But, you don’t need a lot of candles. Just a few strategically placed ones will do.”

Eve nodded. “I like the way you think, Luca.”

“No problem, Lady Boss.”

“Also, I want rose petals scattered on the floor leading to the bedroom,” she continued, her voice softening as she imagined the intimate scene.

“Rose petals, got it,” another guard confirmed, making a mental note of the task.

Eve rattled off a few other things she needed. She was happy that everyone was on board with helping her make this night special for her savage.

“Thank you all so much,” Eve said, turning to Stefano. “Especially you, Stefano. I know Enzo will love this surprise.”

Stefano nodded, his expression serious but his eyes betraying a hint of warmth. “I’m sure he will, Eve. Can I go now?”

“Go. I hope you’re looking for Sienna since you’re in a rush to leave.”

“I’ve got some guys on it.” With that, he left the room, leaving Eve and the guards to finish planning the romantic evening.

As they worked together, Eve couldn’t help but feel a rush of gratitude for these men who were not only loyal to Enzo but also supportive of her relationship with him. They’d even left their stations to come help her plan. But she knew Giorgio had ordered snipers to come watch the perimeters.

Even though they were willing to entertain her, they never left their posts unmanned. Each of them had been checking their security devices, scanning the perimeter whenever they thought she wasn’t looking. It was a strange yet comforting bond that had formed between them, and she knew that Enzo would appreciate their efforts to make this night unforgettable.

Her man had been through a lot this year, and they weren’t even a full quarter into the year. He deserved a night to relax, lay down his burdens, and be cherished. And she was determined to make that happen. Tomorrow night, Enzo DeLuca was going to be her Savage Valentine. And she was going to be his guardian angel.



ENZO

Valentine's Night...

The steam from the hot shower enveloped Enzo and Eve as they bathed. Enzo wanted their bodies pressed close together under the cascading water. However, whenever he tried to step closer to her, she took a step back. He'd been practically chasing her around the shower for ten minutes.

Enzo's dark eyes locked onto Eve's as he slowly reached out to touch her smooth, wet skin. Sure, he'd made love to her twice today, once before he left to meet up with Terzo this morning and again after returning home, but that didn't mean he couldn't go a third round.

It was hard to see her naked and not want her. *Fuck that!* It was impossible. Every inch of her brown skin was so damn beautiful. His fingers traced a path along the curve of her waist before pulling her in for a passionate kiss.

"Enzo, wait," Eve whispered after wrenching her mouth away from his and playfully pushing him away. "Let's not start something we can't finish. And you know you can't do a quickie. I don't want to be late for our reservation."

"Don't worry about that, love," Enzo murmured, his voice low and husky. "I reserved the entire restaurant just for us. We can be as late as we want."

His hand slid up her side, cupping her breast and giving it a gentle squeeze, pulling a soft moan from her when he thumbed her nipple. Her eyes drifted shut. Enzo smiled, knowing it turned her on when he played with her nipples.

And with one touch, the lion had tamed the gazelle. Now, it was time to fuck her against the shower wall. Enzo took a step forward. Eve surprised him by shaking her head and placing her hands against his chest. Her eyes opened slowly.

"This will have to wait," she whispered. "I want your body to be hungry for me all night long. Anticipation, Enzo... that's

the key. And I want you to spend the night anticipating all the freaky shit I'm going to do to you when we get home."

She pressed a teasing kiss to his lips before stepping back and bending down to press a teasing kiss to his cock, which was jutting forward, craving her attention. Her kisses left him wanting more.

But the promise of freaky shit later kept him from turning her around, bending her over, and licking her pussy from the back until she was begging to ride his cock. Enzo sighed. It would seem the gazelle had tamed the lion. *For now.*

Eve stared down at his cock and licked her lips. His cock throbbed, believing she was about to taste him, silently begging her to do so. With a sigh, she shook her head and resumed showering.

"That was savage," Enzo muttered, a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth.

"It takes one to know one," Eve replied with a wink.

Enzo chuckled. Yes, it did. They finished showering, with Enzo behaving for the rest of the shower. Once they were done, Enzo wrapped a plush towel around Eve's curvy form, gently patting her dry.

He picked up the bottle of cocoa butter lotion from the shelf and squirted a generous amount into his palm before returning it to the shelf. He rubbed his hands together before applying the lotion to Eve's body.

As he smoothed the cream over her warm, damp skin, his cock throbbed with desire. His length, hard and wanting, brushed against her body when he moved behind her to rub lotion over her shoulders and back.

"Easy, big guy," Eve teased, reaching behind her to give his erection a light stroke. "I'll take care of you as soon as we return home."

"Isn't it cruel and unusual punishment to let him leave the house like this?" Enzo asked.

“Trust me, my kitty is going through the same thing. Touch her and see for yourself. She’s crying and pouting because she can’t have you.”

Needing to feel it for himself, Enzo reached around Eve’s body and placed his hand on her stomach. He trailed his hand lower and lower. She parted her legs, allowing him to slip his hand between her thighs.

His fingers grazed over her clit before he cupped her sex. Eve gyrated her hips, rubbing her pussy against his palm. Enzo used his middle finger to part her lips. Groaning, Enzo lowered his forehead to the back of her head.

“She’s so fucking wet,” he whispered.

“I told you,” Eve replied, voice barely above a whisper.

Enzo slipped his fingers between her silken folds, coating them in her juices.

“I can’t do this,” Enzo mumbled.

“You can’t do what?”

“I can’t leave her like this. I have to take care of her now.”

“We don’t have time. The restau...”

He didn’t let her finish her sentence. He scooped her up and carried her into the bedroom. Just as he laid her down on the bed, their phones alerted. It was the ding from the motion detectors. *Fuck*. The next shift of guards had arrived. And the first shift was going to secretly escort them to dinner without Eve knowing.

And he’d told them that he and Eve would be down at a certain time. Distracted by his thoughts of the guards, his grip on her loosened, and she scrambled away from him, moving to the other side of the bed. Eve stood up and placed her hands on her naked hips.

“We will not be late for our reservation, Lorenzo DeLuca.”

Enzo sighed. He didn’t mind being late for the reservation. However, he did need to keep them on track, mainly for her protection.

Still, he found himself saying, “This is your last chance to change your mind.” He stared down at his cock, then back up at her. “We’re ready.”

Her gaze lowered to his dick, which throbbed, happy for any attention she gave him. Eve shook her head. “I will not let you put me in a dick trance. Holster that weapon before he hurts someone.”

