



She's Completely
IRRESISTIBLE.

Irresistible

THE ILLICIT LOVE SERIES: DIEGO

NICHOLE ROSE

Irresistible

A Curvy Girl Mafia Romance

Nichole Rose

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About the Book



When love is on the line, right and wrong no longer matter for this forbidden couple.

Diego Butera

Lawyer by day, criminal by night. A life constantly in conflict.

That's the life I chose when I took competing oaths.

One to uphold the law. One to put La Cosa Nostra above all else.

All in a quest for revenge that I walked away from in the end.

Now, I'm tangled more tightly than ever, and it's about to blow up in my face.

Because Special Agent Athena White knows far too much about the kind of man I am.

And the closer she gets to unraveling the web I wove, the more irresistible I find her.

I'll do whatever I have to do to possess her.

Even if it means destroying her world.

Run, rabbit, run.

Athena White

Being assigned Diego Butera's case should have been a crowning moment.

Instead, it's turned into my own personal nightmare.

The only reason I'm in Chicago is because my boss wants me to fail.

Every other agent has for the last year. Why should I be any different?

Diego thinks he can outmaneuver me. My boss thinks he can get rid of me.

They've both underestimated me.

I'm not so easily fooled. I know precisely who Diego is and what's at stake.

The only problem? Every time Diego touches me, the less his crimes seem to matter.

He's a monster. But I've always liked the dark.

Perhaps a little *too* much.

Because right now, the fact that I might not survive it isn't even enough to stop what's happening between us.

If you enjoy steamy age-gap romance, obsessed antiheroes with heart, and sassy, curvy heroines, you'll love Diego and Athena's scorching-hot romance.

Chapter One



Diego

"You were supposed to get me off on all charges!" Sweat drips down Donato Burciaga's red face as he shouts loud enough for the entire building to hear. Apparently, he confused *lawyer* with *miracle worker* again. It's not the first time. The son of a bitch seems to think I'm God, capable of making every shred of evidence against him vanish into thin air.

Unfortunately for him, it doesn't work that way, even for a lawyer as good as me. Not when he's too stupid to cover his tracks, anyway. He left his fingerprints all over the crime scene, didn't wipe the cameras that put him there, and left his victim alive to tell the sordid tale when he was done.

Most of my clients are smart enough to clean up after themselves. It's part of the job when you're in the mafia. But Donato Burciaga is not one of the smart ones. The fact that he's yelling at me now is testament to that fact.

I may not be the worst thing that walks the streets of Chicago. That title is reserved for Rafe Valentino, the *Capo dei Capi*. But I have no illusions about where I'm headed when I die. The devil has a spot reserved for me.

I'm guessing the horned bastard probably put it right beside Valentino's sauna just to make sure eternity lasts as long as possible for both of us. The *Capo dei Capi* is my brother-in-law. He's also the man who murdered my biological father.

I spent most of my life hellbent on razing his empire to the ground...only to walk away from that plan a year ago. Right about the time it damn near cost my adopted sister, Amalia, her life.

Rafe helped me rescue her the night Tommaso Genovese found out she was the only remaining Cerrito heir and kidnapped her. We left a trail of bodies in our wake trying to bring her home. There's nothing like a murder spree to bring people together. The two of us aren't necessarily friends now, but we aren't enemies anymore, either. We're whatever you call two men willing to work together to keep a woman happy. He worships the ground my sister walks on. I owe her more than I can ever repay. It's an uneasy alliance, but it works for us.

"Are you listening to me?" Donato slams his hand down on the edge of my desk.

I flick my gaze to him, my temper rising. He's a piss-ant in this city. I'm a boot. I could squash him with a single phone call. He'd do well to remember it.

"Lower your fucking voice when you speak to me," I warn him.

"Fuck my voice!" he shouts, spittle flying from the corner of his thin lips. "I hired you to defend me, not send me to fucking prison, Butera. This plea deal is bullshit."

I pinch the bridge of my nose, reaching deep for a little patience. Getting blood out of carpet is a bitch. Been there, tried that. "This plea deal is your only hope of getting out of there in the next ten years, Donato. You left a witness alive to point the finger at you. What did you think was going to happen?"

"I thought the *porca puttana* was dead," he mutters sullenly.

"Yeah, well, he wasn't, so sign the goddamn agreement," I snap, leaning back in my chair with my arms crossed. I hit him with a hard look, letting him know I'm done with his bullshit. "Or go to trial and spend the next thirty years in jail. Either way, you were too fucking stupid to make sure he wasn't breathing. You were also too stupid to wipe the cameras and clean up your prints. I'm a lawyer, not God. This is the best I can do when you left a treasure trove of evidence for the DA to choose from. You don't like the consequences? You should have taken the time to do the job right. This is your mess. The Capo expects *you* to deal with the consequences."

No one else is going to do it for him. We certainly aren't going to stick our necks out to save him from his own fuck up. There's only so much I can do, and I've given him all the help he's going to get from La Cosa Nostra on this one. We protect our own, but not when they put us all at risk. Donato should have been smarter, plain and simple.

His expression twists as he snatches up the pen setting atop the plea deal the ADA sent over. "Should have hired Lorenzo Bianchi," he mutters, inking the agreement hard enough to tear a small hole in the paper. "At least he knows how to talk to people."

"You mean he knows how to kiss your ass."

Donato shoots me a baleful glare but doesn't disagree. The story is always the same for motherfuckers like him. He thinks being Made makes him special. As if he's someone just because he took the oath and made a few bucks along the way. The only thing special about him is the fact that he's survived this long without a brain in his head.

Bianchi might have kissed his ass, but Bianchi couldn't have talked the DA's office down to ten years with his criminal history. He's lucky Valentino found him moderately useful, and the DA likes me, or he'd be spending the next twenty-five to life in prison for attempted murder.

Donato finishes signing the agreement and shoves it across the desk toward me, knocking over a stack of files in the process. "Are we done now?" he demands, looking at the Rolex on his wrist. "I have things to do."

"For the moment." I meet his gaze. "Don't try to run. If I have to hunt you down because you failed to show up for court, ten years will look like a cake walk."

"You know, I never put much stock into what people said about you, but maybe there is some truth to all those rumors." He flicks a contemptuous gaze at me.

I don't have to ask what rumors. I already know. They've been saying the same shit for the last year.

Diego Butera is a rat.

I heard he was a rat.

Rumor is, he's a fucking rat.

"I don't waste my time listening to small men talk."

Burciaga snorts. "For someone who took the oath, you help send a helluva lot of us to prison, Butera. It's not a good look for you."

"Like I said, I don't listen to small men talk, Burciaga," I return, smiling coldly. "But I find it curious that those smart enough to cover their tracks don't have the same complaints. It's always those who think the rules don't apply to them who point the fingers. You should be looking in the mirror instead to find where the fault really lies. I'm not the one who got myself caught and pissed off the *Capo* in the process. You did that all by your little ole self."

His eyes narrow to slits at the reminder.

"We're done. Enjoy what's left of your freedom." I push the intercom button on my phone to let Ricci Morano know we're finished in here, making it clear to Donato that he's been dismissed. If he's mad that he's going to prison, he can sulk somewhere other than my damn office. I've got more important shit to do.

He stomps out, brushing past Ricci, who simply quirks a brow at me as if to ask what the fuck his problem is. I shake my head, silently telling him not to ask. He jerks his dark head, nodding, and quietly closes the door behind Donato.

As soon as I'm alone, I rise to pace across my office, seething in silent fury. Donato didn't outright call me a rat, but he came close enough. The rumors about me refuse to die.

Perhaps because they're partially true.

Until a year ago, I was slipping info to the FBI in a bid to make Valentino's life as complicated as possible. I had been for a while. It blew up in my face when Tommaso Genovese found out. He used the knowledge to try to push Rafe into a war, just so he could name himself *Capo*.

He nearly succeeded. But he overplayed his hand when he kidnapped Amalia, intending to use the Cerrito fortune to help cement his place at the

top. All he managed to do was unite me and Rafe in a common mission instead. We killed him and brought Amalia home. Cleaning up the mess, avoiding the war he wanted, and keeping ourselves out of prison wasn't as easy. But we managed it.

The FBI has been breathing down my neck ever since, trying to find out what the fuck happened. They know the bullshit intel they've managed to scrape together isn't remotely close to the full story.

I'm not inclined to fill in the blanks. If Valentino goes down now, chaos will erupt in the city, and we won't be able to stop it this time. There will be a bloodbath for the crown, and we'll all lose.

I have no intention of letting that happen when it puts my sister at risk. She's the last Cerrito heir, and she's carrying Rafe's baby. The only way she's safe is with him in charge. And we'll both go down if the truth comes out.

Like Burciaga suggested, I've helped put too many motherfuckers in the system to want to spend time in a cell myself. I've been juggling two competing oaths since the minute I finished law school. Omertà demands I put the mafia above all else. My degree demands I support the Constitution and the Rule of Law. The two rarely agree.

I've been balancing a house of cards for a long fucking time...and the FBI is ready to blow it over. They're worse than the mafia. Once they have you, they don't let go easily.

Blood in, blood out.

Unfortunately for them, I'm smarter than I look. And unfortunately for them, Valentino has every reason to ensure they don't hook me again. I've done my fair share of dirty shit in my life. But I've done double that since he married Amalia.

To keep her safe, I'll do whatever I have to do. But on the off chance I ever

forget what's at stake, Ricci Morano is a living, breathing reminder of just how little my brother-in-law trusts me on my own. Rafe installed him here to keep an eye on me.

Ricci reports back to Rafe about what I've been up to around here, I have no illusions about that. He's taking no chances that I'll betray his family again.

Guess the fact that my hands are stained with the blood of his enemies isn't reason enough to trust that I chose my side. My loyalty was all but guaranteed the minute he put a ring on my sister's finger and declared her queen. I won't make a move against him so long as it puts her at risk.

Sooner or later, he'll figure it out. Until then, it is what it is. I did the crime when I betrayed him and his brothers. If being watched closely is my punishment...it's a helluva lot less than I deserve. The sentence for betrayal in this world is death. The sentence for rats is a slow, painful one.

I got off easy.

The intercom on my desk buzzes.

"Mattia is on the line for you," Ricci announces.

"Send him through," I growl. Mattia Agostino is Rafe's consigliere. He's also become a surprisingly good friend. Things were touch and go for a while—his loyalty is to Rafe—but somewhere along the way, an actual friendship developed between us. He's an interesting motherfucker.

Ricci sends the call through without another word.

"You're expected for dinner," Mattia says without preamble.

"Hello to you too."

He ignores me, same as he does every time he calls. Mattia's phone skills are shit. His people skills aren't much better. He doesn't do small talk or exchange pleasantries. When he calls, he says what he needs to say and that's

the end of it. He's been mafia too goddamn long to trust phones. Shit. He's been mafia too goddamn long to trust anyone or anything.

And yet, for some reason, he trusts me.

"Rafe wants all of us there."

"All of us?" I quirk a brow, not sure which *all of us* he means.

"Luca, Gabe, you, me, Coda, and Domani."

Luca and Gabriel, two of Rafe's brothers, help oversee the Valentino empire. Between the three of them, they've got Chicago in a stranglehold. Gabriel runs their legitimate business—a multi-billion-dollar company. Luca oversees acquisitions for the business and day-to-day operations for their less-than-legal endeavors. Coda Passero and Domani Brambilla are two of Rafe's most trusted lieutenants. If Rafe is calling us in but not his twin, Nico, either someone fucked up or there's trouble on the horizon.

I don't ask for details. Mattia won't give them over the phone, and I'm not stupid enough to believe the FBI isn't still monitoring my calls. They stopped coming around months ago, but they're like a fucking dog with a bone.

"What time?"

"Be here at six." Mattia pauses. "And your sister says don't bring more shit for the baby or she's killing you. I believe she means it."

I smile in genuine amusement. Amalia's been threatening to kill me ever since she found out she was pregnant. Apparently, pregnancy makes her cranky. Or maybe it's all the shit I keep buying for their kid. Who the fuck knows? But she loves the presents, even if she'll never admit it.

And she won't ever admit it. My sister would kill for the people she loves, but she's stubborn as all hell and has a fiery temper. I'm not surprised Rafe fell for her. She's as temperamental as he is and just as much of a wild card.

The world will tremble when their kid gets here.

"Bring more shit for the baby," I murmur, pretending to write it down. "Got it."

Mattia's sigh sends static down the line. "It's your funeral, Butera."



"Mr. Butera."

I stop halfway across the parking garage outside my penthouse on the Loop, turning to glance over my shoulder. Most people who live here don't know who I am. I've never bothered playing nice with the neighbors. The less they know about me, the better.

Whoever's calling my name seems to know me, though.

My gaze lands on a curvy African American woman weaving her way between two cars, and my dick turns to steel. Even in heels, she's petite, the top of her head barely reaching my shoulder. Her black hair is pulled up in an elegant bun, leaving her round face unobscured.

I don't know who she is, but she's fucking gorgeous. She's strait-laced perfection, not a hair out of place. Not a single wrinkle in sight. She carries herself with her head high, her expression serene. It's a fascinating glimpse of who this woman wants the world to think she is. But her bright hazel eyes tell a different story. There's fire in her, burning hot. And it's not nearly as contained as she'd like to think it is.

It's been years since I was last with anyone. Except for client dinners, I haven't even been to dinner with a woman in longer than I can remember. When you're juggling a job, the FBI, the mafia, and protecting a long-lost *principessa*, dating isn't high on the list of shit to do. But I want this woman in my bed.

I want to unwrap and unravel her, uncovering all her mysteries.

Who the hell is she?

There's no way she lives here. I would have noticed her if she did. Some women are simply unforgettable.

"You're looking for me, *bella*?" I shift to hide the tent in my slacks as she draws to a stop in front of me.

She huffs a breath, her chest rising and falling as if she just raced across the garage to catch me. There's no way she just ran in those fuck-me heels and her pretty little suit, though. "You're Diego Butera, the lawyer?"

"Yes."

"Good. I need to speak to you."

"You need a lawyer?" I reach into my pocket to retrieve a business card, irritated as hell that I don't have time right now to find out what she needs. I'm already running late to Valentino's dinner. I'd rather stay right here and talk this goddess into my bed. "Why don't you give me a call tomorrow, and we'll talk?"

She eyes me as I hold the card out to her, her expression carefully blank. "Do I look like I need an attorney, Mr. Butera?"

"Are people who need lawyers supposed to look a certain way?"

"You seem to think so."

My brows pull down. "I didn't intend to insinuate anything or offend you, *bella*," I murmur. "I simply thought you were confirming I was a lawyer

because you want to speak to me as a lawyer."

She eyes me for a long moment as if assessing whether I'm feeding her a line of bullshit or not. I guess she decides I'm not because she plucks the card from my hand and tucks it into her pocket without looking at it. Her eyes meet mine, her expression almost sheepish. She seems rattled for some reason, as if I'm not what she expected. "Sorry."

"Maybe we should start again?" I suggest, giving her a reassuring smile.

She nods gratefully.

"I'm Diego Butera." I hold a hand out to her.

"Athena White." She slips her hand into mine, startling slightly when I accidentally shock her.

Her skin is soft as silk. Jesus. I want to feel it wrapped around my cock.

"Athena," I repeat. "Goddess of war."

She quirks a brow. "She was also the goddess of wisdom, heroism, and pottery."

She's argumentative and fiery beneath that perfect exterior.

I smile, amused. "No. You're definitely war."

"Hmm?"

"If you don't need a lawyer, what do you need from me, sweet Athena?" I ask instead of repeating myself. We both know she heard me anyway. I think she knows what I meant, too. She just wants me to explain it anyway. I have no intention of giving her that explanation today.

"We can discuss it tomorrow. You look like you're in a hurry."

"Duty calls."

"You're working?"

"Something like that. Come by my office in the morning. The address is on the card. We'll talk." I hesitate for a moment, half tempted to invite her to

dinner tonight. It'll be a helluva lot more bearable with her seated across from me. "Unless..."