Enzo couldn’t help it. He burst out laughing. He’d been laughing all day with her as they’d enjoyed a quiet day inside, watching the movies he liked. Though he’d wanted to watch what she liked, she’d insisted on him choosing. It had been a lazy day spent cuddled up on the couch.

But it had been perfect to him. Just him and her. It got no better than that. He’d only had to go out twice today. And both times were when Terzo called to let him know there had been chatter on the street. And both times had involved a motorcycle club that wanted to transition into a feared crime family.

What better way to do that than to take down the biggest crime family in town. The first time Enzo had gone out, it had been to torture the restaurant chef who’d leaked his reservation to the motorcycle crew.

The second time was when Terzo found the biker the chef had given the information to. Both the chef and the biker were now buried together in an unmarked grave. May they rest in hell for trying to ruin his angel’s Valentine’s Day.

Nothing would ruin this day. Not even him. So, he stopped doing shit that could make them late. Once they were both dry, he revealed the elegant dress he’d purchased for her, along with matching red lingerie, heels, and a dazzling assortment of jewelry for her to choose from, including a diamond-studded tiara.

“Enzo, it’s beautiful,” she gasped, her face lighting up with delight and making his heart swell with pride.

“Only the best for my queen,” he replied.

He watched her slide on her lingerie, assisting her when she needed help.

“It’s sheer,” she mused. “Even the crotch area.”

“Is it?” Enzo feigned ignorance. “I didn’t notice that when I purchased it.”

“Mmhmm,” she hummed, not believing him, and rightfully so.

As Eve slipped into the bathroom to style her hair, Enzo donned his boxers, socks, and then his black tuxedo, adjusting the collar and cuffs until everything was just right. He could hear the soft sounds of Eve humming to herself as she got ready. He found himself smiling as he listened to her.

He wanted this forever. The thought of losing this, losing her, sometimes left him in a cold sweat. But he couldn’t let those kinds of thoughts take hold of him tonight. Pushing them aside, he continued getting dressed. And when Eve stepped out of the bathroom, he helped her slip into her dress and heels.

Once they were both done getting dressed, Enzo couldn’t help but be in awe of Eve’s beauty. She was a vision with her figure hugged by the red dress that accentuated her curves and contrasted beautifully with her brown skin.

Enzo’s breath hitched at the sight of her. The jewelry sparkled like stars against her collarbone, and her black hair cascaded over her shoulders in gentle waves. He understood why his grandfather had thought she was an angel. Perhaps she was. Enzo had felt blessed ever since she’d agreed to be his.

“Damn, Eve, you look stunning,” he praised, unable to take his eyes off her.

“Thank you,” she replied shyly. “You look incredibly handsome in that tux.”

“Thank you, love.”

Enzo offered his arm, and Eve took it. Together, they walked out of their mansion, the night air crisp and cool. He gave a subtle nod to the guards outside, who were going to follow them to the restaurant without Eve noticing. As Enzo

drove them to the restaurant, he couldn't help but glance into the rearview mirror a few times.

"Is everything okay?" she asked, noticing his distraction.

"Everything's perfect," he reassured her, reaching over to squeeze her hand.

Arriving at the restaurant, Enzo parked the car, and they got out, his hand on the small of her back as he led her inside. Unbeknownst to Eve, Enzo had positioned guards discreetly around the exterior of the building. Upon entering the restaurant, they were greeted by the soft melodies of a pianist playing in the background, heard but unseen.

"Enzo, this is beautiful," she whispered, her eyes taking in the elegant decor.

"Only the best for you, tesoro," he replied, guiding her to their table.

As they arrived at their secluded spot, Enzo pulled out Eve's chair. She gracefully sat down, and he pushed the chair in gently before taking his seat across from her.

"Thank you, Enzo," she said with a warm smile, her eyes locked onto his. "All of this is so amazing. It's like a fairytale."

That was the look he was going for. Tonight, he was her prince, and she was his happily ever after.

The flickering candlelight cast a warm glow over the table, casting shadows that danced along the crisp white tablecloth each time they moved. Enzo studied the wine list, eyes narrowing as he considered each option.

"This should be good," he murmured, selecting a bottle that would complement their meal perfectly. "A Barolo, 2010."

The attentive waiter scurried off to fetch their wine. Conversation flowed effortlessly between them, the outside world fading away in the intimate space they'd created. It still amazed him at how easy it was to talk to Eve.

Most of the time, he hated conversing with people. They either irritated him, or they said dumb shit that made him want to kill them. He hated pointless conversations. He despised talking just for the sake of talking.

But with Eve, he could talk for hours without getting bored. They could talk about anything, even his duties as don, which was not a conversation for tonight. But the point was, with her, he wasn't the same Enzo he was with others. With her, he was better.

As they savored the dishes before them, Enzo couldn't help but steal glances at Eve. The way the candlelight played off her smooth brown skin, highlighting the curve of her cheek and that spark of fire in her eyes, left him breathless.

As she forked a bite of food into her mouth, movement to his left caught his attention. His gaze flickered to the window, where his discreetly positioned guard stood watch. *Shit*. Was something going on outside?

"Enzo?" Eve's voice brought his gaze back to her. "You seem a little distracted. Is everything okay?"

"Yes, love," he replied, reaching across the table and squeezing her hand gently. "I was just admiring how beautiful you look tonight. I'm a lucky man."

"Flattery will get you everywhere, don DeLuca," she teased.

Enzo tensed when he noticed more movement to his left. Something was indeed going down outside. Smiling, Enzo reached for his napkin and dabbed the corners of his mouth.

"I'm going to the bathroom," he told Eve. "I'll be right back."

She finished taking a sip of her wine before she spoke. "Okay. I'll be here."

He bent down and kissed her forehead before heading toward the bathroom. When he rounded the corner, he saw a waiter standing just out of sight, awaiting his orders. Eve didn't know that he'd switched the waitstaff with some of Terzo's guys.

“What’s going on outside?” Enzo whispered.

“A guy dressed as a waiter tried to enter the property,” Vaughn answered. “Drew told him that he wasn’t needed for tonight because it was a special event. The guy said he wanted to hear it from his boss.”

“The owner of the restaurant, along with the head chef, already assured me that all staff who weren’t needed tonight had been contacted.” Enzo had even paid them for tonight despite not needing them.

“Yes, boss. That’s how Drew knew something was wrong.”

“Where’s the guy now?” Enzo asked.

“Drew is dragging him around the building.”

Shit. Enzo looked back in the direction of the dining area. If he was gone too long, Eve would worry.

Facing the waiter, Enzo said, “Keep an eye on Eve for me. If she comes looking for me, let her know that I stepped out to make a call.”

“Yes, don Enzo.”

Jaw clenched, Enzo strode toward the exit. He stepped out into the cool, crisp night air. He turned and headed toward the parking lot, wanting to see who the fuck thought it was a good idea to act up while he was on a date with his woman.

That person would soon breathe his last breath.



ENZO

He rounded the corner and stared up at the camera.

His team was manning the cameras. He'd paid an arm and a leg to have them be the only one with access to the cameras tonight. When he reached the parking lot, he saw Drew closing his trunk. Was Enzo too late to the party?

"Who is he?" Enzo asked.

"Hey, boss," Drew greeted him. "You didn't have to come out. I could handle this punk."

"Who is he?"

"He isn't talking. But I removed his shirt. He has a skull tattoo with snakes and shit on his back."

The motorcycle gang. "Them bitches were still brave enough to send someone," Enzo mused.

"I have to say, they've got some balls."

"Well, I want all of their balls cut off. I'll tell Terzo this tomorrow. But tomorrow, we're putting an end to that club."

"Yes, sir," Drew nodded. "Any special instructions for this one?" Drew tapped his trunk.

"Send his balls to his leader with a note saying we're coming for all of them."

"Consider it done."

"Make sure things stay quiet out here. And don't let Eve see any of you."

Drew nodded. With the conversation over, Enzo turned and headed back to the restaurant. Once inside, he approached the waiter again.

"Anything happen while I was gone?" Enzo asked.

"Eve went to the bathroom."

Enzo stared down the hall where he knew the men's room was. "Is she still there?"

"It's not that way, boss. The ladies' room is on the other side of the dining area."

"She went alone?"

"I followed her," the guard assured him. "But she asked me to stop at the end of the hall."

Enzo gritted his teeth. "I told you to keep your eyes on her."

"I couldn't follow her into the bathroom, boss."

"You could've followed her to the..."

To the what? *Shit*. He was right. Getting too close in that situation wasn't appropriate. Plus, it could've triggered Eve, and she may have tried to kill his guard. It wouldn't be the first time. His little lady was a savage.

"Is she back?" Enzo asked.

"Yes. She's seated at the table. She declined dessert. She said she already ordered dessert at home."

She did? Enzo smiled, anger fading. Nodding, Enzo headed back to the table.

"Sorry for taking so long," he apologized as he sat down across from her. She was sipping her wine, and therefore, she couldn't reply right away. However, Enzo frowned, noticing the sheen of sweat on her forehead.

"Are you hot?" he asked.

Her brows narrowed in confusion as she lowered her glass and swallowed.

"Hot?" she said.

"You're sweating," Enzo pointed out.

"Oh! Oh, right. Yes. A little. I mean, not out here. It's obviously not hot out here," she rushed to say. "But the bathroom was a little warm." She grabbed her clean napkin and touched it to the side of her head.

“You alright?” Enzo asked, his gaze drifting toward the hall that led to the lady’s room. Had she encountered anyone in the bathroom? Had she noticed a guard and gone outside to see what was going on? His gaze swiped over her as she lowered her napkin to the table. She seemed fine.

Smiling, she returned her gaze to him and said, “There were dozens of roses all over the bathroom. They were beautiful.”

Oh, right. He’d forgotten he’d requested that.

“Was that your idea?” she asked.

“It was. I’m glad you liked them.”

“I loved them. But why in the bathroom?”

“Wherever you go in this restaurant, even if you want to go to the kitchen to compliment the chef personally, you’ll find at least one vase of roses.”

“For me?” she asked.

“For you. My world bloomed once you entered it. That’s why I want to make sure you see flowers wherever you go.”

Eve burst out laughing.

“What’s funny?” Enzo asked.

She laughed so hard that she had to clutch her side. “I’m sorry,” she gasped, barely able to get the words out because she couldn’t stop laughing.

“What’s funny?” He was sure he’d said it right, line for line.

He’d found it on the internet when searching for romantic things to say to your Valentine. She took a deep breath, trying to reign in her laughter. One look at him had her laughing hard again. He must’ve said it wrong. Enzo gritted his teeth.

“Keep laughing like that, and you’re going to hurt yourself.”

She looked almost ready to fall out of her seat. Eve shook her head, tears streaming down her cheeks. Most

motherfuckers didn't like looking his way, afraid that if they looked at him the wrong way, he'd kill them. Most motherfuckers didn't like talking to him, afraid that if they said the wrong shit, he'd kill them.

They definitely didn't laugh at him. That was a ticket to hell, for sure. But his Eve did all that. She stared him directly in the eyes and laughed at him like he wasn't the don of one of the largest crime families in the world.

To her, he was just Enzo. And that's one of the reasons he loved her so fiercely. Enzo handed her a napkin, which she used to dab her eyes and dry her cheeks as she slowly calmed down.

"Now, do you want to tell me what was so funny?"

Smiling, she took a deep breath and released it slowly.

"What corny pick-up lines site did you find those words on?" she asked.

How did she know? He started to deny it but thought better of it.

"How did you know I found it online?"

She chuckled again. "Because that doesn't sound like something you'd say."

"But it was sweet, right?"

"It was sweet," she agreed. "Corny, but sweet."

"It made you laugh, so it was worth it. I'm happy as long as you're happy."

Her smile widened. "You say the sweetest things."

"It's easy to do when I'm staring at the sweetest woman."

Her blush was beautiful. Enzo raised his glass. Eve followed suit. The clink of their wine glasses filled the air as they toasted to their love and the special occasion.

"Here's to a memorable Valentine's Day, my angel," Enzo told her. "May our love continue to grow stronger every day. I also read that online."

Eve chuckled. “To us, Enzo. May we always be this happy and corny.”

As they sipped their wine, Enzo reached under the table and pulled out a small, exquisitely wrapped gift box. He slid it across the table toward Eve.

“Enzo, you didn’t have to get me anything,” she protested softly, but her eyes lit up with excitement as she carefully unwrapped the delicate paper.

Inside, she found two velvet boxes, each containing an elegant friendship necklace. Her fingers traced the intricate design, and she looked up at Enzo with an expression of awe.

“Is this what I think it is?” she whispered, tracing her hand over the word sisterhood.

“One is for you,” he explained, voice tender and sincere. “And the other is for Sienna. I want you to give it to her when we find her. I promise you, Eve, I will do everything in my power to reunite you with your best friend.”

Tears welled in Eve’s eyes, and seeing them made his own eyes grow misty. Eve opened her mouth and then closed it. She opened it again, then closed it once more. It was clear that she couldn’t find the words to express her gratitude, so instead, she stood up and walked around the table.