She cocks her head to the side, curiosity sparking in her gaze. "Unless what?"

"Do you have dinner plans?"

"Uh, not at the moment." She seems caught off guard by the question and then an amused smile spreads across her face. "Are you inviting me to dinner, Mr. Butera?"

"Actually, I'm begging you to save me from a night of unbearable tedium."

Her sultry laugh washes over me, sealing her fate. One way or another, I'm getting her in my bed. I may keep her there for days when I do. "For some reason, I find it hard to believe you're in for a night of tedium."

"You're right. It's worse than that." I grimace. "It's dinner with my brother-in-law and his family. He doesn't like me much."

"Isn't it supposed to be the other way around? You aren't supposed to like him since he married your sister?"

"Oh, I don't like him. He's a bastard, and that has nothing to do with the fact that he married my sister." Truth be told, I like him more since he married my sister. He's changed. Or hell, maybe I have because he's still one dangerous motherfucker. I just seem to hate him less than usual these days.

Gratitude is a bitch.

Athena laughs again.

"So, dinner?"

"I don't think that's a good idea," she says regretfully.

"Why the fuck not?"

She eyes me for a moment and then sighs before reaching into her pocket to pull something out. I watch in curiosity as she turns the object in her hand

around to show me.

My stomach sinks as soon as my gaze lands on the silver shield in her hand.

Jesus Christ. She's a fucking fed.

"Because I'd rather not die tonight, Mr. Butera." She meets my gaze, unblinking. "And I don't believe Rafe Valentino would welcome me into his home with open arms, do you?"

Chapter Two



Athena

Standing in front of Diego Butera is like standing in front of the sun. He's one of the most powerful men in this city. He's rich. And he's gorgeous. I've seen more than my fair share of photos of him in the last two weeks, but they did not prepare me for this reality.

He towers over me, powerful and fierce...dark from head to toe. Messy dark hair and an olive skin tone pair perfectly with obsidian eyes and a five o'clock shadow. Even his suit is dark, black jacket, black tie, black slacks. It probably cost him more than I make a year. He wears it well. *Too* well, perhaps.

He plays the debonair lawyer to perfection, and it's distracting as hell. *He's* distracting. I'm never off my game, but I've been reeling this entire meeting. My heart pounds with nervous excitement, as if I'm meeting a potential date instead of a member of the mafia.

Despite knowing his file inside and out, he's still not what I expected. He was an informant, but he's been radio silent for the last year. It doesn't bode well considering he's one of the biggest criminals in this city. The man is a monster if his file is to be believed, but he looks like a Gucci model. He's also charming and intelligent.

It's disorienting.

"You're a fucking fed," he growls, his expression darkening.

"I believe the term you're looking for is federal agent." I tuck my shield back into my pocket out of sight. "If that's the case, then yes, I am."

"How old are you?"

I bristle at the question and his sudden hostility. Two minutes ago, he was flirting hard enough to make my stomach flutter. Now, he's hostile and suspicious. I suppose I should have expected it. It's nothing I haven't heard before. No one wants to talk to the FBI, especially not the mafia.

Even fewer seem to want to talk to me. I'm twenty-five. As far as most people are concerned, that makes me a baby. They certainly don't think I'm old enough to be a federal agent. I don't have enough fingers and toes to count the number of times I've been called *cute* in the last two years.

They usually switch to something else once they're in cuffs. It's equally as offensive, but at least it's not patronizing. My boss, Dennis Respert, is worse than our suspects. He's been dying to get rid of me since I was transferred to his field office three months ago.

As far as he's concerned, I'm too young, too female, and too dainty for the job. I belong behind a desk, answering phones while the men do the heavy lifting. He's old school misogynistic and makes no secrets about it.

Giving me an errant informant and mobster no one can crack right out of the gate is a surefire way to ensure I fail. I get to waste my time plucking at threads that the task force has already pulled for the last year. And when I inevitably fail, Dennis gets to gloat and say he was right about me. It's a win-win for him.

I should have quit as soon as he handed me the assignment...except I've never been one to let anyone decide what I'm capable of doing. If Dennis wants me out of the FBI, he really shouldn't have thrown down a gauntlet. I'm too stubborn not to pick it up. If he wants to fire me, I'm going to make him work for it.

And if Diego Butera thinks I'm too young to pose a threat to him and his boss, he needs to think again. I've spent the last two weeks reading his file

backward and forward. If it's in there, I know it by heart.

"My age isn't your concern," I state firmly.

"It is when you're going to get eaten alive." He scowls, shoving a hand through his hair. "Jesus Christ. Did they at least send you backup?"

"Are you suggesting I'm not capable of doing my job without help, Mr. Butera?"

"I'm suggesting that you're a kitten walking into a lion's den, Athena," he growls. "Have you ever worked a RICO case? Do you know anything about the mafia?"

At least he's not going to deny being connected to the mafia. That ship sailed a long time ago. We all know he's a Made man. We all know who he works for, too. It's been common knowledge for years. He went to law school with an agenda. The ink hadn't even dried on his degree before he was back in the streets, swearing fealty to Rafe Valentino.

He's spent most of his career defending the Valentino family against any charges we throw their way. And then a few years ago, he flipped. No explanation, no reason. He just started passing on info about little things. Never enough to bring Valentino or his brothers down. But just enough to keep us clued in on what was happening here.

A year ago, he stopped informing as suddenly as he started. Tommaso Genovese and three dozen of his men ended up in graves, his granddaughter married Luca Valentino, and Diego's sister ended up married to Rafe Valentino. Diego went radio silent immediately after. The events are connected. We just don't know how.

Diego knows. I think he was probably in the thick of it. But he isn't talking. No one is, including Genovese's family.

"You haven't, have you?" he demands incredulously.

"That's not your concern, and I know more than enough about the mafia." I slip my hands into my pockets, craning my head back to look up at him. "For instance, I know that Rafe Valentino may be responsible for the death of your biological father, Dario Marchesi. I also know Valentino's wife and your sister is the long-lost Cerrito *principessa*." I hold his gaze. "But you already knew that too since you and your adopted father hid her from everyone for most of her life, didn't you?"

Seraphina Cerrito's parents were killed in a house fire when she was a toddler. She ended up in foster care. Everyone lost track of her after that. But she turned up again last year under the name Amalia Santiago, claiming to be Diego's sister. No one even knew Diego had a sister, let alone one connected to the Cerrito family. He'd been hiding her for years.

What else has he been hiding from us? That's what we'd really like to know. He's at the heart of everything that happened last year, but we don't know how the pieces connect yet. I fully intend to figure it out. If he's still a threat, we need to know it.

We were wrong about him once already, and it nearly resulted in a war we never saw coming. We can't afford to be wrong again.

"Do you have a point?" Diego asks.

"Who were you hiding her from, Mr. Butera? Tommaso?" Given that Rafe Valentino married her, I don't think he was hiding her from the Valentino family.

He eyes me levelly, not speaking.

"Is that why he's dead? He found out who she was and went after her?"

"Tommaso Genovese is dead because he was a rabid dog," he growls, his eyes flashing unholy fire. "He was born a rabid dog and died a rabid dog. The world doesn't mourn him, Athena. Not even his family mourns him."

I don't think he's entirely wrong about that. Genovese wasn't even cold in the grave before his granddaughter married Luca Valentino, a union that stopped whatever war his death almost started last year. Their families have been at peace since. By all accounts, the world is better off without Genovese in it. But the FBI is in the dark...and that's the one place we don't like to be, especially when men like these are involved.

"You're going to have to talk someday."

A wicked smirk steals across his face, turning him from debonair lawyer to deadly devil in the blink of an eye. "Yeah? You think so, *bella*?" He leans down over me, getting in my personal space. "Tell you what, I'll make you a deal."

"W-what deal?" I lick my lips, trying to focus as the rich, decadent scent of his cologne swirls around me.

He leans closer, so close his breath washes across the side of my face, warm and intoxicating. "The day you agree to ride me soft, I'll agree to answer any questions you want me to answer."

I gasp, jerking backward in shock. Without even thinking about it, I lift my hand, prepared to slap him across his smug, gorgeous face. He catches my hand in his fist, using it to pull me into his arms.

"Hit me, and you'll be wearing my marks all over your body when you walk out of here," he growls, his eyes twin pools of obsidian flame. "Think you'll be able to explain that to your bosses?"

I jerk against his hold, my heart hammering. I'm not afraid of him, though. Perhaps I should be. But I'm too mad to be afraid. "Let me go right now, Diego. Before I arrest you for assault."

"Don't call it what it isn't, goddess." He brushes his lips against my ear. "We both know if I checked your panties right now, they'd be soaked. You

fucking love the fact that I just touched you."

I growl a curse, yanking my arm free of his hold. He's right, damn him. And I think I may hate him a little bit for knowing it. I also think I was right earlier. Diego Butera is one of the most dangerous men in this city.

I just didn't realize he was going to be a personal danger to *me*.

"Walk away, Athena. Before I decide not to let you walk away at all."

"Is that a threat?"

"No. It's a warning, *bella*. Walk away."

"I'm not going anywhere, Diego."

"Fine." He steps back, his heated gaze running over me. "See you in the morning, beautiful," he says, tipping an imaginary hat before striding away.



I wait in my car until Diego pulls out of the garage in his Bentley and then follow behind him. I don't make a secret of it. Trying to tail him without being seen is pointless. I'm sure he has far more experience at this game than I do. He's the freaking mafia. I've spent my career to date dealing with scammers and low-level cybercrimes.

This is my first actual case, and it was given solely as a means to an end. My boss is probably praying right now that I screw up enough for him to have cause to fire me.

Quite frankly, I hope he trips and falls on Legos tonight.

I follow Diego through the Loop at a snail's pace. Traffic is as heavy as ever, slowing progress to a crawl. A breeze blows through my cracked window, bringing a dichotomy of smells...the faint hint of chocolate from the factory, the sharp scents of the city, and the freshwater and fishy smell from the Lake.

My phone rings as a young couple stumbles through the crosswalk ahead of me, arm in arm. I glance at the navigation screen and then hit the button to answer when I see my brother's name.

Maybe he can distract me from Diego's filthy threat.

Maybe talking to him will help me convince myself that I didn't like anything about the things Diego said to me. Except...I'm honest enough with myself to know part of me liked it a little too much.

He's a criminal. You're a federal agent. Forget it, Athena.

"What are you doing?" Ceres demands as soon as I answer the call.

"Working. What are you doing?"

"Working. Remind me again why we told Ma we wanted to grow up?"

"Uh, I'm pretty sure *you* told her that because you hated being told what to do. I never told her that. I was perfectly fine being spoiled at home and having no bills," I say, smiling. Even as a kid, Ceres was a handful. He wanted to do everything his way. How he ended up in the military, I'll never know. It was the last thing any of us expected of him.

I kind of expected him to be a rockstar or something crazy, to be honest. He had that restlessness about him. I guess he was always a little too reasonable for that, though.

"You *were* spoiled."

My smile grows. He's twelve years older than I am. If I was spoiled, he

played a big hand in it. Not that he'll ever admit it or anything. He swears I annoyed him, which is a lie. If I followed him around, it was only because he let me.

"What are you working on so late?" he asks, changing the subject.

"I'm tailing someone."

"Ah. Who?"

"What are *you* working on?" I ask instead of answering, already knowing he isn't going to tell me. He can't, not any more than I can tell him who I'm tailing. But we ask anyway. It's what we do. Neither of us can talk about what we're doing, but we want to know. I think he worries about me. I know I worry about him.

"Same shit, different day." He pauses. "You'd tell me if you were in trouble, right?"

"Ceres," I say quietly. "I'm fine."

"So you say," he mutters. "But you're halfway across the country. I preferred you closer to home."

"You mean you preferred me where you could keep an eye on me."

Diego takes a right, rolling to a stop at the intersection. Once he's sure it's clear, he takes the ramp to the interstate. I follow behind him, sure he knows I'm following him. He doesn't try to evade me, though. He doesn't speed, either.

"No, I preferred you closer to home," Ceres growls. "I miss you."

I sigh, turning on my blinker to get over into the left lane behind Diego. "I miss you too." He thinks I moved to avoid him, but the truth is, I just wanted out of cybercrimes. Busting scam rings all day was exhausting.

Most of the time, even when we managed to track them down, they were outside of our jurisdiction. We'd bring in local authorities, but they'd just pay

off the police and be back in business in a matter of days.

Recovering the money they stole was just as exhausting. Half the time, it was long gone. The victims never got it back. Most of them were elderly, scammed out of their life-savings because they didn't know any better. Having to break the news that they weren't getting it back was wearing me down.

I wanted to do something more than that. Only...I'm not entirely sure *this* is what I signed up for, either. I've dreamed of being a federal agent since I was a little girl. But no one warned me that I'd spend most of my time dealing with men like Dennis who don't think I belong in their boys' club.

"Does adulting ever get easier?" I ask Ceres.

His loud laughter echoes down the line. "Fuck no, baby sister. The shit just gets harder from here."

"I was afraid you were going to say that," I groan. "This is for the birds."

"Who you telling? Just wait until you're my age and you suffer for a goddamn week every time you even think about sleeping wrong or exercising or carrying something heavy."

"You aren't that old," I say through laughter.

"Mind telling my neck and back that because they did not get the memo?"

I flip my blinker on as Diego whips into the right lane ahead and then immediately crosses into the lane exiting the interstate. I have to slam on the brakes to exit behind him.

"Jerk," I mutter, certain he did that on purpose just to irritate me.

"Hey, now," Ceres protests.

"Not you. The guy I'm tailing. He's driving like a jerk to annoy me."

Silence sounds down the line. I flick my gaze to the screen to make sure we weren't disconnected.

"Ceres?"

"He knows you're following him?" he growls. "What the fuck, Athena?"

"Calm your tatas, Cranky." I roll my eyes. "I'm not going to try to weasel my way into the confidences of a mafia member. I'm not trying to disappear without a trace." I'm just going to make a nuisance of myself until he gets sick of me and agrees to help fill in some blanks.

So far as plans go, it's a terrible one. But Diego's too insulated, too untrusting, and too smart to be easily fooled. Why bother trying when the most likely outcome doesn't bode well for me?

"Jesus H. Christ. You're tailing a member of the mafia?" Ceres growls.

Well, crap. I probably shouldn't have said that.

"Technically their lawyer." It's partially true. He is their lawyer. He just also happens to be one of them.

The distinction doesn't seem to help much. Ceres breaks into a litany of curses. "I'm coming out there."

"You absolutely are not coming out here!" I glare at the screen as if he can see me. "This is my job, Ceres. I don't interfere with yours. You need to butt out and let me do mine."

"I'm telling Ma."

"I'll tell her what really happened in South America," I warn, fighting fire with fire.

He growls, knowing he can't win this particular war. His job is far more dangerous than mine, and he's hidden a whole lot of it from our mom. She has no idea how many times we've almost lost him because I've kept his secrets. It's his turn to keep one for me.

"If anything happens to you, I'll take down the mafia myself," he swears, making me smile. I think if anyone were stubborn enough to do it out of pure

spite, it might just be my brother.

But I don't need him to protect me. And I won't need him to follow through on his threat. Diego's going to tell me what I want to know. Even if I have to haunt him every waking hour until he does.

Chapter Three



Diego

"We're taking a step back."

I stare at Rafe across the antique dining room table, not sure what the fuck that means. The ornate chandelier overhead spills light down over us, but the room is so fucking big, it does nothing to chase away the shadows clinging to the furthest corners. "A step back from what?"

"Everything."

Coda and Domani, normally stoic, grim motherfuckers, share a look that lets me know they don't know what he's talking about, either. Even Mattia, the unflappable, cool as a cucumber consigliere, seems caught off guard by his best friend's after-dinner announcement.

Amalia, Callandria, and Genesis, Gabriel's wife, excused themselves from the dining room a few minutes ago to give us time to talk. I guess they knew what was coming. Luca and Gabriel certainly don't seem surprised. For once, they're a united front, perfectly in sync with their older brother.

"You're going to have to explain it like I'm five," I growl. "Because I still don't know what the fuck you're talking about."

"He's talking about the four of you stepping up as the face of this family while we play puppet masters," Gabriel says, an amused glimmer in his eyes as if he finds this shit funny. Hell, maybe he does. There's no telling with him.

"Puppet masters?" Rafe frowns at his youngest brother, his dark brows pulled down into a severe line.

Gabe just shrugs, unrepentant. His leather bomber jacker and dark jeans fit his *devil-may-care* attitude. He's the only one of the brothers who doesn't

dress like mafia. Doesn't act like it, either.

Rafe sighs, choosing to ignore him. I think Gabriel fucks with Rafe just because he can. He's been doing it for as long as I've known them. None of the brothers particularly relish being responsible for the Valentino empire, but Gabe hates it more than most. In ways, there's more darkness in him than in his brothers, but this way of life suits him less than Rafe and Luca.

"What I mean," Rafe says, turning back to us, "is putting the four of you in charge of daily operations for a while. You'll work together to handle whatever the fuck needs handling while we focus on other shit."

"You've gotta be shitting me." I stare at him as if he's lost his ever-loving mind. Matter of fact, I'm certain he has lost it if he's suggesting putting me in charge of running shit alongside Mattia, Coda, and Domani. I have no interest in ruling over his little empire of criminals.

"He's serious," Luca Valentino says from beside him, drumming his long fingers on the table. His probing gaze meets mine. "They'll need your help keeping the law off their backs."

"Have you forgotten that you don't trust me?" I arch a brow, expanding my *what the fuck* look to include him. "Last I checked, I was only included in this council out of necessity."

"We haven't forgotten anything," Rafe says, speaking quietly. The man never raises his voice. I don't think I've ever heard him shout. When he's pissed, he gets quieter than usual. "But the past is in the past, is it not?"

The past *is* in the past. It's fucked up to sit across from the man who murdered my father and agree with that sentiment when I spent most of my life determined to make him pay. It's equally as fucked up to sit across from

the man I tried to destroy as if I'm a welcomed member of the family. And yet...here I sit, anyway.

I mean, goddamn. Amalia's father murdered Rafe's mom and shot Rafe. Rafe's father killed her parents, leaving her an orphan. If they can let all of that go and end up happy together, our shit seems like pebbles in comparison.

Dario Marchesi was a lot of things, but he wasn't a saint. Hell, he wasn't even a father, not really. Alvis Butera raised me. He taught me how to survive this world. He's the one who deserves my loyalty. All Dario ever did for me was complicate my life.

I don't know why I was so hellbent on avenging his death. It seems so goddamn pointless now.

"The past is the past," I agree, holding Rafe's gaze. "But I'm a fucking lawyer, not a *sottocapo*." I jerk my head toward his brothers. "They're your backup, not me."

"And they agree with me," Rafe says, his voice level.

"*Che palle!* This is madness."

"He's not wrong," Coda mutters. "No disrespect intended, but I know fuck all about being in charge, Rafe."

"We'll be here to guide you. You'll answer to us. We're just taking a step out of the thick of it for now to focus on legitimizing a few things."

"Why?" Mattia asks, the only important question at this point. Why now? What the fuck are they thinking? There hasn't been war or the threat of war in months because the brothers are united. This is what they've always worked toward...peace between the five families. A break from the constant treachery. Why risk overturning the whole fucking cart now?

"The baby," I say quietly. It's the only logical answer. Of course, he's taking a step back because Amalia's pregnant. He lost his mom to this world. She

was murdered right in front of him and Nico. Rafe nearly lost his life the same day. I'm guessing that shit still haunts him. He may be a lot of things, but he loves Amalia. If there's even a chance of someone harming her or their baby, he won't risk it. He wants out of the spotlight for their safety.

Rafe lifts his chin in acknowledgement, confirming my suspicion.

"*Cazzo*," I groan, pinching the bridge of my nose. He picked the worst time to make this decision. Any other day of the fucking week, I might have gone along with it, simply because it's Amalia we're talking about here. But not even two hours ago, Athena White was standing in front of me, threatening to send my world up in flames. If it ignites, Rafe's goes up too.

"If this is what you want," Mattia says. Coda and Domani are already nodding their agreement, willing to fall in line.

"We have a problem," I blurt. We're beyond breaking the news gently. Christ. We were beyond that when Athena showed up.

"*Figlio di puttana!*" Gabriel growls. "I've had about enough of those."

"An FBI agent followed me here."

"Jesus fucking..." Coda mutters.

"*Cristo*." Luca whips his head toward the window as if looking for her. It's pitch-black outside and the house sits behind massive gates, an impenetrable fortress. He can't see anything. I'm not even sure if she's still out there or if she only followed me to get under my skin.

Either way, it worked. I thought about pulling over and dragging her out of her car to finish what I started in the parking garage. My fucking dick was hard the entire drive here, thinking about her in the car behind me, hot and wet. Sticky for me.

She should have run when she had the chance instead of following me into the dark. Now, she's in my domain. And I've never felt more like hunting.

"They're trying to get you to talk again," Rafe says, seemingly unsurprised.

"Looks that way. Their agent cornered me in my garage earlier this evening."

"Is he going to be a problem?" Luca asks point-blank.

"She."

"She?"

"She is a woman. Athena."

"They only sent one this time?" Rafe's eyes widen. "That's new."

You don't even know the half of it.

"Is she going to be a problem?" Luca demands to know.

"Aren't they usually?"

"Women or the FBI?"

Coda's question earns an amused grunt from Gabriel, though he doesn't look any more thrilled than either of his brothers. No one at the table is happy with the news. Guess we all deluded ourselves into thinking they were done asking questions about Tommaso Genovese.

"What's your plan?"

"Who says I have one?" I lift my gaze to Rafe. "That's supposed to be your department."

"Cut the shit, Butera," he warns me, his expression going cold. "We both know you're a calculating motherfucker. You have plans for your plans. And unlike most, you're actually smart enough to pull them off."

"Is that a compliment or a complaint, Valentino?"

"Depends on whether you feel like getting up to your old tricks." He lifts his glass of brandy to his lips, taking a swallow. "The way I see it, you're either an asset or a problem. You tell me which you plan to be."

Everyone else at the long table goes quiet, watching the two of us as if

expecting us to go for each other's throats. They've been watching us the same way for the last year. But like so much else, we're beyond that now. We're two fucking peas in a pod, both headed straight to hell. He doesn't trust me. I'm not entirely sure I *like* him. But we're stuck with one another anyway.

And shit, at least he's honest about where we stand.

"I have no intentions of talking, Valentino." I lift my hands, flipping them palms up on the table. "In case you forgot, my hands aren't any cleaner than yours in any of this. Might be dirtier, in fact."

"They weren't pristine last time."

"You weren't married to my sister last time," I say bluntly, holding his gaze. "You hadn't risked war to save her life. The minute you did that, you guaranteed my loyalty and my silence."

He eyes me intently for a moment and then dips his head in an approximation of a nod, letting me know he gets it. Shit, maybe he does. He has brothers. He tied himself to an empire he didn't want to free his twin. If anyone understands how far someone will go for family, he should. She may not be my blood, but she's been my sister, my responsibility, since the day Alvis brought her home when she was ten.

"What's your plan?" he asks again.

"She isn't going to give up easily." I barely even know her and I'm already certain of that fact. This is personal to her for some reason. Perhaps because I pushed too far today. I don't know, but I threw down a fucking gauntlet and she couldn't help but to pick it up. She won't back down until one of us cracks.

"So what do you want to do? Make her disappear?"

I turn a lethal glare on Gabriel, who holds up his hands. "Jesus. I was joking." His lips pull down into a frown. "Not even Rafe is that fucked in the

head yet."

"*Stronzo*," Rafe mutters under his breath.

What am I going to do? The answer to that may make me the biggest bastard in this room. She really should have run when she had the chance, but she didn't. Now, I'm not going to let her. I'm going to take what I want. *Her*.

"She won't be with the FBI for long," I say, running a fingertip around the rim of my glass. "Not when they found out that she's sleeping with the enemy."

Shocked silence greets my announcement.

"*Dio Santo*," Luca growls. "You're fucking her?"

"Not yet." I lift my gaze to his, keeping my expression as level as possible. They can think what they want to think about my choice here. At the end of the day, it is my choice. And they don't need to know why I'm making it. "But that's the plan."

"It'll ruin her," Gabriel growls.

"I'm aware. But it's better than making her disappear, don't you think?" We don't target women. I wouldn't let anyone put their hands on this one if they tried. But she's already sifted loose more about what happened than she should have been able to find. We can't afford for her to keep digging. If she does, she'll dig us right into a fucking hole, and Rafe will have to make a choice between taking her out and letting us fall.

I won't allow the first to happen. This city won't survive if the second does.

"*Trovarsi fra l'incudine e il martello*," Rafe says, seeing the gravity of the situation. He knows we're stuck between the hammer and the anvil without me having to spell it out for him. I'm not the only smart, calculating motherfucker in the room. He didn't claw his way to the crown by failing to grasp the bigger picture.

Either I seduce Athena and make sure her bosses find out...or we find another way to make sure she stops digging. We don't kill women. But we do what we have to do to protect La Cosa Nostra.

This time, I intend to enjoy every filthy moment of it.

Run, rabbit, run. I'm coming for you.



"Mattia's here to see you."

I flick my gaze up from my computer screen to Ricci, who is standing in the doorway to my office. It's not even eight in the morning. I'm not entirely surprised Mattia's here. I had a feeling Rafe would send someone. He trusts no one, especially not me.

"Send him in."

Ricci nods and disappears into the outer office.

Less than thirty seconds later, Mattia strides through the doors, a cup of coffee in hand, dressed in his usual dark suit and matching tie. If you didn't know him, you'd think he was some high-powered executive. At least until you take a good look at his eyes. The glittering darkness there screams danger. Like Valentino, he isn't someone to be fucked with. He may hide it better, but he's just as dangerous, capable of just as much savagery.

The only difference is that Mattia's far more patient than his best friend. He'll wait years before he strikes if it suits his purposes. Valentino prefers to handle his business and move the fuck on.

"Which of us are you here to babysit?" I ask, genuinely curious if Rafe sent him to keep an eye on me or if he sent him to get a bead on Athena.

Mattia's brow rises toward his hairline. "Who says I'm here to babysit anyone?" He brings his cup to his mouth, taking a long sip. "One of these days, you and Rafe will stop dancing around each other and realize you're both too goddamned busy to worry about the other half as often as the two of you think you do."

"What does that even mean?"

"It means you both spend too much time worried about bullshit when neither of you have time for it. Yet you spend your time thinking he's watching for a knife from you. He spends his time thinking you're watching for a knife from him." Mattia grimaces. "Neither of you will betray the other because of Amalia. Life would be far easier if you two would accept that already."

So Rafe worries about me not trusting him. Interesting. Is that why I got roped into being his new underboss? As a show of faith? I start to ask Mattia that question and then swallow it back, not sure I want to know the answer. Not sure the answer changes anything. Regardless of the reason, I won't say no if it means protecting Amalia.

"Your agent is coming this morning?"

"That's the plan," I say with a smirk. With any luck, she'll be *coming* all over me before she leaves my office.

Mattia leans against the door frame, giving me a level look. "I looked into her last night. She's never worked a RICO case."

"Not even one?" I ask, not entirely surprised. I knew yesterday that she was too goddamn young and inexperienced to be working this case. "Who the fuck sends a rookie to deal with people like us?"

He shakes his head, at a loss for how to answer that one. "My sources say she worked in cybercrimes before being assigned this case."

"Jesus Christ," I mutter. Her bosses are pricks for sending her after me. They should have known better. "She's a lamb to the slaughter. Why the hell would they assign her to us?"

"No clue, but I don't envy her." He takes another sip of his coffee, eyeing me over the rim of the cup. "You sure you want to follow through with this? She's young, fresh out of Quantico, has a whole career ahead of her."

Unless I derail it. He doesn't say it, but he doesn't have to say it. It hovers in the air, unspoken. If I seduce her, I won't just be destroying whatever case she's trying to build against us. I'll be destroying her career. They'll never trust her again. It's a fucking asshole move. But the thing is...I never pretended I was prince charming. I never said I wasn't a fucking asshole.

I take what I want, just like I always have. That's how my world works. That's the rule I live by. Take what belongs to me and make no apologies. Athena White belongs to me, even if she doesn't know it yet. I won't apologize for taking her. Even if it destroys her world. Even if I have to burn it to the fucking ground to make her mine.

If she wanted safety, she shouldn't have followed me into the dark. If her bosses wanted her safe, they shouldn't have been stupid enough to put her in my path. I've never apologized for being who I am. I won't start now.

"I made my choice." I meet Mattia's gaze, daring him to try to stand in my way. Daring Rafe and the FBI, too. They can try, but this is personal. I can pretend it's about protecting the Valentino empire and Amalia all I want, but

at the end of the day...it has nothing to do with either of those things and everything to do with *her*.

Mattia sighs and then nods. "Figured you'd say that." He pushes away from the door, draining his cup. "But I thought we should have this conversation anyway. Probably should have had it with Rafe, Luca, and Gabriel last year, and didn't. I'm doing shit differently this time around."

"Think they would have done anything differently?"

A rough bark of laughter bursts from his lips. He launches his cup toward the trashcan beside the desk, sinking it in one. "Not a fucking chance," he says. "But who knows? They've surprised me a few times lately." He looks me over. "Your FBI agent just moved to Chicago. Her entire family is back in Washington."

I jerk my chin in a nod, grateful for the intel. Family tends to complicate things, and right now, that's the last thing I need. Until she's in my bed and I'm stealing my way into her fucking soul, I want her to myself. Nowhere to run. Nowhere to hide.

I'm going to be the only thing she thinks about. Until it drives her fucking crazy.

Chapter Four



Athena

"Stop stalling and go in," I mutter, trying to coax myself out of the car for the fifth time since I parked in the garage outside Diego's office. It's not working. I tossed and turned all night, mad as hell about how our meeting yesterday ended. Mad that I let him touch me. Mad that he was right. Mad that part of me didn't hate it.

This morning, I dressed myself in outrage and painted myself for war... only to lose my nerve as soon as his building came into view. It's ridiculous. I'm not a little girl and I don't fall at any man's feet. Especially not one like Diego Butera.

He's responsible for more death and destruction than I can count. He's helped more criminals in this city escape justice than I can even fathom. Maybe he had an identity crisis for a while there and tried to do the right thing. Maybe talking to us was all part of whatever game he's playing. Whatever the reason, he's clearly back to his old way.

If I needed any proof of that, I got it last night. He had dinner with Rafe Valentino. It doesn't matter if they are family by marriage. He chose his side, and it isn't ours. It's theirs. The mafia's. Diego Butera is one of them and he always will be.

"You going to sit out here all morning, *bella*?"

"Jesus!" I practically jump out of my seat when his velvet voice sounds right outside my driver's side window. My arm comes down on the horn, blowing a sharp blast that echoes through the garage in a distorted wave. I jump again, my nerves on edge.

Diego notices. A smirk stretches across his handsome face, wicked humor reflecting in his eyes. "Distracted thinking about me, goddess?"

"You wish." I roll my eyes, scowling at him.

"I do," he says, so softly I almost don't hear the words at all. His gaze drops, rolling over me like a heatwave.

I fight the urge to lay my arms across my chest to hide my hard nipples, refusing to give him the satisfaction. "My eyes are up here, Butera," I growl, snapping my fingers instead.

He slowly lifts his gaze, his smirk growing. "I'm aware, Athena. But I wasn't looking for your eyes. I was imagining what your tits look like in that pretty little top. I'll be fucking my hand to the fantasy later."

I grab the door handle, shoving it open hard enough to send him reeling back a step when it connects with his thigh. He doesn't even flinch, the bastard. His laughter floats through the garage, lifting little hairs at the nape of my neck.