“Thank you, Enzo,” she whispered, her voice thick with emotion as she settled herself into his lap.

Enzo scooted his chair away from the table so she could be more comfortable. Every inch of her body pressed against his, igniting a fire within him that he fought to control. And he had to control it because this was a sweet moment. He didn’t want to mess it up by turning it into something sexual.

“Why are you so good to me?” she whispered, a tear trailing down her cheek.

Enzo wiped it away. “Because you deserve it, love,” he told her. “And because I love you.”

“I love you too, Enzo,” she whispered before grabbing his tie and pulling him in for a searing kiss.

Enzo's arms wrapped around her, holding her close as his tongue danced with hers. The heat between them grew, their bodies yearning for each other as Enzo's arousal became almost unbearable.

"Eve," he growled, pulling away from the kiss.

"Shhh, just kiss me," she whispered and tried to pull him close again.

He leaned back. "I can't *just kiss* you right now, love. I need to fuck you. And if you don't want to be fucked on this table right here, right now, then we need to leave."

Eve's eyes danced with mischief and lust, her lips curling into a sultry smile. "Let's go home then, don Enzo. Take me home and fuck me all night long."

A shiver ran down his spine at her words, and without wasting another second, he lifted her off his lap and rose from the chair. His hand clasped hers tightly, leading her out of the restaurant, their steps quickening towards the exit.

"Bill me," he muttered to the nearest staff member before they disappeared out the door. The crisp night air did little to cool the fire that roared within them as they hurried toward the car. His gaze darted left then right, making sure his men were nowhere in sight.

When they reached his sleek black vehicle, Enzo opened the door for Eve. Before she could climb into the car, he slapped her on her ass and watched it jiggle. He was obsessed with watching her ass shake. Damn it, he needed to fuck her right now.

She looked over her shoulder at him, arched her back, and whispered, "Harder."

This little motherfucker! He slapped her ass again, causing her to moan. He watched that ass jiggle. It moved just like that when he was fucking her from behind. Damn it! He needed to be buried balls deep in her right now.

"You've got me so wet," she whispered. "My sheer thong is soaked."

His cock throbbed, wishing it was the one soaked in her juices.

“Get in the car, Eve, before I fuck you right here.”

Then he'd have to kill his own men because he couldn't let them live after having seen his angel naked. Smiling, she blew him a kiss, then blew a kiss towards his dick before climbing into the car.

This woman was going to drive him insane. But he'd enjoy the hell out of the journey. He closed the door before walking around the car and sliding into the driver's seat. His thoughts raced, images of him fucking her hard and long fueling his urgency to get them home.

“Enzo,” Eve whispered, leaning close until her breasts touched the side of his arm as he started the engine. “I can't wait much longer. Hurry.”

“I'm hurrying, baby,” he assured her, his grip tightening on the wheel.

She placed her hand on his thigh, and his entire body jerked. *Damn it.* Should he pull over and fuck her in the car? No, that wouldn't be romantic. And he had to make this day perfect for her, every minute of it. Enzo inhaled deeply. *Be romantic, Enzo. Be romantic.* Her fingers trailed up and down his thigh.

Be fucking romantic, Enzo!



EVE

She couldn't wait to get him home and get him naked. Eve's pulse quickened as she eyed Enzo's profile. No matter how often she stared at him, she couldn't help but admire his chiseled jawline that was right now clenched in concentration as he navigated the streets.

A curl of his dark hair fell over his forehead, adding to his handsome allure. Eve shifted in her seat, pussy wet and aching to have him sliding into her. She placed her hand on his thigh, causing him to tense.

“Enzo,” she murmured, her voice thick with desire as she leaned across the seat, breasts pressing against the side of his arm. This man was so damn big, he filled up the entire driver’s seat.

He wasn’t one of those guys who was big and muscular for no reason. He had strength and agility also. And stamina. Boy, did her savage have ALL the stamina. When they were in bed, he flipped her ass all kinds of ways.

When he was done fucking her brains out, she always felt like she’d been to a theme park and rode all the rides. However, within the confines of this car, they couldn’t do that. That didn’t mean they couldn’t play around.

Her fingers grazed his thigh as she pressed her lips against his neck, leaving a trail of heated kisses. He tilted his head to the side slightly, giving her room to continue her kissing exploration.

“I need you,” she whispered against his skin, feeling him swallow. “I don’t think I can wait any longer.” Her finger tapped along his thigh, inching closer to his cock that was tenting his pants.

“Eve,” he warned, his voice strained with arousal. “I’m driving, baby.”

“Mhmmm,” she moaned against his neck.

It wasn’t her fault that she could hardly keep her hands and mouth to herself. He shouldn’t be so damn sexy. It should be illegal for a man to be this damn fine. Fuck waiting until they made it home. She needed her mouth on him now.

The question was, how could she pleasure him without making a mess in the car? Her thoughts raced, searching for a solution to satisfy them both. And then it struck her. *Show him what that mouth do, Eve.*

“Enzo, give me your tie,” she demanded softly.

“What are you up to, love?” he asked, one hand gripping the steering wheel while the other hesitantly reached for his tie, casting a quick glance at her.

“I’m going to get it dirty,” she warned, a wicked smile playing on her lips. “You okay with that?”

He smirked back. “It’s okay, I have plenty of ties.”

“Good. Let me take it off for you. You just focus on the road.”

As Enzo let go of the expensive slip of fabric, Eve carefully began to remove his tie, her fingers tracing the path of silk around his collar. The sound of the loosened knot seemed to echo through the car, heightening the tension between them.

Eve removed the tie and folded it into four neat sections before placing it in the console for later use. Then she smiled at Enzo mischievously. He eyed her warily, trying to maintain his focus on the road, but the growing anticipation was evident in the way his knuckles whitened around the steering wheel.

“What are you up to, love?” he asked again.

“Let’s make this drive a little more interesting,” she whispered seductively as her fingers began to unbutton his pants.

Enzo let out a shaky breath, shifting in his seat to give her more room to work with. As she freed his cock from its confines, she licked her lips, suddenly very thirsty. That dick stood at attention, rock hard and ready to be gagged on.

“Hello, buddy,” she murmured, leaning down to plant a soft kiss on the tip of his erection, causing him to shiver in response. His breath hitched when she wrapped her hand around his shaft, slowly stroking him. “Damn, I love how thick you are,” she whispered.

“Fuck, Eve,” Enzo groaned, his grip on the steering wheel tightening.

She reveled in the power she held over him. Knowing that she could bring this strong, dangerous man to his knees with

her touch alone made her even hotter for him. Leaning down, she pressed a chaste kiss against his tip. Then she trailed her tongue around the head of him, loving the taste of this man.