I grab my bag and slide from the car, scowling up at him the entire time as if that'll keep him from coming too close. Let's be real, though. Diego Butera is a wild animal. And I think I may be his prey.

It's supposed to be the other way around. I'm supposed to be the hunter. He's supposed to be the hunted. That's the way law enforcement works. But this man hasn't been hunted a day in his life. He's never run from anyone or anything. He's in charge and he knows it. I won't win in a power struggle. We both know I don't even stand a chance.

But I'm not helpless against him, either. He may overpower me, but he can't outwit me. He wants something from me, and that makes him vulnerable too. If he wants to play cat and mouse, I'll let him play. He can chase me and

corner me and tease me all he wants. But every time he thinks he's caught me, he'll find out just how wrong he is.

"Keep dreaming, Butera," I say sweetly, batting my lashes as I step right up to him, so close I feel the heat of his body against mine. "You'll never touch me. I'll never belong to you. I'm not a toy for you to play with until you get bored." I meet his gaze. "You don't scare me."

He growls, reaching for me, but I quickly sidestep him, putting distance between us. "Remember you said that when I have you screaming you belong to me so loud your voice breaks, Athena," he warns me. "Remember it when I teach you just how much you like being my obedient little toy."

"Whatever you say," I call over my shoulder, heading toward the elevators. "Which way to your office, Butera? I don't have all day."

He mutters something behind me in Italian and then his footsteps echo across the garage. Within seconds, he's at my side, striding toward the elevator. The bottom of his coat brushes my hand, sending a shiver through me. If he notices, he doesn't say anything.

He doesn't speak again until we're crowded onto the elevator, our reflections bouncing back at us from every direction. We don't fit together... the petite, curvy African American federal agent, and the tall, muscular Italian criminal. We're opposites in every way. His reflection screams danger. Mine promises sunshine and sweetness. And yet, we look good together, as if maybe we don't fit together so oddly, after all.

"You look incredible," he murmurs as if reading my mind. "Pink is your color."

"Black suits you." I lift my brows, sending him a pointed look as the elevator shudders to a start. "Very devilish."

"You think I'm the devil, *bella*?"

"If the horns fit." I shrug, adjusting my bag over my arm.

He throws his head back, laughing loudly. "I'm merely a lawyer, Athena. I believe we're still a few levels above Satan."

"Perhaps. But I believe murderers are on the same level, are they not?" I meet his gaze, unflinching. "What about serial murderers? Surely they've reached a special level of hell."

"Ah. And how many murders do you think I've committed?"

"By my count? Close to twenty. By the FBI's count? Fewer than that," I admit. "But I'm sure we've both missing a few names on our lists." I tip my head to the side, eyeing him critically. "You could do me a favor and give them to me."

"Well, there was Napoleon last year." He taps his lips. "And I believe Rasputin the year before that. Bin Laden may be on the list too, but I'd have to check with the military on that one."

"I suppose you want to claim credit for Hitler too while you're at it?"

"Might as well." He shrugs magnanimously.

"Cute. Real cute." I scowl at him. "What about Tommaso Genovese? Giovanni Barone? Carlo Mancini? Salvatore Leone?"

The elevator grinds to a halt on the top floor, vibrating beneath my feet. I throw my hand out, grasping at the wall to steady myself. At least, I mean to press my hand against the wall. Instead, I grab a handful of Diego's fancy coat and tie.

"Sor—" I move to snatch my hand away as soon as I feel the steady thump of his heart beneath my fingers.

Faster than I can process, he has me by the wrist, crowding me up against the wall. His lips rake down the side of my throat as he cranes my head back

with his free hand. His erection grinds against my ass, hard and hot and heavy.

Good grief. He's massive.

"Next time you touch me, you better be prepared for what comes next, *bella*," he growls, nipping my throat. "I'm not some little boy you can tease. You fuck with me; I'll have you on your back, begging me to keep fucking you."

"It was an accident."

"Yeah?" His tongue wraps around my earlobe as he grinds his erection into me again. "Lie to yourself, Athena. Don't lie to me. You grabbed exactly what you intended to grab."

Did I? Am I lying to myself?

"It was an accident," I growl again, using his hold on my wrist to yank him into me. The unexpected move gives me a split second. I jab my elbow into his ribcage and then bring my heel down on his foot as hard as I can.

"*Cazzo!*" he swears, grabbing for me as I slip away from him. His eyes glitter with anger and something darker as he spins to face me...some twisted desire that sends a wave of lava straight into my veins.

God help me. This man likes it rough. He lives for the pain. And I think he has every intention of teaching me to love it too.

"Don't touch me again, Diego," I warn him. "Next time, I'll shoot you in the freaking leg."

He doesn't say anything as he straightens his suit and pushes the button to open the elevator doors. We just stare at each other, locked in some silent battle of wills, neither willing to back down, neither willing to admit defeat.

"Don't make threats you aren't willing to follow through on, Athena," he says as the doors open. "Someday, it may cost you more than you're willing

to lose."

"What does that mean?" I demand, following him off the elevator.

"It means you're lucky I'm a gentleman, or I'd be demonstrating how little you meant that threat," he says over his shoulder.

"I meant i..." I trail off as we emerge into his office, blinking. I knew he was a high-powered attorney. He works for the mafia, for God's sake. But holy cow. His office drips wealth, making no secret of the fact that it's intended to leave a lasting impression on those who step through the doors. Expensive art hangs from the walls, with leather-bound legal reference books scattered artfully around shelves. One entire wall is dominated by a smartboard and conference table. The other houses his desk, with views of the city and Lake Michigan glittering below.

"Your elevator leads directly to your office?"

"Perks of the jobs," he says, striding toward the door to the outer office. He pokes his head out, conversing quietly with a man seated at the desk there. I've been keeping an eye on the building for the last several days...long enough to know Diego's secretary is Ricci Morano, one of Rafe Valentino's lieutenants.

I take a minute to get my bearings. Not that it does me much good. I knew Diego was wealthy. His clients are some of the richest criminals in the world. But I don't think I understood exactly what that meant until just now. He isn't simply well-off. He's obscenely rich, judging by the looks of this place.

Why did he start passing intel to the FBI? I thought maybe it was a crisis of morality, but judging by this place, I'd say he has no problems with the things they do. He certainly doesn't seem to have any problems lining his pockets with their dirty money. So what does that leave?

Amalia. It leaves *Amalia*. Whatever happened, whatever led him to us, I

think it involves her.

The door closes with a click, sending my heart into overdrive.

I watch him warily as he strides toward his desk, yanking his jacket off as he goes.

"I believe you had questions for me," he says, motioning for me to come to him. "You might as well ask so we can get this whole farce out of the way."

"What farce?" I cross toward him.

"You playing the dutiful little FBI agent. Me evading your questions. Both of us ignoring why you're really here." Another devilish smile dances at his lips. "Isn't that precisely how this is going to go, goddess?"

"I'm not playing at anything, Diego. I am an FBI agent."

"But not a dutiful one."

I stop behind the wingback leather chair situated across from his desk. "You may like to break the rules and the law, but not everyone has the same audacious lack of regard for the rule of law."

He tips his head to the side, regarding me in silence. "You think I have no regard for the rule of law?"

"Yes. Precisely."

"You're mistaken, Athena," he says quietly. "I hold the law in high regard. I just happen to be bound by oaths far older and far more unforgiving. The rule of law only works for those who work within it. For those who don't, it's an ineffective means of control. Ours are far more...persuasive."

"At least you're still willing to admit the mafia exists," I mutter, dropping heavily into the chair across from him. I set my bag on the floor at my feet, straightening. "Most of you refuse to even do that."

"Alexa, what's the mafia?" he says, humor dancing in his eyes.

I narrow mine at him, making him chuckle.

"I was an informant, Athena. We're past me pretending the mafia isn't real."

"Why did you decide to start sharing information?" I lean back, placing my hands in my lap as if we're having a polite conversation.

"It suited my purposes."

"And what were those purposes?"

"To share certain information."

"And cooperating no longer suits your purposes?"

"Astute observation, *bella*." He grins at me, not taking this seriously at all.

"Stop calling me that."

"Why?" His brows wing together. "And don't dare say because it isn't true, or you'll feel the sting of my hand against your gorgeous ass before you can scream for help."

"Because...because it's inappropriate," I manage to stutter, caught off-guard by his response yet again. He keeps doing that, saying things I don't expect, doing things I'm not prepared for him to do. There is no finding my footing with this man when he yanks the rug out from beneath me every time I think I'm finally on solid ground again.

I don't have to ask him if he means it to know he does. He thinks I'm beautiful. When is the last time someone said that to me? Aside from Cornerstore Joe, who shouts it every morning when I walk past, it's been a while. I know I'm not an ugly duckling, but I've never put in effort, either. In this line of work, putting in effort is just asking for trouble.

Beautiful women aren't taken seriously in male-dominated careers. Someone inevitably asks them out, and then things get complicated and awkward and weird at the office. I wanted to avoid all of that, especially since I'm one of very few women in this field office. So I rarely wear more

than a coat of mascara, and my hair is usually pulled back in a bun. I'm cute on a good day.

"The truth is inappropriate?" he asks, playing dumb even though he's far from that.

"You know what I mean, Diego. Calling me pet names isn't appropriate. We aren't friends. We aren't dating. I'm here in an official capacity. You're under investigation."

"For what, precisely?" He cocks a brow. "Your people did nothing with any of the intel I gave them. Why the hell would I continue wasting my time and risking myself?"

"Building cases takes time. You know this."

"And what happens in the meantime, *bella*?" he asks. "People die bloody. Wars and conflicts continue. Street life goes on the same as always. The wheels of justice turn so goddamn slowly, they might as well not turn at all where we're concerned. By the time your people get around to dealing with a problem, we've already handled it and five others."

"Is that what happened to Tommaso Genovese? You *handled* him?"

"Someone did." Diego shrugs. "Like I told you yesterday, he was a rabid dog. He got put down like a rabid dog. That's how the mafia law works, *bella*."

"Who killed him, Diego?"

"He killed himself."

I growl in frustration. "He didn't commit suicide and you know he didn't."

"Everything is black and white to you," he says with a shake of his head. "I didn't say he committed suicide. I said he killed himself. His actions got him killed, *bella*. He knew what he risked when he did the things he did. He chose to do them anyway. You know the risks and assume the consequences if you

fail. And you don't betray your own people. That's mafia law, Athena. He broke it. He reaped what he sowed, the same as anyone else who does the same."

"Who did he betray?" He has pieces I'm missing, knows things I don't. But he's talking around them, leaving giant holes in the middle that leave the picture muddied and unclear. "Explain it to me, Diego. I can't help you if you don't."

"I don't recall asking for your help, *bella*." A slow smirk overtakes his face as his gaze roves down my body. "Not with that anyway. If you want to discuss the other thing, however...."

"Fine, let's discuss that then." I hop to my feet, knocking my bag over in the process. My clumsy fingers go to the buttons on my jacket, slipping them through the holes.

"What are you doing, goddess?" For the first time, he seems wary as he watches me.

"Since you want to see them so badly, we might as well get it over with." I strip my arms out of the jacket, frustrated and flustered and running on pure annoyance. I have no idea what I'm doing, but I'm out of ideas here. I drop the jacket in the chair, leaving me in nothing but a skirt and slinky blouse. "Is this what you wanted to see, Diego?"

"Not quite," he murmurs, his gaze locked on my chest. "But it's a start, *bella*." His tongue touches his bottom lip before his eyes drift up to mine. "Your nipples are hard."

"I'm cold," I lie. "Who did Genovese betray?"

"Liar. You aren't cold. You want me." He shifts around in his chair, his hands disappearing from sight. "He betrayed his own people. Half of those

bodies you're trying so hard to pin on me belong to him. Pinch your nipples, Athena. Let me see how you like to be touched."

"You're saying he killed his own people?"

"Pinch your nipples," he growls at me.

My stomach clenches, heat washing through me. That menacing growl is sexy as hell. It's also one I won't be obeying. This isn't how I want to get my answers. This isn't who I am. I won't pretend to be that woman, not even for every secret he holds.

"Don't tell me what to do, Diego. I don't answer to you." I toss my head, sending him a haughty look. "Right now, you answer to me. In case you forgot, I'm the one holding the key to your freedom in my hand, not the other way around."

"And I hold your safety in mine."

I hold my arms out wide, making myself a target. "Take a shot then."

"Busy," he growls.

Only then do I realize he still has his hands under the desk. Only then do I see the sweat beaded along his forehead and the way he's moving.

My legs tremble, shock and desire crashing together like cymbals in my chest. "Diego, are you...?" I can't bring myself to finish the question.

He doesn't answer. Instead, he pushes away from the desk, rising to his feet with his fist wrapped around his massive erection.

I grasp onto the back of the chair to keep myself upright.

"Watch me while I do it, *bella*," he demands, unrepentant and unashamed. "You're the reason he's this fucking hard."

I stare at his erection, transfixed by the way he grips himself in his fist. He's rough with himself, squeezing tight as he works his hand over his cock, getting himself off. I've never been with a man before. Dating hasn't ever

been a priority in my life. But I have seen porn. And he certainly measures up.

"D-does it hurt?" I whisper, my tongue skirting across my bottom lip as I watch him. My heart hammers against my ribcage, sending pulse after pulse of desire pinging through my veins. I shouldn't be watching this. I shouldn't allow this to happen. And yet my feet are rooted to the ground. And yet I can't look away. I don't want to look away.

"Fuck yes," he rasps. "The only thing that's going to make it any better is getting inside you. Once you're choking on my cock or coming all over it, the pain will stop. Until then, this is as close to heaven as I'll ever get."

"Diego, I..." *I want to touch it. Let me help you.*

I say neither of those things.

"Pinch your nipples, *bella*. Let me hear you moaning for me," he grits out.

This time, I give him what he wants. Because, this time, there are no reciprocals attached. This isn't about getting answers now. It's not about using my body to get what I want. This is simply about me and him and the current seething between us. It's dark and malevolent and may just burn us both to ash...but it's vast and powerful all the same.

"Goddamn," he groans, his fist flying over his erection as my hands close over my breasts, pushing them together. "I can't wait to get my dick between those."

I run my thumbs over my nipples, gasping as little sparks shoot straight to my clit. The sensation is heightened, more intense than usual. I pinch, rolling both nipples between my thumbs and forefingers.

"Feels good, doesn't it, goddess?"

"Yes," I gasp, unable to deny the truth. Everything about this is wrong, but I love the way it feels. It's our own little secret, something no one ever has to

know. I won't tell them that he jerked off in front of me. He won't tell them that I loved every minute of it. We'll go back to our lives like it never happened, united only by this one moment in time.

Liar, liar, pants on fire.

I cram that little voice down into the deep, dark recesses of my mind, rolling my nipples between my fingers again.

"Fuck, come here."

I stumble toward him on trembling legs, unable to resist the allure of his gritty voice and torrid gaze. They're entrancing, pulling me deeper under his spell. I stumble to a stop on the far side of his desk, an arm's length from him.

He closes the space between us, pulling me up against him. His mouth comes down on mine. I gasp in shock. It's the only invitation he needs to slip beneath my defenses. His tongue dips into my mouth, his kiss hot and hard, full of searing passion.

I cling to him, fingers digging into his shoulders, heart beating a thousand miles a minute. He annihilates me with a single kiss, laying my entire world to waste. And he does it with his cock in his hand, the hard ridge of it caught between us. I feel him gripping it, feel every move he makes.

He kisses me until I bow beneath him, and break.

His other hand slips beneath the hem of my skirt. He doesn't ask permission. We both know he doesn't have to ask, damn him. It's his to take...and we both know that, too.

"Diego!" I gasp, choking on his name as he slips my panties to the side, touching me for the first time. I'm drenched, shamefully so. And already trembling on the edge of a massive orgasm.

"Oh, *bella*. Look how wet you are," he breathes against my lips. "You're going to make it real easy to take what belongs to me, aren't you?"

"I...I..."

He parts my folds with a fingertip, running it in a circle around my clit. "Come before I decide to see how good you look on your knees with my dick down your perfect throat, Athena," he demands, sucking my bottom lip into his mouth. He grinds his thumb against my clit, relentlessly, ruthlessly pushing me toward the edge of the cliff.

I push against his shoulders, trying like hell to get him to do...something. Stop? Go slower? Give me a minute to catch my breath? I don't know. I just know the world is spinning and I have no idea which way is up. But he's ruthless in his quest to make me come.

"Come, *bella*. Don't make me say it again." His teeth sink into my lip in a stinging bite. "I'm not the kind of man who asks nicely. If I have to say it again, it'll be with you on your back and my hand around your throat."

I shout his name as pain mingles with pleasure, tossing me over the edge. My legs go weak. The world goes black. I lose my voice and my mind simultaneously as wave after wave of pleasure crashes down over me, drowning me in euphoria.

Diego groans, canting his hips away. A few seconds later, wetness splashes against my abdomen and I realize why. He's coming too. I peel my eyes open in time to see the searing look of possession stamped across his face.

God help me. This man will consume me if I let him. He'll lead me into the dark and destroy me if I let him. And for a moment... I can't think of a single reason not to let him. Not even one.

For the first time since I was assigned this case, I know fear. *Real* fear.

It drives me as I stumble away from him, bumping into the desk.

"Athena."

"Stay away from me," I whisper, throwing my hands up to ward him off.

"Don't even think about touching me, Diego." I scurry backward away from the desk, keeping a wary eye on him as I stoop to grab my bag from the floor.

He watches me, trying to clean his hands off and tuck himself back into his pants at the same time. "Athena, what...?"

I grab my bag and hurry toward the door, fleeing like the hounds of hell are chasing me. When he shouts my name, I'm not entirely convinced they aren't. But I manage to throw myself into the elevator and stab the button to close the doors before he catches me.

My last sight of him is of his thunderous expression as he strides across the office toward me, my name still on his lips. And then the doors close, granting me safety.

At least for the moment.

Chapter Five



Diego

"Can we just get this shit over with already?" I growl, glaring across the console at Mattia. "Jesus Christ. We've been out here for four hours already. If the *stronzo* was going to make a move, he would have done so by now."

Mattia's only response to my outburst is an arched brow.

"Fuck." I throw myself back against the seat in his SUV, exhaling a breath. "Sorry."

It's not his fault I'm in a bad mood. It's not even his fault we're out here, tailing Domingo Borelli. He's become a problem for us, so we're handling him the easy way.

By letting the FBI deal with him.

If they're watching me, as soon as they see me talking to him, he'll become the next man on their radar. There isn't anything he can tell them about us, but if they dig even a little, they'll find a treasure trove of dirty laundry in his closet. Enough to make sure he's no longer a problem for us.

We keep our hands clean. He gets handled. It's shady as hell, but the other option involves sinking him to the bottom of the river. Considering that I'm already on the FBI's radar, it's not a viable option at the moment.

"Feel better?" Mattia asks.

"Fuck no."

His soft chuckle floats across the SUV to me. "You're moody as fuck."

He's not wrong. I've been an irritable bastard for the last three days...ever since Athena fled my office after coming all over my hand. She hasn't been back since and it's driving me fucking crazy.

I never thought I'd live to see the day I wanted the FBI up in my face, but here I am. Mad as hell that she ghosted me. I'm half-tempted to show up at her office myself. In fact, that's precisely my plan if she doesn't materialize by tomorrow.

She's had more than enough time to wrap her head around what happened between us. I'm not inclined to give her more. Either she comes to me, or I'm going to her. It's as simple as that.

"Things didn't go well with the FBI agent?"

I roll my head to the side, looking at Mattia. "Are we gossiping about my love life now, motherfucker?"

"Your love life?" Genuine surprise flickers in his eyes.

Fuck.

"I thought this was a means to an end for you."

"It is," I mutter.

Mattia waits me out.

"Maybe." I sigh.

"You like her."

"Does it matter?" I shrug, not willing to give up that info, not even to Mattia. The simple fact is, she's gotten under my skin in a major way. She's been on my mind non-fucking-stop since I met her. I'm mad as hell that she ran the other day, but I'm worried about her too.

I don't worry about anyone, least of all a fucking fed. Yet I can't stop worrying about this one. Is she safe? Is she thinking of me? Has anyone put their fucking hands on her?

I'll burn this city to the ground if they have.

Mattia and I sit in silence for a good five minutes, watching the brownstone across the street, before he's compelled to speak again. "Not saying it's a good

idea to fall for a cop," he murmurs. "But if she matters to you, it matters."

"Yeah, I know," I sigh, pinching the bridge of my nose. The only question is what the fuck I'm going to do about it. Before I have time to figure it out, Domingo's front door opens. "There's the little *coglione*."

"Good." Mattia pops open his door, his gaze already focused on Domingo. "Let's go frighten the neighborhood children into behaving."



"I'm here to see Agent White," I announce, dropping my ID onto the desk at the FBI's headquarters on West Roosevelt.

The clean-cut desk agent gives me a cursory glance, and then his gaze falls to my ID, his interest already waning. I clock the instant he reads my name.

"Holy shit." His gaze jumps back to my face as he sits upright. "Uh, you want to see who?"

"Agent Athena White." I drum my fingers against the top of the desk, feinting boredom. "I believe she's been looking for me."

He snatches the phone from the desk, quickly dialing an extension. To his credit, he keeps his eyes on me. I note what numbers he punches in, just in case I need them in the future, and then listen as he informs my little goddess that I'm standing at the front desk waiting for her.

I don't know what she says in return, but judging by the way the desk agent pales slightly, I'm guessing it's full of vitriol and probably threats on my life. I smile at the thought, my dick lengthening in my pants.

Christ, I've missed her fiery little ass.

I should have come after her the day she ran out on me, but I wanted to give her a little time to stew. Part of me hopes she's spent it looking over her shoulder, just waiting for me to appear. The other part hopes she's spent it coming to terms with the fact that she's powerfully attracted to me.

I'm not foolish enough to believe she's spent the time doing either. Knowing her, she's spent it convincing herself that what happened between us was a fluke, a one-time occurrence that will never happen again. I can't wait to disabuse her of that notion. It will be happening again. And again and again and again.

I adjust her jacket over my arm, almost regretting what I'm going to do to her today. If her bosses don't have doubts about her yet, they will by the time I leave this office. I'm fully aware that makes me a prick. I just don't care. I accepted that I'm going to hell long ago. But at least she'll be in my bed while I'm here on earth. An eternity of torment is a small price to pay for that pleasure.

"She'll be down in a moment," Desk Agent says. "You can wait here."

I jerk my chin in a nod, sliding my ID off the desk while he writes my name across a name tag for me. As soon as he slides it over, I put it on, amused by the thought of strolling the halls with it stuck to my chest. I doubt Athena will be, however. I'm guessing this is the last place she wants me right now.

Too bad for her. I have no intention of going anywhere unless she's at my side, playing my little queen.

Rafe isn't going to like it. Fuck. He's going to *hate* it. But I'm banking on

his feelings for my sister staying his hand.

Cazzo. What a tangled web we weave.

There are half a dozen other people in the lobby aside from the desk agent. They all do that fucking cop thing where they watch me without being obvious about it. Which only makes it more obvious since their gazes tend to follow the same patterns. Like the grizzled motherfucker standing near the bathrooms with a receptionist. He looks at his watch, then the doors, then the elevators, then me, before doing the same thing in reverse. It'd be less obvious if he blatantly stared.

I pretend not to notice any of the looks, instead toying with my phone. I'm sure they'd love to get their hands on it, but it's useless to them. Mattia isn't the only one who doesn't trust phones.

Less than ten minutes later, Athena emerges from the elevator on the far side of the lobby, looking entirely too fucking beautiful in her black pantsuit. Most of her hair is pulled back in a bun, but long pieces curl around her face, framing it. Her heels click across the FBI crest on the tile floor as she stomps toward me, clearly pissed.

"Mr. Butera. I don't recall having an appointment with you today."

"Hello, Athena," I purr, making no secret of the fact that I'm eyeing her up and down. Jesus. Who can blame me when she looks as good as she does? I lift her jacket, making sure everyone in the lobby sees it. All eyes are on us anyway. "I thought you might like this back. You left it at my place after our last...encounter."

Everyone goes silent.

"How kind of you." Her eyes shoot off sparks of fury. "Since you're here, maybe you can answer a few questions that we didn't cover at our last meeting at your law office."

She sashays her sweet ass toward me, plucking the jacket out of my hands as if she isn't bothered at all by my insinuation. She's good, I'll give her that. But her eyes let me know exactly how she feels. If we were alone right now, she might actually follow through on her threat to shoot me.

Goddamn, she's incredible. The FBI doesn't deserve her. They don't even know what to do with a woman like her.

"Did my information about Genovese not check out?" I ask. We both know she already looked into what I told her. I didn't kill Genovese's men. He did. He also started the conflict that ultimately cost his life.

"I have additional questions. Follow me." She takes off toward the elevators without another word.

I smirk, following behind her. My dick is rock hard as I watch the way her ass sways in her pants. One day very soon, I'm going to bend her over and eat both of her holes before I teach her how much she loves having my dick between her round cheeks.

She stabs the button to recall the elevator like it personally assaulted her.

"Someone's cranky," I whisper.

She responds with a death glare.

My smile grows.

The handful of agents in the lobby are still dead silent, watching the two of us. Not a single one of the motherfuckers offers to sit in on the meeting for her safety. To these people, I'm the next thing to a serial killer. Worse, perhaps. But not one of the assholes seems to give a flying fuck if Athena is alone with me.

No, they don't deserve her. They don't even know how to protect her properly.

The elevator finally descends to the lobby. Two agents step off. The eldest

of the two—a bulky bastard with a square jaw and lines around his eyes—runs right into Athena, knocking her back a step. I recognize him on sight.

James Tackett, one of the first assholes they sent to try to convince me to talk. To pricks like him, the only good criminal is a dead criminal. He made no secret of the fact that he would have loved to put a bullet between my eyes if he could have found a reason. Funny thing about men like him...the same propensity for violence runs in his blood that runs in ours. The only difference is that we're honest about who we are. Men like him, the dirty cops who thrive on chaos and violence, hide behind a badge and pretend they're righteous.

He grunts, intending to step around Athena and continue on his merry way without so much as an apology.

Fuck that.

I step into his path, blocking him.

"Watch where you're going," I warn him.

Hard blue eyes snap up to mine. "Excuse me?"

"Mr. Butera."

"I said watch where you're going, Tackett. You walked right into her."

"She was blocking the elevator."

"Mr. Butera," Athena says again.

"So was I, yet you didn't plow into me. You plowed into her. So how about you at least pretend like you were taught manners and apologize?"

The *stronzo* shifts his gaze from me to Athena and then back to me. "My apologies," he practically spits.

"To her," I growl, spearing him with a contemptuous look. "You apologize *to her*."

"My apologies, White," he growls at her. "Now, can you get your fucking

guard dog out of my way? Some of us have actual work to do."

"Sure." Athena smiles brightly. "Good luck with your *actual* work. I hope it's as easy for you as getting Mr. Butera here to come in and talk was for me. Honestly, I don't know why you guys acted like getting him to talk was so hard. He's been perfectly cooperative." She bats her lashes as Tackett's face falls into a mask of fury.

I laugh in his face, amused as hell. She doesn't need me to defend her. She's capable of doing it herself. That doesn't mean I won't put a motherfucker in his place for disrespecting her. No one treats her like this *pezzo di merda* just did and gets to walk away from it unscathed.

"That's because you aren't an ignorant prick like this motherfucker," I say just loud enough for him to hear.

"Fucking murderer," he mutters under his breath.

I step around him onto the elevator, making a mental note to pay him a visit later. He's a fucking bully and a coward. Maybe I'll let him live long enough to teach him how to speak to women. Or maybe I'll rip his goddamn throat out.

The elevator doors slide closed as Athena jabs the button for the third floor.

"Does Tackett treat you like that often?"

"Are you serious right now?" she hisses at the same time, whirling to face me. "You showed up at my *office*?"

"You're avoiding me."

"I've been busy," she lies.

"Interesting."

"What?"

"You managed to graduate from the FBI Academy, but you're a terrible liar."

"I'm not lying. I've been busy."

"Doing what?"

"My job, Diego." She rolls her eyes as if that should be obvious. "I don't see how you forgot about it considering you're currently in my building."

"Don't be a smart-ass, *bella*."

"Who, me? Never."

I smile, unable to help myself. "You're cute when you're pissed."

"Don't." Her warning reflects in her eyes.

I decide to heed it for the moment since we're on a public elevator. "You didn't answer my question."

"What question?"

"Does James Tackett treat you with such disrespect often?"

She snorts indelicately. "Tackett treats everyone with disrespect, Diego. He thinks this is his world and we just live in it."

"I see."

"What does that mean?" She narrows her eyes on me, suddenly suspicious.

"And why are you asking?"

"Curiosity."

"Now who's lying?"

The elevator arrives on her floor, sparing me from responding. She shoots me another death glare and then marches off. Apparently, word has traveled ahead that I'm in the building because the entire floor has found an excuse to congregate around the receptionist's desk.

Athena mutters a curse under her breath when she sees everyone.

No one tries to say anything to me. No one even speaks to her. They just watch us parade past like we're goddamn bugs under a microscope. None of them seem particularly pleased that I'm here.

I scowl, beginning to put the pieces together. There's a reason this is Athena's first RICO case and she's working it alone. I'm guessing this is a trial by fire and they're praying she fails. It's a hell of a grim realization. Because my position has suddenly become uncomfortably untenable.

If she succeeds, Rafe will have no choice but to kill her to silence her. If she fails, these pricks get exactly what they want. One way or another, she loses.

I shouldn't care about that. I'm not supposed to care. And yet I do, goddamn it. I care all too much about this fiery little FBI agent and what happens to her. I've cared since she cornered me in the fucking parking garage like a ferocious little kitten.

She stomps into a small interview room, holding the door wide for me to enter.

I step through and glance around. It's little more than a closet. The only things inside are a table, three chairs, and an ancient coffee pot that's seen so much use the glass is permanently stained. A camera hangs in the corner.

So we aren't free to talk here. Fuck that.

"I'd like to record this interview," she says, closing the door behind her.

"Do I have a choice?"

"You always have a choice, Diego." She rolls her eyes.

"Is the camera on?"

"Yes, but it doesn't pick up audio unless you agree to let me record."

"Good. Turn it off, *bella*."

"I just told you it's not recording audio." She scowls, though we both know she isn't surprised. We also both know she only asked to record this meeting out of sheer desperation. She's terrified she won't be able to resist me if we're alone. Three days wasn't long enough for her to convince herself that the other day was a fluke.

"And I told you to turn it off." I meet her gaze. "Unless you want to explain to your bosses why you were wrapped in my arms while I was dry-humping you against the fucking wall. Your choice."

She stares at me for a full five count, trying to assess if I'm serious or not.

"One..."

"Infuriating, arrogant, pain in my..." she mutters, stomping toward the table. She slips her hand underneath the side, hitting what I'm guessing is a hidden control for the camera before she whirls around to face me again.

"Happy now?"

I'm at her side in two steps, dragging her into my arms.

She doesn't try to stop me. She doesn't even tell me no. I boost her up into my arms, planting her back against the wall as I crash my mouth down on hers, stealing her breath. She tastes like peppermint and sin.

"Goddamn," I growl, grinding my dick against her hot little cunt as her hands sink into my hair, pulling hard. "You're trying to get yourself fucked right here, aren't you?"

"No," she lies.

"Liar." I bite her lip. "Did you dream about me, *bella*?"

"No. I haven't thought about you at all."

"No? I bet your panties tell a different story, Athena." I drag my lips across her cheek and then down her throat, not giving a fuck if anyone walks in and catches us. Let them. It'll solve my problems. "I smell how fucking hot you are for me right now."