She traced teasing circles around the tip of his cock before she took him deep into the warmth of her mouth, her cheeks hollowing as she sucked him. Enzo's hands clenched the steering wheel even tighter, his moans filling the car, making her want to take him deeper.

"Damn it, Eve," he gasped, voice strained and thick with lust, almost as thick as his cock. "You're going to make me crash, love."

"You want me to stop, love?" she whispered against his length.

"Never," he growled.

Eve continued licking and sucking her man, taking him deeper still, gagging slightly on his girth as she fought to maintain control of her beast. She wasn't going to let a little thing like gagging prevent her from taking him deeper.

She wanted to push him to the edge, to make him lose himself in the pleasure she was providing. And from the way he was moaning her name, she knew she was succeeding.

Soon, he would explode all over her tongue. She was ready to have her mouth filled with his cum. That was the dessert she'd been craving all night. As Enzo's moans grew louder and more desperate, Eve knew he was close to the edge.

"Fuck, Eve, I'm so close," Enzo panted, his breathing ragged and uneven as he struggled to keep the car on the road.

Her mouth tightened around him as the car swerved a little to the left. The thrill and danger of their illicit act only heightened her arousal, and she doubled her efforts, desperate to bring him to completion.

"Fuck, yes," Enzo growled, his voice rough with need. "Just like that, baby. Suck that dick just like that, beautiful. Shit, Eve."

His words spurred her on, and she sucked him harder, faster, until, at last, he could take no more. With a final, shuddering moan, Enzo shouted her name as he found his release, his body tense and trembling from the force of his orgasm.

He exploded just as she'd hoped he would, filling her mouth with his cum. Eve continued to pleasure him through his climax, enjoying his taste, drinking down every drop he gave her, not willing to let a drop of this delicacy go to waste.

"Damn it, Eve," Enzo whispered breathlessly, slumping back against his seat, spent.

As his breathing slowly returned to normal, Eve licked his cock clean, then carefully wiped it with his tie, making sure she got rid of any remnants of the intimacy they'd just shared.

"Is that what you needed my tie for?" Enzo whispered, still slightly breathless.

Eve nodded as she folded the tie neatly before setting it aside.

"I like to clean up after I make a mess," she told him, sliding his cock back into his boxers.

She took her time straightening his clothes on him, ensuring that every button and zipper was back in place. His gaze kept drifting to her as she worked, and she didn't miss the look of awe on his face as he watched her.

"I love the way you take care of me, beautiful," Enzo told her, eyes straying from the road to her and then back to the road.

"You deserve it, handsome."

His smile made her heart flutter.

"As soon as we get home, I want you to put that pussy on my face," Enzo growled.

"You want me to sit on your mouth?" she whispered, leaning close to him again.

"All on it," he confirmed.

“You want me to ride that tongue?” she asked, pressing a kiss to his cheek.

“Fuck yes,” Enzo told her. “And we’re almost home. So go ahead and slide them panties off.”

“Right now?” Eve asked.

Enzo nodded, eyes on the road.

“Yes, sir.” Giggling, she slid her panties off and tossed them onto the back seat.

“Good girl,” he praised her. “Are you going to be my good girl when we get home, Eve?”

“Always,” she agreed, ready to show him just how good his good girl could be.



ENZO

Enzo pulled up to the home he now shared with Eve and turned the car off.

Eve didn't even wait for him to open her door. She hopped out at the same time as he did. Their eyes locked onto each other like magnets over the car's hood. The look of lust in her eyes sent shivers down Enzo's spine.

"Come on," Eve purred, biting her lip as she shot a sultry glance at him.

She then turned on her heel and sprinted up the steps to their house, leaving Enzo momentarily stunned by the intense desire he'd just seen in her eyes. Eve ignored the guards stationed near the entrance. Enzo gave a quick nod to his men, whose expressions remained stoic as they acknowledged their boss with nods of their own.

"Enzo!" Eve called impatiently as he jogged up the steps, his hard cock bobbing with each step.

Why the hell were his fingers shaking as he fumbled with the keys? His gaze rose to Eve's, whose gaze was on the tent in his pants. She must've felt his eyes on her because her gaze drifted to his. But was she embarrassed for being caught looking? Hell no, not his woman.

"I need that dick right now," she mouthed.

Fuck! She was intoxicating enough to make a powerful mob boss feel like an awkward teenager again. And that was exactly what he felt like as he struggled to find the right damn key.

"Seriously, Enzo, open the door before I start stripping right here, right now," Eve hissed.

"I'm the only one who is allowed to see you naked," Enzo growled as he finally pushed the correct key into the lock. "If you want those guards to live, you'll be a good little girl for me."

“I’ll be your good girl tomorrow. I’m feeling very bad tonight,” she shot back, a wicked grin spreading across her face.

“Bad girls get spanked,” Enzo told her.

With that, Enzo pushed open the door and scooped up Eve in one swift motion, tossing her over his shoulder and smacking her on her ass. She yelped in surprise as he carried her into the house, kicking the door shut and locking it behind him.

As they entered, Enzo’s eyes widened in shock at the transformation of their home. White flickering candles cast a soft, warm glow over the room, illuminating the red rose petals that were strewn across the marble floor. With Eve still on his shoulder, he followed those petals to the living room.

The air was filled with the sweet scent of chocolate, meaning there was dessert somewhere ready for them to eat. In the center of the living room was a large black pillowtop lounger.

He knew it was a pillowtop lounger because Eve had shown him a purple one online, saying that she wanted it to lounge on and read. He planned to get it for her soon. But it seemed his lady had gotten a black one for their Valentine’s Day night.

Soft strains of romantic music played in the background, further heightening the sensual ambiance. He took in the details of her romantic setup, noting the effort Eve had put into creating this atmosphere. He’d done nothing to deserve such a woman, but he was so damn thankful for her.

“Wow, Eve,” Enzo breathed as he took in the scene before him. “You did all of this for me?” he asked, unable to keep the awe out of his voice.

No one had ever romanced him before. This was a new feeling, a strange feeling. He felt he should be doing this for her, not the other way around. However, he also liked that she’d done this for him.

“Of course, I did all of this for you,” Eve replied, her beautiful brown gaze meeting his. “But I can’t take all the credit. The guards helped me set everything up.”

Enzo’s dark eyes narrowed as he considered the guards’ involvement, but instead of feeling upset or embarrassed, he was touched by the fact that they’d helped her. He’d have to thank them later.

“Come here, love.” Enzo beckoned Eve toward him.

And as she stepped into his embrace, their bodies melded together like they were made for each other, because they were. Their lips met in a passionate kiss, their desire for one another growing stronger with every breath they took.

The kiss deepened. Eve’s arms wrapped around his neck while Enzo held her tight against him. Enzo lost himself in the taste and feel of Eve, loving the way her fingers threaded through the hair at his nape, sending shivers down his spine. At the same time, he reveled in the sensation of her curves pressed against his hard body.

Pulling away from the kiss, he murmured into her ear, “I need to feel your skin against my skin.”

“Then what are you waiting for?” Eve teased before gently biting his lower lip.

Right! What the fuck was he waiting for. Turning her around, Enzo began to undress her, his fingers quickly unzipping her dress, revealing more and more of her beautiful brown skin with each pull.

Once her dress was unzipped, he spun her back around because he wanted to see her from the front as he undressed her. She smiled up at him. Damn, his woman was beautiful.

Enzo eased the dress over her shoulders. He pushed it lower and lower, revealing the lacy red bra that cupped her full breasts. Her eyes locked onto his as she reached behind her back, unclasping the bra, shrugging out of it, and letting it fall to the floor. Her nipples were already hard and aching for his touch.

“You’re taking too long sightseeing,” she told him. “This pussy needs that dick, stat.”

With a chuckle, he quickly finished undressing her, leaving the expensive dress and lingerie pooling around her feet. Placing her fingers on his chest, she gave him a gentle push and stepped forward, stepping away from the pile of red fabric.

She stepped closer to him. “Your turn,” Eve whispered, helping him out of his jacket and then tossing it behind her. “Oops!” she said. “Was that expensive? Should I hang it up?”

“Fuck that jacket,” he told her, delighting in the smile she gave him.

“Right,” she said. “Fuck that jacket. And fuck this shirt.”

Her breath was a warm caress on his neck as she worked at the buttons of his shirt. As she slid the shirt off his broad shoulders, her nails grazed his skin, sending shivers down his spine.

Their gazes met, and the heat in her eyes had his rock-hard cock throbbing. Next, she unbuttoned his pants. He shoved them down before she could and kicked them aside before taking off his boxers.

“You were taking too long sightseeing,” he told her.

She chuckled, stepping closer again to press her lips against his neck. As Eve’s lips trailed down his neck, leaving scorching kisses in their wake, Enzo’s heart raced. And even though he was loving her lips on him, she’d already taken care of him in the car.

It was now his turn to take care of her. His strong arms wrapped around her waist, lifting her effortlessly. He carried her over to the plush bedding she’d arranged on the floor, laying her gently upon it.

Enzo lay on the plush bedding, sinking into its softness. The comfort of it surprised him. Maybe he needed to get one of these for each room in the house. He pressed a kiss to her shoulder. Before he could do more, she stopped him.

“Wait,” she murmured, hand against his chest. “I almost forgot. I have your favorite dessert ready for you. It’s the chocolate mousse you love, topped with cherries.”

“You’re my favorite dessert,” Enzo reminded her, his deep voice laced with desire. “Now be still and stop interrupting me while I’m trying to eat.”

Eve’s cheeks flushed with warmth as she stared up at him, her brown eyes twinkling with mischief.

“Sorry, Mr. DeLuca,” she whispered. “Go ahead and enjoy your dessert.”

He held in his smile as he stared down at her. She was naked and adorned in diamonds. *Beautiful*. Leaning forward, Enzo pressed another gentle kiss to her shoulder. He could feel the heat radiating off her body, and he couldn’t resist reaching out to touch her.

His hands roamed over her silky skin, feeling the curve of her hips and the swell of her breasts. Every touch seemed to ignite a fire within her, one that burned brighter with each caress.

“Enzo,” she whispered, her breath hitching as he traced his fingers along the inside of her thigh.

“Come here,” he urged, pulling her closer so he could taste her lips once more.

Their mouths fused together in a passionate kiss, tongues dancing and dueling as they explored one another. As their kiss deepened, Enzo’s hands continued their journey across her body, touching every dip and curve.

Breaking away from her mouth, he trailed kisses across her cheek, down her neck, and across her collarbone, eliciting shivers from the beautiful woman in his arms. Eve arched her back, pushing her chest towards him as his tongue flicked over her nipple before sucking it gently into his warm mouth. She moaned softly, gripping his shoulders as he tongued one nipple while thumbing the other.

“Ah, Enzo,” she gasped, her head falling back as he worshipped her body with his mouth.

He continued his journey down her body, pressing tender kisses along her belly and the curve of her hip. As he reached the juncture between her thighs, he paused for a moment, his dark eyes taking in his favorite sight.

Enzo couldn't help but drink in the sight of Eve's glistening pussy, his favorite dessert. The way her soft folds beckoned him, drawing him closer like a moth to a flame, he knew he wouldn't be able to resist the taste of her any longer.

"Enzo," she moaned softly as he leaned in, his warm breath ghosting across her sensitive skin, making her tremble.

Enzo's face hovered above Eve's pretty pussy. He exhaled, allowing his breath to glide over her swollen clit. Her body trembled with anticipation. *Fuck!* He loved the way she responded to him.

"Enzo," she moaned, her voice thick with desire as she pouted. "Don't tease her like that. It's not fair."

Fair? She'd had him rock-hard all during dinner. She was the queen of Not Fair. Or, rather, she was Princess Petty, as she'd told him over a dozen times. As her man, that made him Prince Petty by default.

He shot her a wicked grin before flicking his tongue over her sensitive nub, eliciting another throaty moan from her. He twirled his tongue around her clit, loving the taste of his woman.

"Fuck, amore mio. Your taste drives me wild," he murmured against her wetness before he proceeded to devour her, licking and sucking her pussy until she was gripping his hair tightly, her hips bucking against his face as she fucked his mouth.

His tongue delved between her folds, drinking in her essence and pushing her to give him more. Her moans grew louder, more desperate as he continued his relentless quest to get more from her.

He was a greedy man. He wanted all of her, every drop. Enzo reveled in the feel of her nails digging into his scalp and

the taste of her desire on his tongue. It was intoxicating, heady, and he couldn't get enough.

He would never be able to get enough of this woman, his woman, his Eve. The erotic sounds of his tongue against her wetness mingled with her throaty moans as he feasted on her pussy.

His Beauty bucked against his mouth as he wrapped his arms around her thighs, tonguing her down. He licked her until her thighs trembled against his face, and finally, she creamed on his tongue.

“Enzo, I can't take anymore!” she cried out, her body shuddering beneath him as she reached her climax, coating his tongue in his favorite dessert.