"I can't stand you."

"You wish that was true."

She pulls my hair again.

I grind my dick against her again, breathing her in. "Fuck, you smell good."

"You smell like trouble."

I chuckle against her skin, my hands digging into her luscious ass. "Baby, I'm your favorite kind of trouble and you know it."

"Whatever," she mumbles.

I tip her head back, kissing her once more. She goes pliant in my arms this time, her body softening. When I grind my dick against her again, she circles her hips, a soft moan pulled from deep in her chest.

"You want to come, *bella*? Right here, right now?"

"I..." Fear and excitement war in her eyes. She wants it, but she's scared.

I push like the asshole I am, dragging her out of her comfort zone. It's what she wants. She's just too fucking afraid to reach for it. Her heart and body are beginning to catch on, but her mind isn't done rebelling against the thought of us yet. Too bad.

I balance her on my thighs, holding her gaze captive as I quickly undo her pants. Her breathing picks up speed, her eyes darting toward the door and then back to me.

"Diego..."

"Don't scream and no one has to know, *bella*."

She bites her lip, the pulse in her throat fluttering wildly.

I slip my hand into her pants, my eyes locked on her face the whole time. As soon as I touch her, the fear disappears. She arches upward, moaning. Goddamn, she's beautiful.

"Don't scream," I remind her, circling her hard little clit with my finger.

She nods, catching her bottom lip between her teeth to keep herself quiet.

I don't drag it out. As much as I need her out of the FBI...I don't want it to be this way. I won't allow anyone to see her like this except for me. Her

pleasure is for me alone. I own it. I control it. I'll work like a fucking dog to earn every drop of it.

I play with her, rubbing her clit in tight circles until she's mewling in my arms, unable to stay still. Her sounds grow louder, her eyes dazed and glossy. One day, I'm going to fuck her in front of a mirror so she sees herself like this.

"Diego, I...I..."

"Come," I growl. "*Subito.*"

Her eyes lock with mine as she unravels, coming with a soft groan. My cock throbs, begging for attention as she squirms and shivers her way through it, trying like hell to keep quiet and not let anyone know what's happening in here.

Somehow, she manages it. We don't get caught.



"That can't happen again," she says a few minutes later, pressing her hands to her cheeks as she stares at me across the table.

"Don't make me prove you wrong right here and now, *bella*. I think we've tempted fate enough for one day." She may think she's strong enough to resist me, but deep down, she knows she isn't. It's the only reason she's trying to

fucking hard to establish that boundary. She doesn't trust herself not to cross it.

I'm not playing by her rules, though. I'm making my own.

She drops her hands, her eyes narrowing. "Did you come all the way here just to piss me off?"

"No." I grin, lacing my fingers together behind my head. "That's just an added bonus."

"I can't stand you."

"Do you want me to prove just how much you can stand me, Athena?" I quirk a brow. "It's not my bosses on the other side of that door."

She growls in wordless frustration. "Why are you here, Diego?"

"You know why I'm here, *bella*. You ran out on me."

She actually squirms in her seat, her gaze sliding away from mine. "I wonder why?" she mutters under her breath.

"I know why. You like me and that scares the hell out of you."

"I don't like you."

"No? Your juices on my hand say different, goddess."

"We are *not* talking about this. I have questions for you."

"So do I. Why are you on this case?"

"Because it's my job."

"Why this case? Why you, specifically?" I press, leaning back in my chair, trying to get a read on her.

"Why not me?"

"They want you to fail, don't they?"

The faint tremble in her hand is all the answer I need.

"*Cazzo!*" I growl, my temper rising. "They gave it to you because they knew you would fail, just like every other agent has for the last year."

She lifts her head, meeting my gaze. "It doesn't matter what they want because I'm not every other agent, Diego. I'm not going to fail."

She says it with so much confidence my fucking cock turns to steel. Competing desires war for dominion. Part of me wants to scoop her up and kiss the shit out of her again. The other part wants to bend her over and spank the hell out of her.

Does she even know what's at stake here? Not my freedom, but her life? A delicate truce we've spent the last year forging between the five families? If we go down now, this entire city will fall to chaos, and no one will be able to do a damn thing to stop it. Rafe and his alliances are all that hold the other families in check. If he's removed from the board now, the other families will wage war to claim his throne.

Chicago hasn't seen an actual mafia war in decades. They've never seen one like this. Mexico has. The cartel wars there have torn entire parts of the country apart. I doubt this city will fare much better.

In this moment, though, that isn't what guides me. It's *her* future, *her* fate that worries me. Somewhere over the course of the last few days, she's become necessary to my survival. How? When? I don't need anything. I don't get close to anyone. And yet this curvy little spitfire just blew up every fucking corner of my life.

Everything is different, yet it all remains the same. To save her life, I have to destroy her world.

"I'll tell you what you want to know," I growl. It's not a lie. I will tell her. But by the time I do, she'll be in too deep to get back out again. It's the only way she survives this. At the end of the day, I need her alive more than I need her to stick it to these motherfuckers. Maybe one day, she'll see it the same.

"I'll answer every one of your questions if it's what you want. But I want something first."

"What?" She eyes me suspiciously, just waiting for the other shoe to drop.

I let it fall like a fucking anvil.

"You," I state succinctly. "I want twenty-four hours with you."

"No."

"Fine." I shrug like it doesn't make a difference to me at all. "Then I wish you the best." I rise to my feet and cross to the door, placing my hand on the knob.

"Wait!"

I pause, making no move to turn back around.

"I'll do it," she growls.

A smile curves my lips, satisfaction coursing through me.

Oh, rabbit. I've caught you now.

Chapter Six



Athena

"I'll do it. But I want proof that you mean it," I demand, staring at Diego across the claustrophobic interview room. "You have to give me something."

I've spent weeks pouring over his file. He's smart, calculating, and methodical. There's always a reason behind everything he does, some bigger plan in the works. I think it's been that way his entire life.

He put himself through law school with a purpose. He came to the FBI with a purpose. And he quit informing for a reason. If he's offering to talk now, it's not simply because he wants to spend twenty-four hours with me. He's up to something.

Yet again, he holds all the cards, and I'm stumbling in the dark.

It's not a comfortable position to be in with a man like him, but it's quickly becoming the status quo.

"Have you looked into what I told you about Genovese?"

"Maybe." I have, and he wasn't lying. Genovese's grandson more or less confirmed the intel.

Diego jerks his chin in a nod. "He wanted the Valentinos to think I killed them, and wanted the other families to believe Valentino ordered their executions."

"Why?" I demand, my heart pounding.

"You already know the answer to that question, *bella*," he says quietly. "I told you the day we met."

He was a rabid dog. He was born a rabid dog and died a rabid dog.

"He wanted war?"

"He wanted the throne." Hatred flickers in Diego's obsidian eyes. "And he was willing to do anything to get it."

"Including starting a war," I say, nodding. Of course. That's how we missed it. It was a power grab, planned in secret until he was ready to strike. Nothing short of removing Tommaso Genovese from the board would have stopped it. "Why you?" I scrutinize Diego's expression, looking for any sign that he's not being honest with me. "Why did he want the Valentinos to think you were behind the deaths?"

"My place, seven tonight," he says. "I'll tell you then."

"I'm not sleeping with you."

"Who said anything about sleeping?" He smirks. "A deal is a deal, *bella*."

That's precisely the problem. A deal is a deal...and I'm pretty sure I just made one with the devil. So why don't I regret it?

Because you like him, a little voice whispers.

It's right, dammit. I do like him. Far more than I should.

I've spent the last few days trying to convince myself that I don't. That I can't. That I *won't*. And yet as soon as I saw him standing in the lobby today, my heart leaped into my throat. I felt the same thrill I did in his office the other morning when he had his hand in my panties and his lips on my skin.

We're playing a dangerous game, and one of us is going to lose. I'm pretty sure it's going to be me. He's been playing it a lot longer than I have. He's perfected it at this point, and I'm only just learning the rules.

But I want to play anyway.

God help me, I don't think I could stop myself even if I tried.

What's that saying about playing with fire? If you do it, you'll get burned? Well, I seem to like the pain. He has me under his spell, and I don't want to

break it. I know what that says about me. I know what that means for my career. But right and wrong don't seem so black and white anymore.

Diego isn't a good man, but he isn't evil, either. He's that gray area in between...the shadow standing between light and true darkness. Without men like him, men like Tommaso Genovese win. If that makes him a monster... well, at least he's one that targets other monsters.

Whatever he wants from me, whatever game he's playing here...I have to believe he's playing it for a reason. Trusting him is dangerous, but not trusting him? Well, that seems pretty impossible right now, too.

I should have stayed in cybercrimes. Scammers were far less exhausting than this.

"I'll be there," I blurt. For better or worse, my decision is made.

Diego's expression softens. A ghost of a smile crosses his face. He seems... relieved. And then he blinks, and the arrogant, debonair lawyer is back in full force. "See you tonight, goddess," he murmurs, winking.

"Wait." I push away from the table to follow behind him. "I have to walk you out. You can't be wandering around the building alone."

"Ah. Of course, we wouldn't want that."



"Butera was here."

I look up from my computer as Dennis Respert barges into my office without knocking. The sweat beading on his forehead shines under the fluorescent lights. The man is always sweating. Even when he's sitting still, he's sweating. It's seriously off-putting.

I sit perfectly still, praying he doesn't know what went down in the interview room. If he ever finds out, I won't have to fail to be fired. I'll be out immediately. I'm sleeping with the enemy, a suspect. There are some rules that are inviolable. That's one of them. Not even agents deep undercover can break it without consequence.

I've broken it twice now.

"Why was he here?"

"I asked him to come in," I lie, saving my document.

"And he came?" Dennis's brows climb toward his receding hairline. "Just like that?"

"No, sir." If he thinks anything is that easy with Diego, he clearly doesn't know anything about him. The man was probably born being difficult. "It took a little convincing."

"Well? Did he give you anything?" he demands.

"I still need to check out a few things to see if the information he gave was legitimate, but I believe it is."

A week ago, I would have loved to rub in his face that Diego talked to me when no one else has been able to get a word out of him that didn't begin with an f-bomb and end with *you*. But it doesn't feel the same now. Perhaps because I don't know what game Diego is playing. What does he want from me badly enough that he's willing to spill his secrets?

Nothing good, I'm sure.

And the saddest thing about it? Even if I told Dennis about my deal with

Diego, he wouldn't stop me from going. The man would throw me in front of a speeding bus if it made him look good.

"Well? What do you have, White?" he barks. "I don't have all day."

I carefully close my document, buying myself time before I turn to face him. "Tommaso Genovese killed his own men last year."

"Right," Dennis scoffs.

"I believe the intel is good, sir. It aligns with information I've gleaned from other sources."

"Why the fuck would he kill his own people, White?"

"That's the intel I need to confirm."

He eyes me sideways. "How'd you get him to talk?"

I take a deep breath, trying to keep calm at the way he emphasizes *you*, as if I'm the last person who should have been able to get Diego to talk.

I made a deal with the devil, sir.

"What do you mean?" I ask, playing dumb.

"He hasn't talked to anyone, but he's talking to you?" Dennis narrows his gray eyes at me. "What did you offer him?"

Just my soul, sir.

"Nothing," I lie. "I guess he just feels more comfortable with me."

"Right," Dennis snorts, leering at my chest. "I'm sure *that's* it."

I curl my hands into tight fists, battling the urge to throw my coffee mug at his sexist, chauvinistic head. I'm not sure what infuriates me more. The fact that he thinks he has a right to say it...or the fact that he's not entirely wrong.

Diego isn't talking because he trusts me. He isn't even talking because I'm good at my job. He's talking because he wants something from me. And to prove this man wrong, I'm going to give it to him.

I don't even regret it. That's how much I loathe this man. That's how much I

want him to lose. I just have to keep from losing *myself* in the process.



"You're late," Diego growls, yanking open the door to his penthouse apartment at ten minutes after seven. His obsidian eyes are on fire as they rake over me like coals. He ditched his jacket and tie, unbuttoning the top two buttons of his shirt. "You were supposed to be here at seven."

"Yes, well, you're the one who lives in one of the busiest parts of Chicago. You have no one to blame but yourself if traffic held me up." I arch a brow, my hands planted on my hips. "Are you going to keep me out here complaining about it, or are you going to invite me in?"

A lazy smile dances across his handsome face as he holds the door open wide. "Come, *bella*."

I fight the urge to shiver, his quiet command recalling memories of us in his office earlier this week when he growled the same thing. The man has a way with words. Then again, doesn't the devil usually have a silver tongue?

"This is nice," I murmur, peering around in interest. His apartment takes up most of the top floor of the building. Unlike my place in Beverly, it screams hedonistic luxury. One entire wall is a bank of windows overlooking Lake Michigan. Masculine furniture rests on expensive rugs and hardwood floors, with tasteful artwork hanging on the walls.

"You look more than nice," he says, coming up behind me.

I fight the urge to lean back against him. Fight the urge to turn to him. I fight every instinct compelling me to entangle myself further with this man. If this were the animal kingdom, I'd be dead already. My sense of survival is clearly non-existent. It pushes me toward danger instead of away from it.

"Thank you."

His arms surround me, pulling me back against his chest. His head rests against mine as he pulls in a deep breath, groaning. "Fuck. You drive me crazy, *bella*."

I melt into him despite myself, heat coursing through me. What is it about him that is so fascinating to me? Why does he make me want to forsake everything I thought I knew? It's madness, and yet I feel it percolating in my blood anyway, growing stronger every time I see him.

"I thought we agreed you weren't going to touch me," I manage to say.

"Did we?" His hands skim up and down my sides, sending waves of desire washing through me. "I don't recall agreeing to this, goddess."

"I'm not going to prostitute myself for answers, Diego." I spin to face him, trying like hell to resist the ache deep in my belly. It only grows when his expression darkens with anger. "If you thought that's why I came, you were wrong."

"Taking what you want doesn't make you a *puttana*, Athena," he says, disapproval heavy in his voice. "Do you think I think so little of you?"

"I don't know what you think." I throw my hands up, frustrated. "What game are you playing, Diego? You really expect me to believe you're willing to spill secrets that could land you in prison, just to spend twenty-four hours with me?" I eye him sideways. "I'm not that naïve."

"Ah, I see." He strides across the living room as he speaks. "So it's not me

you think so little of. It's yourself."

I gape after him. "That's not true."

"Isn't it?" He crosses into the kitchen, rolling up his shirtsleeves as he goes. "Anyone not willing to take a gamble for twenty-four hours of your time is a fucking idiot, *bella*."

"A little gamble?" I laugh in disbelief, stomping after him. "You're talking about giving me everything I need to send you to prison, Diego. That's not a little gamble. That's like betting the entire freaking far...Ahh!" I scream as he grabs hold of me as soon as I cross the threshold into the kitchen, pressing me up against the wall.

His lips come down on mine, his kiss skillful and demanding. He holds me prisoner, subduing me as if it's no trouble at all. I fight him, trying to throw him off me, but he's an implacable wall, refusing to budge. All my training is useless against him.

"Behave, little girl," he growls, his hand around my throat. "You can't beat me."

"Let me go, Diego. Now."

"Not until you kiss me back."

"Go to hell."

"I'm already there, *bella*. I've been burning every minute since I met you." The ragged confession is too honest to be a line. He means it.

"You think I haven't?" I swallow hard. "You're everything I shouldn't want, and yet I'm here anyway."

"Then stop fucking fighting me and kiss me. I won't say it a third time, Athena."

I stop fighting and tip my face back in frustrated submission. He grunts his approval, brushing his lips across mine again before his tongue dips into my

mouth. I try like hell not to lose myself to his kiss, not to lose myself to him as he annihilates my self-control all over again, taking it to the breaking point.

Potent desire turns to something deeper, something darker. I have no name for it, but I feel it brewing like a storm in my soul. Calling out to him. Calling out *for* him, perhaps.