Enzo continued drinking from her, savoring the taste of her ecstasy. As Eve's breathing slowly returned to normal, and the trembles faded away, Enzo wiped away all traces of her orgasm from her pussy with his tongue before rising from between her legs.

Gripping his cock, which was already throbbing with need, he rubbed it through her slick juices, coating himself in her essence. He looked into her eyes, dark with lust, and saw his own desire mirrored there.

“Please, Enzo. I need you inside me right now. I can't wait,” she begged, her hands reaching out to pull him closer.

With a low growl, he angled his hips and thrust into her, burying himself deep within her welcoming heat. Eve cried out his name, her nails digging into his biceps as he fucked her long, hard, and fast.

He'd wanted to take it slow, to make it romantic. But all that flew out the window when her pussy gripped him tightly as if it never wanted to let him go. Now, his passion was in control.

So, he fucked her hard, slamming into her with a force that rocked both of their bodies. Her legs wrapped around his waist, causing him to sink deeper into her pussy and pulling a groan from deep within him.

“Enzo, yes! Fuck yes!” she panted between thrusts, her body writhing beneath him as they moved together in a primal dance of passion and desire.

“Ti amo, Eve,” he grunted in response, his eyes never leaving hers as he drove them both closer and closer to the edge.

Their world narrowed down to this moment, their connection transcending their pasts and fears, allowing them to lose themselves in each other completely. As their pleasure built, Enzo could feel the familiar coil of tension tightening within him, signaling that his own release was imminent.

But he couldn't come before her. He was determined to share this moment with the woman who had captured his heart so completely. The woman who'd shown him what love was. The woman who'd taught him how to love.

And though he was still possessive of her, and would always be possessive of her, and sometimes put her safety above their happiness, she was still willing to stay with him, teaching him along the way how to balance this crime life and love life.

Enzo and Eve continued to move together, their bodies slick with sweat as the sounds of their pleasure filled the room, a symphony of moans, gasps, and whispered endearments. In that moment, there was no danger, no threats lurking in the shadows—only the raw, unbridled desire that coursed through their veins.

Their eyes locked, and in the depths of her pretty brown eyes, he saw her love for him, he saw the unbreakable bond that seemed to transcend the physical act they were engaged in.

It was as if their souls were intertwined, both seeking solace in the sanctuary they'd found within each other's arms. She was the calm to his storm. And he was a spark behind the raging fire that was his Eve.

And vice versa. He'd found a life partner in Eve, and she matched his savagery perfectly. And she loved it when he

fucked her like he could never get enough of her. And Enzo knew he'd never be able to get enough of her.

"Fuck, you feel amazing," Enzo murmured against her lips, his breath coming in ragged pants as he drove deeper into her heat, so close to spilling into her.

"Enzo... I need more," she pleaded, her nails digging into his shoulders as she urged him to go faster, harder.

He obliged without hesitation, his powerful strokes fueled by an insatiable hunger for the woman beneath him.

"Yes, like that, Enzo. Just like that, my love."

"Damn it, Eve, you are my everything," he confessed between gritted teeth, the force of his emotions threatening to consume him entirely. He couldn't hold out much longer. "Come for me, love," he whispered, his thrusts becoming erratic as he fought against the overwhelming pleasure. "Let go, and let me take you there."

"Enzo!" she screamed, her orgasm washing over her in a tidal wave of ecstasy.

Her pussy clamped around him as if trying to pull him deeper, and he couldn't hold back any longer. The sensation of her body tightening around him pushed him over the edge, and he followed her into oblivion, his own release erupting from him like molten lava.

With a final, shuddering gasp, he surrendered to his own climax, filling her with his seed, their bodies trembling together as they weathered the storm of their passion. Spent and breathless, they collapsed into each other's arms, their limbs tangled together.

They simply lay there for a time, reveling in the closeness and the quiet as they tried to catch their breath. Finally able to breathe normally again, Enzo pulled Eve against him, only to have her pull away, leaving him missing her warmth instantly.

"Enzo," Eve said suddenly, sitting up and disentangling herself from his embrace. "I forgot to give you your gift."

“You don’t have to give me anything else,” he replied.
“Where are you going?”

“Wait here,” she insisted, dashing off toward the stairs, leaving him naked, sweaty, and alone.

Moments later, she returned with a gift bag, which she offered to him while smiling down at him. He patted the spot next to him, missing her warmth. She plopped back down on the plush lounge and then danced the gift bag around in his face.

“You really didn’t have to get me anything, love.”

“I know. But I wanted to get you something special since you’re special to me.”

This woman! Curiosity piqued, Enzo reached into the bag and pulled out a framed photograph that was wrapped in red and white tissue paper which was decorated with hearts. Enzo chuckled. Had she framed a photo of him and her?

She was so fucking adorable. Was it one of the pics of them being silly? Or was it one she’d taken before their last date night? Maybe it was a racy picture because she’d taken a few of them also. He removed the tissue paper from around the frame and froze. It wasn’t a photo of him and Eve.

It was a picture of him and his grandfather, Don Ermanno DeLuca. The sight of the two of them together, smiling and carefree, brought a lump to his throat and an ache to his heart.

Enzo couldn’t tear his gaze away from the framed photograph, his dark eyes swimming with unshed tears. As memories of that day resurfaced, he traced a fingertip over the glass, blinking back tears.

“Where did you find this?” he asked hoarsely, his voice thick with emotion.

Seated beside him on the plush bedding, Eve gently rubbed his back. “I asked the new consigliere if his father had any pictures of you and your grandfather. He searched for some time and finally sent me this one. It’s a really good picture.”

Yes, it was. “Thank you,” Enzo whispered again, unable to express just how much this meant to him. Words wouldn’t do justice to what he was feeling. His attention was drawn to the frame itself, where he noticed words etched into the silver. The handwriting was unmistakable. This was his grandfather’s writing.

Cherish yourself, Enzo.

I love you, Enzo.

Be brave, Enzo.

I’m always with you, Enzo.

Until we meet again, Enzo.

“Where did these phrases come from?” he questioned, his eyes never leaving the frame.

Eve shifted closer, her body pressed against his. “They were from some of the folders the old consigliere had of the don. In those folders were scribbles and notes your grandfather had written down absent-mindedly. I thought it would be a special touch to have them engraved into the frame.”

Those words were nearly his undoing. He swallowed, fighting to keep the tears at bay. Had his grandfather been trying to find the right words to write his last letter to Enzo? Were these scribbles from those attempts? He slowly traced his finger over the sentence, *I love you, Enzo*, as he pictured his grandfather writing those words.