I want to hate him. I want to rage at him. Instead, I hand him a little piece of my soul.

"You're worth the risk," he groans, resting his forehead against mine when he finally breaks the kiss. "Don't ever fucking doubt that again."

I lick my lips, trying to collect my thoughts. He scattered them to the winds, leaving me reeling. I don't even remember what we were arguing about. That's how dangerous he is to me.

God, what am I doing?

Chapter Seven



Diego

"You cooked me dinner?" Athena eyes me skeptically, expression screwed up like she's waiting for the punchline.

"I did. Come." I hold out my hand to her.

She hesitates for a moment before curiosity wins over suspicion. Her hand lands in mine. I twine our fingers together, leading her toward the small table on the far side of the kitchen. It doesn't get much use. Neither does the kitchen, for that matter. I'm rarely here long enough to eat a meal at home, let alone cook one.

But I made an exception for her.

I seem to be making a lot of those for her.

"Why is there only one chair?" she asks, drawing to a stop.

Ah, so she noticed.

"I only have one for you." I tug her arm to get her moving.

She digs in her heels, refusing. "You are so full of it, Diego Butera. You don't live in a place like this and only have one chair."

"You misunderstand. I own many chairs, but I only have one for you, *bella*." I tug her arm again, unbalancing her so she has no choice but to move with me. Once we reach the table, I pull the chair out and sit before crooking a finger at her. "Come. Sit."

She gapes at me, her gorgeous mouth open in a little "O" of surprise. "You are not serious."

"You're mine for the next twenty-four hours, goddess. That means I make the rules." I point at my lap. "Claim your throne."

"You are such a pain in my..."

"No insulting me unless you want to see how that works out for you."

She snaps her mouth closed, stomping toward me.

I chuckle quietly, lifting her off her feet onto my lap. She sits rigidly, her back ramrod straight. Her ass nestles against my cock, and I have to fight a groan. Christ, the hard bastard refuses to relent.

"Relax, *bella*. I don't bite." I press my lips to her ear. "Not unless you want me to."

"Diego, dammit." She tenses like she's going to jump off my lap.

I hook an arm around her waist, anchoring her in place. "I'm kidding, Athena. Relax."

"Easy for you to say." She squirms around. "Can you take your phone out of your pocket? It's poking me in the..." Her teeth actually click together when she realizes it's not my phone poking her.

"He's like this because of you." I brush my lips against the shell of her ear. "Watching you come for me today drove me crazy."

"Diego," she whispers, squirming again. "Please."

"Please what?"

"Can we *please* just eat dinner?" she pleads quietly.

I take mercy on her for the moment and reach for the covered plate, dragging it closer. "I hope you like alfredo, *bella*." Her stomach growls when I remove the cover with a flourish, making me chuckle. "I'll take that as a yes."

"I haven't eaten all day."

My lips pull down into a frown. "Why not?"

"Gee, I wonder?" she says sarcastically. "First, a member of the mafia shows up at my office and flirts with me in front of everyone, and then he does inappropriate things to me in the interview room. And then he convinces

me to spend twenty-four hours with him. And then my boss came to chat about why said member of the mafia was at the office. And then I had to follow up on the information said member of the mafia gave me." She blows out a breath, running out of steam. "It's been a busy day."

"Who's your boss?" I ask, reaching for the fork to spear a piece of chicken for her.

"Dennis Respert."

The name is vaguely familiar, but I don't know him. I make a note to remedy that immediately. If he's over Athena, I want to know everything there is to know about him. Just in case I need to deal with him the same way I need to deal with James Tackett.

"Do you like him?" I ask, bringing the fork to her lips.

She leans forward, wrapping them around the tines.

My dick pulses again. There's something...deeply satisfying about watching this woman eat, knowing it's food I prepared and am feeding her with my own hands. I like it. Perhaps we'll eat this way every night, with her in my lap, feeding her from my hand.

Her eyes widen in surprise as she chews the chicken. "It's good," she says.

I chuckle quietly. "Don't sound so surprised, *bella*. I haven't survived this long being unable to care for myself."

"Sorry." She swallows. "I didn't mean it like that."

"I know. I'm only teasing. Do you like your boss?"

Her nose twitches with irritation. "He's fine," she lies.

"You're still a shit liar."

She rolls her eyes at me. "He's fine, Diego. He just doesn't like me much."

"Why not?"

"Patriarchy? Misogyny? Because he was born in the wrong decade?" She

shrugs. "I don't know. He's pissed that I'm taking a spot that a good *male* field agent could be filling. As far as he's concerned, I should be behind a desk, fielding phone calls. I'm too young, too female, and too small to be a real FBI agent."

"Prick," I grunt, wrapping noodles around the fork for her.

"He's not the only one who feels that way."

"Taggart?"

"Him and about half of the other guys in the office." She rolls her eyes. "I didn't even have a chance to prove myself. They decided they didn't like me on sight."

My blood boils as I carefully feed her. Fuck each and every one of them. She's been on this case for a matter of days and has made more headway than they did in a year. If I were to talk to anyone, it'd be her. Simply because she isn't a fucking prick who hides behind a badge and thinks it makes her better. She's fierce and smart and relentless. And she has more courage in her pinky toe than they've ever shown in their miserable lives.

"You promised to tell me why Genovese wanted Valentino to think you were the one behind the murders," she reminds me, clearly ready to change subjects.

"I did promise, didn't I?"

"Yes."

"He found out I was talking to the FBI."

"That's it?" Her brows furrow. "That was his reason?"

"You think that's a small thing? It's the one rule you don't break in the mafia."

"So why break it?" Her gaze flits across my face. "What did you want so badly that you were willing to risk it?"

"Rafe Valentino in a body bag," I say bluntly.

She flinches.

"You asked. This is who I am. I won't pretend to be something I'm not. My world is vicious and ugly and bloody. I do what I have to do, and I won't apologize for it, Athena. If you're looking for an innocent man, you won't find one here."

"Tell me what happened," she pleads.

So I tell her. "I happened."

"I don't understand."

"Rafe Valentino's father murder Amalia's parents."

Her eyes widen in shock.

"It was a revenge killing, *bella*. Her father killed his mother and shot him. Amalia had nothing to do with it. She wasn't even born when it happened. She was two when her parents died. Alwise found her in foster care when she was a little girl. When he brought her home, we both knew what would happen to her if the Valentinos ever found her. They'd already killed her parents. Rafe had killed my father, too. I wasn't going to let them kill her too. She was innocent."

"She was just a little girl," Athena whispers.

"Yeah, she was. And she grew up safe because we kept her hidden. But I knew the only way she'd ever be free was if Rafe was dead and gone. I wanted him that way anyway, so I started talking to the FBI. Genovese found out. He thought he could use me to get Rafe out of the way."

"You guys teamed up?"

"Fuck no," I growl. "He was going to tell everyone about my chats with the FBI. I couldn't let that happen. It would have left Amalia completely unprotected. So I reluctantly agreed to help him bring Rafe down. Except I

couldn't do it alone. Genovese had already made sure of that by trying to pin those fucking murders on me. I had to ask Amalia to help.

"It was all downhill from there. When Rafe came looking for me, he found her, exactly like we'd planned. It was a risk, a huge fucking risk, but it was one we had to take. She was supposed to find his books and smuggle them out to me. I'd turn them over to the FBI, and the Valentino empire would fall, freeing us.

"Except we didn't fucking know Genovese knew who she really was. As soon as he had a chance, he grabbed her, trying to lay claim to the Cerrito fortune. And I had to make a choice...let my shit with Rafe go, or risk losing my sister because I fucked up."

"Diego," Athena whispers, her expression soft.

"Had I known Genovese wanted her too, I would have done it differently. She ended up under his thumb because of me. Every goddamn thing that went wrong was because of me, *bella*."

She licks her lips, watching my face. "You're leaving things out."

"Yeah, I am," I freely admit. "I'm leaving it out to save your life."

"What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I said. There are things I'm not telling you because the minute you know them, your life is over." I laugh abruptly. "The life you knew is already over."

"What are you talking about?"

"What do you think happens to you now, *bella*? You think you walk out of here in twenty-four hours and go back to your life as if nothing has changed?" I ask, brushing a curl away from her face. "You aren't that naïve."

"I..." She exhales a breath. "My boss knows I'm here, Diego. If I go missing, they'll know it was you."

"You think I'd put my hands on you? Hurt you?" I push our plate back and then lift her from my lap to set her on the table. "You know nothing, *bella*. *Nothing*," I growl. "Everything I do, I do for you."

"Except give me a choice, right?" she demands, staring up at me with a stubborn tilt to her jaw.

"I gave you a choice the first day. I warned you to walk away. You decided not to heed it." I wrap my hand around her throat, tipping her head back. "You should have run, rabbit," I whisper. "Now, it's too late."

She stares at me with wide eyes. Even now, she isn't afraid. Even now, when I deserve it less than ever, she wants me. I see it written all over her face. Whether she wants to or not, she feels me in her soul. It's right there in her eyes.

"Christ, the things I want to do to you when you look at me like that."

"Like what?"

"Like you'd rather go up in flames than run."

"M-maybe that is what I want, Diego. To burn."

"Don't say it if you don't mean it," I warn her. "I won't let you take it back, Athena. Once you give me that part of yourself, I'll burn you completely out before I let you take it back." I tighten my grip on her throat, dipping my head until my lips are inches from hers. "I'll burn everything to the fucking ground before I let you go."

"Then don't," she whispers, her voice a mere scrap of sound. "Don't let me go, Diego."

She doesn't know what she's asking. I haven't even told her the worst parts yet...the things guaranteed to make her hate me. But she's sitting here, offering me a taste of heaven. And I'm bastard enough to take.

I press my lips to hers, claiming her soul.

Chapter Eight



Athena

The heat banked in his obsidian eyes scorches me everywhere it touches as he carries me through the apartment. It passes in blurbs, not even the view outside the windows enough to draw me from the one in front of me.

God, he's beautiful. In a thousand ways I didn't expect. He's beautiful when he's angry. He's beautiful when he's bossy. He's beautiful when he's commanding my body. The way he loves his sister is beautiful. There isn't a single thing about him that doesn't captive me. God made the most dangerous animals some of the most beautiful. He's one of them.

"Fuck, I need to kiss you again." He presses me against the wall in the hallway, pinning my body between him and it. I gasp as the chill penetrates my clothes, only to be swept away again in a split second.

He plants a hand on the wall above my head, shifting my head to hold me up with his knee between my thighs. His other rakes down my side, setting me on fire all over again.

I offer my mouth up to him without reservation. He nips my bottom lip before thrusting his tongue between my lips to kiss away my soul. I moan when he rocks me against his knee, sending shards of pleasure through me.

He doesn't wait until we're in his room to start undressing me. He starts now, slipping buttons through their loops to drag my shirt from my body. His mouth never leaves mine as he sets to work on my bra, trying to strip it from me too.

We kiss until neither of us can breathe, and then part on a hungry gasp. I'm shaking with need. So is he. He grips my hips, panting as he stares at me, pure starvation painted across every line of his face.

"If this wasn't your first time, I'd be fucking you against the wall right now, *bella*."

"How do you-?"

"I can taste it on you. No one has ever touched what belongs to me, have they?"

"No," I whisper.

He growls, his hands digging into my hips. Another shard a pleasure stabs into me at his possessive grip. At the way he looks at me as if I do belong to him. But he isn't satisfied with his hands on my hips, not for long. He shoves them down my pants, gripping my cheeks in his palms.

"One day soon, I'm going to take this too," he says, eyes glittering with desire. "Every fucking hole on your body will belong to me."

I press my face to his throat, trying to hide how much I like the idea. It seems so intimate, so *raw*. I want him to have that part of me too, more than I should, perhaps.

"You'll love it," he whispers, his mouth at my ear as he kneads my cheeks. "Especially when I'm fucking your perfect cunt with a vibrator while I'm taking this sweet ass."

I drag my lips along his throat, moaning quietly. The more he talks, the more I want it. His scruff scratches my skin, but I love the way it feels. I love the way he growls my name even more.

He peels me away from the wall, carrying me down the hall again.

I bite him, just to see how it feels. Just to see what he does. Just because I can. I'm not sure which is most true.

The next thing I know, I'm sailing through the air. I land on my back on his bed, sinking into a cloud of blankets. He's on top of me in seconds, shoving his way between my legs.

"You want to play dirty? Is that it, *bella*?" He pins my arms above my head, holding me down. "You want me to punish you?"

"Yes. No." I sob, frustrated because I don't know what I want. I just want him. "Please, Diego."

"Bite me again, and I'll have you tied to the bed, pleading for mercy, *bella*." I arch toward him, whimpering.

"Look at you," he breathes. "You want me to tie you up."

"Yes." I'm not sure what that says about me, and I don't care. But I don't want to be in control here. I don't want to have a say. I want him to do exactly what he promised and take what he wants. If that's wrong, then fine. I'll own it. But he's been threatening to do it for days, leaving me to imagine what it's like to be completely at his mercy. I want it. More than I should admit.

He peels himself off me, rising to his feet.

I press my legs together, trying to ease the ache between them.

"You have no idea the things I want to do to you, goddess," he says, yanking his shirt open. Buttons pop, flying across the room. He ignores them, stripping it off and casting it to the floor.

I stare at his body, completely shameless. God, he really is as beautiful as he is dangerous. Smooth olive skin gleams over bulky muscle, the ridges of his abdomen obvious. Bold lines of ink swirl up the right side of his rib cage and across his chest, completely hidden when he's dressed. He's thick everywhere, like a deadly, fierce warrior. He's a freaking masterpiece.

I watch with bated breath as he kicks his shoes off and then undoes his pants. My heart stops when they hit the floor. I've seen his erection before. But not like this. Not with him completely naked, standing in front of me with it pointing right at me. It juts proudly from his body, long and thick. The

broad head is engorged and wet. It curves slightly toward his body, the veins along the underside thick and prominent.

He catches me staring and wraps a fist around himself, squeezing. "You like watching, *bella*?"

I jerk my chin in a nod, unable to deny it.

A lazy smile dances at his lips. He spits in his hand and then wraps it around his dick again. He's rough with himself, squeezing hard as he works his fist up and down his shaft.

I press my thighs together, aching everywhere. I want to know what he feels like on top of me with nothing between us. I *need* to know what he feels like inside me. If all I get with him is twenty-four hours, I want everything.

He lets me watch for a long moment before he steps closer to the bed. "You're still wearing too many clothes, Athena."

I exhale a shaky breath, so turned on I can't think straight.

He places a hand on my belly, and my hips jolt off the bed. Another smirk plays at his lips as he undoes my pants, tugging them down. I lift my bottom, allowing him to drag them off me.

"Goddamn," he groans, eyes transfixed on my panties. "Look at the mess you made."

"It's your fault," I whisper. "Every time you touch me, this is what happens."

He growls, hooking his fingers into the waistband to pull them down. The modest part of me wants to cover myself, but the look on his face stills my hand. He's a starving animal, his face stamped with stark need.

"Spread your legs, Athena. I want to see what's mine."

I part them slowly, my eyes locked on his face to give me courage.

"Good girl. Now spread your lips."

"Diego."

"Do it, *bella*."

I jump to obey the command in his voice. My entire body shakes as my hand slides down my abdomen. I take a deep breath and squeeze my eyes closed, slipping my hand onto my sex. I part my slit slowly, so wet my juices coat my fingers.

"Good girl," he croons. "Now touch yourself, Athena. Rub that hard little clit for me."

I don't tell him no. I've already gone this far, let him see this much. My fingers slide through my wetness before I swirl them over my clit.

I arch upward, moaning his name.

"That's right, goddess. You moan my name. It's the only one you know now."

The possession in his voice makes me bolder, braver. I keep going, touching myself for him. Imagining that it's his fingers inside me, his thumb against my clit. I arch and moan, rocking against my hand.

I hear him moving around, but I don't know where he is. I don't know what he's doing. Not until I feel something cinch around my left wrist. My eyes spring open to see him holding a necktie.