I love you more, grandfather; Enzo thought, sending up a silent prayer. And I’ll continue being strong until we meet again. And I’ll cherish myself and the angel you sent me while watching over the family like you taught me. Until we meet again, old man.

With a slight smile on his face, Enzo’s heart swelled with gratitude as he stared at Eve, marveling once again at her love and generosity. This woman never failed to surprise him. She

made him fall in love with her over and over again each day simply by being herself. She cherished him. This was what it felt like to be cherished.

“This...this is the best gift anyone has ever given me,” he choked out, his voice trembling.

Her smile widened, her brown eyes sparkling with joy. “I’m glad you like it, Enzo.”

“I more than like it. I love it. Just as I love you, Eve. And I’ll cherish it forever, just as I plan to cherish you forever.”

Enzo returned the frame to the gift bag and set it on the floor before facing Eve again. He stared into her eyes, seeing the unshed tears and knowing they were there because this woman felt his pain when he was hurting and felt his joy when he was happy. Her happy tears were a reflection of what he was feeling. He wiped away a tear that dripped from her eyes, then cupped her cheek.

“You have to be my Valentine forever,” he told her. “Because I could never love anyone other than you. You are the only one for me.”

Her brown eyes sparkled with happiness as she smiled up at him. “Good, because I need you to be my savage Valentine forever. I don’t want to love anyone other than you. I can’t love anyone other than you, Enzo Deluca.”

With those words hanging between them, Enzo pulled her into his embrace, holding her tightly against his chest. Her arms wrapped around him, and she held on to him just as tightly. As their heartbeats synced, he silently thanked his grandfather for sending him an angel.

His grandfather had sent him a fierce, loving force who would stand by his side through the darkest times and smile with him through the happiest times. His grandfather had sent him a best friend, a life partner, a woman to grow old with. He’d sent him Eve, his savage Valentine.

And she was the greatest gift of all!





Thank you!

I hope you enjoyed Enzo and Eve's Valentine's Day short story. Be sure to leave a review! If you're new to the DeLuca crime family, start binge-reading the books in the Savage Bloodline series today. Each DeLuca novel is a standalone, and they do not have to be read in order.

However, my books in the series are connected. Here's the reading order for M'Renee Allen's savage romances.

**Brutal Bloodline, Enzo DeLuca, and Stefano DeLuca. Stefano DeLuca part 2 is now available for preorder.*

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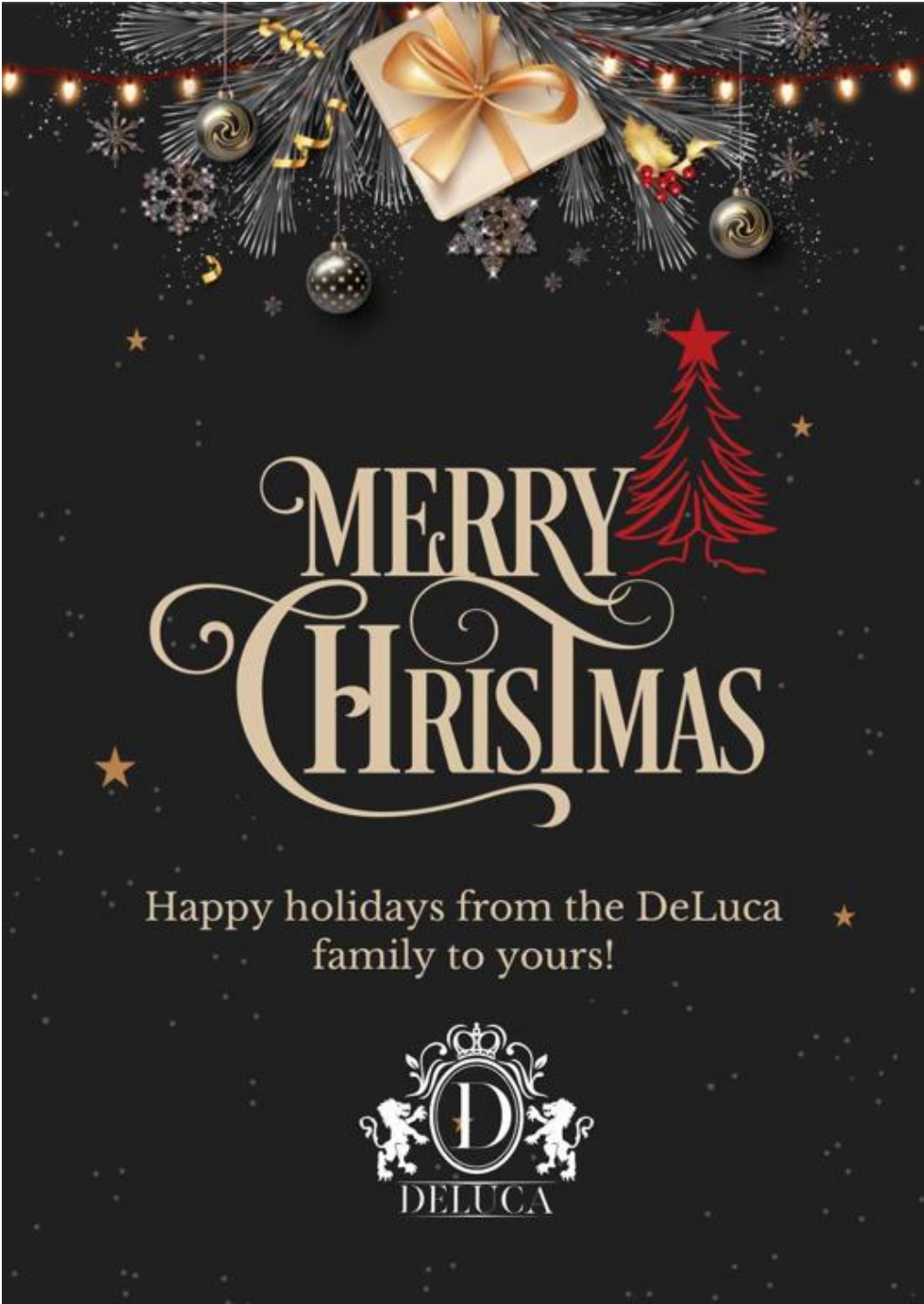
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MERRY
CHRISTMAS

Happy holidays from the DeLuca family to yours!





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We are so thankful for all of our Savage Bloodline readers. You all are truly appreciated. Without you, the Savage Bloodlines series wouldn't be what it is today. Not only do we appreciate you, but so do the DeLucas. Please enjoy this holiday card from the DeLuca crime family to you and your family.

Happy Holidays, and have a wonderful New Year!