"Arms over your head, *bella*."

"I..."

"I won't hurt you."

I lick my lips, nod. I trust him.

"Then put your arms up, wrap your hand around the headboard."

My heart threatens to beat its way out of my chest as I obey his quiet command. He moves quickly, looping the tie through the slats of the

headboard and then around my right wrist. He ties me tightly enough to ensure I can't go anywhere, but not tightly enough to hurt me.

"Are you okay?"

"Y-yes."

"Good." He smirks, a wicked, deadly smirk that leaves my soul quaking.

"Diego!" I cry, startled and turned on as he smacks my right breast just hard enough to sting. He pinches my left nipple at the same time, sending a flurry of chaotic sensations barreling through me. They play against one another, causing my clit to throb like never before.

"Damn, that sounded good." He does it again, with the same result. My clit pulses and throbs, my belly quivering.

I thrash against the ties, sobbing his name. He doesn't take pity on me. I'm not sure this man knows the word. He moves from breast to breast, teasing me into a frenzy. He knows exactly how to touch me, and he's merciless, driving me higher and higher without giving me an ounce of relief.

"Please, please," I plead. "Oh, God. Please."

"Look at me."

I peel my eyes open. Force myself to focus on him. I see the obsession glittering in his eyes, feel it scorching me everywhere his eyes touch.

"Don't forget to breathe," he says. It's the only warning I get before he's on top of me, moving down my body like a storm raging. He touches me everywhere. Kisses me everywhere. He bites and licks, working me into a frenzy before he ever shoulders his way between my thighs.

"Please," I beg, beyond shame. Beyond anything but him and need.

He falls on me in wild abandon, taking me with his mouth, claiming me. *God*, the things he does with that mouth. His tongue strikes against my clit as he thrusts two fingers inside me, stretching me. He's greedy, leaving no part

of me untouched. His sounds leave no question as to whether he's enjoying this. He is. Every freaking second.

I scream his name when he presses his thumb against my back entrance.

"Don't fight me, *bella*." He lifts his head, spearing me with a dark look. "Relax and let me in."

I should tell him no...but I don't. I can't. I'm helpless to do anything but take what he gives me, every drop of it. He's a starving animal, ferocious in his need. He takes, and takes, and takes a little more.

His thumb slips into my back entrance as his tongue swirls around my clit.

My orgasm hits so quickly it knocks me breathless. It demolished everything in its path, leaving me a mess of broken, blissed out pieces.

"Again," he demands, savage sounds ripping from deep within his chest.

I fight like hell, trying to deny him. He restrains me as if it's nothing, keeping me captive as easily as the ties at my wrists do. When he thrusts his tongue inside my hole, I feel every snarl and growl.

The orgasm builds just as quickly this time. I know it's going to shatter me into pieces too fine to put back together. I'm not sure I want to be put back together after this. I hold my breath, waiting for the inevitable detonation.

Diego's tongue slides lower, replacing his thumb.

I sob. In shock. In bliss.

The world fades to black when I explode this time. Blood rushes in my ears in a torrent of sound. My heart races faster and then faster still. When it skips a beat entirely, I know I'm lost. Ruined. Annihilated. Completely at his mercy.

I give myself up to it, give myself over to him. Wherever this leads, wherever he takes me, I'll go.

The world returns in flickers as Diego crawls up my body, crooning praises. "Good girl, *bella*," he breathes, raining kisses across my face. "Such a fucking good girl."

"Diego," I whimper as he slips my leg up over his hip. His erection nudges my clit, causing me to jolt. My entire body is sensitive, humming with aftershocks.

He notches himself at my entrance, running his lips all over my face. "This may hurt at first, Athena. Breathe through it."

"Do it," I demand, commanding him now.

He surges forward, growling my name. Little by little, he slips inside me. It stretches and burns, but it doesn't hurt. I feel full. We both know the moment my hymen tears. We both feel it.

He's as gentle as possible, but it stings for a moment anyway.

"*Perdonami, bella.*"

"I'm okay," I promise, his mournful tone breaking my heart. Already, the sting is gone. I relax beneath him, retracting my nails from my palms. "I'm okay."

He begins to move carefully, rocking his hips into me in tiny pulses.

I gasp in stunned delight. It feels incredible.

"Are you okay, *bella*?"

"Yes. Perfect." I bring my other leg up to hook it over his hip.

He smiles, thrusting harder. Deeper. I pull against my restraints, desperate to get my hands on him as his run all over me. But he doesn't untie me. He just keeps going. Harder. And then deeper.

"Goddamn, *bella.*" He leans back on his heels, wrapping his hand around my throat. "You're heaven around my cock. I could fuck you like this all day."

"Do it," I plead, losing myself in him and the pleasure growing in his eyes, turning them darker and then darker still. We're heat and steam, fire and flame, working together. Nothing outside of this bed and this moment exists or intrudes. I'm not an FBI agent. He's not mafia. We're just Diego and Athena, and that's enough.

"I'm going to remember this day for the rest of my life, *bella*," he murmurs. "I finally stepped out of hell today."

"Diego." Tears well in my eyes. That might be the sweetest thing anyone has ever said to me.

He leans down to kiss me. I writhe with him, moaning louder and then louder again. I don't ever want it to end. And yet my body refuses to cooperate. Diego refuses to allow me to hold it off.

As soon as the orgasm sparks in my belly, he knows.

"Come on my cock, *bella*," he orders. "I want to feel it."

I want to tell him no. I want to fight him and defy him and remind him that he's not in control of me. But I don't. *Yet I can't*. Because he is. My body is under his command now.

"Give it to me," he says. "I've got you. You can take it."

I'm not so sure I can take it, but I give it to him anyway, helpless to do anything but submit. Waves break over me, dragging me under. Spots swim in my field of vision, blotting out everything. I'm just pain and pleasure and *us*, so lost to him, I know I'll never be free again.

My name leaves his lips in a powerful cry, his body locking up. I hear the reverence in his voice, the emotion. He lets me know with a single sound that he's never going to be free again either.

He fills me in a warm rush, giving me everything he has and everything he is. And as he does, he slips into place in my heart as if he was always meant

to be there.



"Tell me something."

"More questions, *bella*?" Diego's brow lifts, an amused smile playing at his lips. "Perhaps I didn't do a good enough job wearing you out."

I roll my eyes, ignoring his teasing. He did a more-than-good-enough job wearing me out. But my mind isn't as easily exhausted as my body. It's still racing, trying to fit pieces into place and form a complete picture. Now that I have the information, what am I supposed to do with it?

He said everything changed for me as soon as he told me. I think he might be right. Not for any of the reasons he gave me, but simply because the villain is already gone here. Everything that happened last year can be laid squarely at the feet of a man who died for his crimes.

Even if he were to tell me who pulled the trigger, I'm not sure it would change my opinion any. We're supposed to uphold the law. But the law wasn't designed for men like these and situations like this. I'm not naïve enough to believe justice in the eyes of the law and true justice are the same thing. I know better.

Justice is a pay to play game, and men like Genovese can afford to pay to play. Even had we known what he planned, we couldn't have stopped it. Until

there were bodies on the ground, our hands would have been tied. He would have swatted away anything less than a murder charge as if it didn't even exist. The outcome would have been exactly the same.

I don't know if Diego pulled the trigger or if someone else did, but whoever did it stopped a war. The law says that's wrong. How can it be when it saved lives while the law would have let them die before doing anything remotely helpful?

I wanted answers, and I have them now. But I don't know what I'm supposed to do with them when all they do is complicate everything and change nothing. I know what I'm supposed to do. I know what my job requires me to do. But my life stopped being black and white the minute I stepped into that parking garage a week ago.

"Ask your question, Athena," Diego says, running his hand down my side.

"Do you regret it?"

"Regret what?"

"You were out," I say carefully. "You went to law school. You could have walked away for good. Do you regret that you didn't?"

"There's no room for regret in this life. I've got a couple of them, but not that one."

"Oh. Why not?"

"I was never out, *bella*. This isn't a job you can just walk away from. So long as there was even a remote chance of them tracking Amalia down, I was never going to be out. I made a promise to Alvis to protect her. I won't break it."

"You really care about her," I observe.

"She and Alvis were my only family for a long time. When he died, it was just the two of us. I raised her." His hand drifts down my side again. "I taught

her how to survive this world."

"And she taught you not to lose yourself to it."

"You have an older brother who helped raise you, right? Ceres?"

I blink at him, shocked.

Amusement glints in his eyes. "You aren't the only one who's been doing research, *bella*."

"That's...that's...I don't know what that is," I mumble, though I'm not entirely sure why I'm surprised. I'm also not entirely sure I want to know what else he's found out about me. "Yes, Ceres is older than I am."

"You're close?"

"Yeah, we are."

"Then you should know how far he'd go to protect you. It's the same for me and Amalia. She kept me human in a way nothing else could have. If I still have a heart, it's her doing."

"I think maybe it's the same for Ceres, sometimes," I admit. "He's in the military. Special Forces. He doesn't talk about the things he's seen and done, but I know they weigh on him. Things were really dark for a while there. I do what I can to keep him from falling back into that place."

I guess a life at war has a way of changing everyone. A life in the military and a life in the mafia don't compare, not at all. And yet, there are distinct parallels. A life in either is a life of turmoil and danger. They're just at opposite ends of the spectrum. Our armed forces are the good guys, the ones who do it to protect us all. And guys like Diego? Well, if he has a halo, it's shaped a lot like horns.

I still don't think he's evil, though. Perhaps I think it even less now that I understand his story. Everything he's done, he's done out of love. It's hardened him, turned him into the ruthless, dangerous man he is today. But

he still loves. Even now, he watches over his sister, keeping the promise he made to their adopted father.

"You said you have a couple regrets," I say after a moment. "What are they?"

"I can only tell you one now."

"Fine. What is it?"

"That I'm not inside you right now."

I roll my eyes. "I'm serious, Diego. I want to know."

"I am being serious." He grabs my hand, dragging it down his body to his cock, which is just as hard as it was when he was inside me an hour ago. "I deeply regret that I'm not in you right now, *bella*."

I groan, wrapping my hand around his length, unable to help myself. I think I may be addicted to him. Actually, that's not true. I know I'm addicted to him. And God help us both, I'm also pretty sure I'm falling in love with him.

Chapter Nine



Diego

"I said sit on my face, *bella*," I growl, dragging Athena's gorgeous ass across the bed toward me. "Get up here before I spank you."

"I swear to God, if you spank me..."

I smack her ass, making her yelp. The startled sound quickly bleeds to a moan.

"Don't tempt the devil, Athena. I've been aching to get my hands on this luscious ass since you tried to hit me."

"You deserved it."

I smile despite myself. She never gives an inch. If I push, she pulls. If I say up, she says down. She fucks with me as if it's a biological imperative, refusing to submit until I earn it. And *fuck*, how I love earning it.

I've kept her naked and on my cock all day. We've fucked in every room of my apartment, and I still want more. My twenty-four hours ends soon, but she hasn't made a move to leave yet. We haven't discussed what comes next, either.

Sooner or later, I'm going to have to tell her. But not yet. Not until the clock runs out and I have no choice. I need every moment I can get until then. To convince her that this is where she wants to be. That I'm what she wants. I have to convince her, or her world isn't the only one that ends when the clock runs out.

Mine does too.

I'm not giving her up, even if she hates me when I lay out her options. Either she quits on her own, or I do it for her. But her life at the FBI was over the minute she agreed to give herself to me.

I lift her over me, placing her legs on either side of my head. She hovers over me, trying to balance on her knees.

"Sit on my face," I order, not fucking around with her anymore. I need another taste of what I own.

"Diego!" she cries.

"Now, Athena." I yank her down, not being gentle about it. She topples onto me, landing on my chest with her ass right in my face. Fucking perfect.

"Get your mouth on my cock, goddess."

I spread her cheeks and dive in, not giving her time to think about it. If I do, she'll get all shy and shit. Fuck that noise. Every inch of her body is a goddamn treasure. And every priceless piece belongs to me. I'll do what I want to do with it.

She shouts my name, innocent shock ringing in the air around us. As if I didn't have my fingers in this same little hole this morning. As if I didn't threaten to fuck it last night.

I flick my tongue against her back entrance, toying with her as her pussy grows wetter, dripping all over my face and chest. Christ, she loves it. My innocent little virgin grinds against my tongue, sobbing my name.

"Get your mouth around my fucking cock, Athena," I growl, smacking her right cheek.

She jolts forward, wrapping her hand around my shaft and her lips around the swollen head. I snarl a curse when she immediately takes me as deep as she can, her throat closing around the head of my cock.

Jesus Christ. She's going to be the death of me. What she lacks in experience, she makes up for in enthusiasm. She'll never admit it, but I think she loves choking on my cock. Every time it's been down her throat in the last twenty-four hours, she's been in heaven.

Shit, that makes two of us.

I drag her closer to my mouth, pressing my thumb to her ass while I run my tongue around her clit. We're in a race to see who can get there first, and I don't intend to lose. She comes first, always.

But goddamn, she makes it hard when she sucks me so fucking good.

My thumb slips into her ass, earning a choked cry of ecstasy from her. She redoubles her efforts, bobbing on my cock like she can't stop herself. One small hand glides up my shaft, jerking off what won't fit into her mouth. The other runs over my balls, driving me crazy eight different ways.

I wrap my lips around her clit, sucking it into my mouth. I suck, flicking my tongue against the hard little bud at the same time. My thumb moves in and out of her little asshole. Two fingers plunge into her tight fuckhole, bombarding her with pleasure from every direction.

She chokes on my cock, sobbing as she splinters apart and squirts all over me. I snarl in triumph and flip her onto her back. Before she can even miss me, I'm on top of her, shoving her legs apart.

"You squirted all over me, *bella*," I growl against her ear, my hand in her hair to pull her head back. I thrust deep, groaning as her cunt pulses and flutters around my cock.

"Diego. Diego. Diego," she chants.

I fuck her like a madman, pounding into her again and again and again. My balls smack against her ass with every thrust, filling the room with the sounds of sex—her cries, the smack as our bodies come together, the wet suck of her cunt around my cock.

I'm rough with her, pushing her past her breaking point as I spank and fuck and bite...and all she can do is beg for more. Every little cry from her lips drives me higher. I fuck her harder, deeper. Until the bed rattles beneath us

and my lungs burn. Until she's spent and drooping beneath me, completely wrecked.

"One more," I demand, greedy for it, never satisfied. Fuck, with her, there is no such thing as too much. I can't fuck her hard enough or deep enough or fast enough or often enough. I'm no longer sure if I'm trying to fuck my way into her soul, or if I'm trying to permanently imprint her on mine. All I know is that I'm running out of time.

I need her to fall. If she doesn't, there will be no saving me. I'll have damned myself and earned every moment of my torment.

"Diego," she whimpers, tears leaking from the corners of her eyes. "Please."

"One more, *bella*." I press my lips to hers in a reassuring kiss. "You can take it. You were forged for war." Hell, I think she was born to bring me to my knees, as if God knew he needed a goddess to capture and contain my ass. His plan worked. I'm on my knees, tamed only for her.

I slip my hand between our bodies, seeking her clit.

She gasps, arching upward.

I lift her, anchoring us chest to chest as I move inside her. Our eyes lock. Neither of us speaks. There's nothing left to say. She knows she has me. Christ, she has to know. I spilled my truth over her, and she didn't flinch.

Her body quickens, the orgasm creeping up on her. It washes over her in stages. Her eyes flutter, her mouth falling open. Her body goes rigid, and then her cunt locks down around my cock. A decadent groan rolls from her lips, pouring over me.

The sight of her, the sound of, fuck, the feel of her, sends me over the edge with her. I bury my face in her throat, groaning her name as I spill into her, draining every drop I have into her.

And praying to fucking God my seed takes, tying her to me in ways that

can't be undone.

She falls against my chest, completely spent.

"Diego," she sighs.

Within moment, her breath evens out into the deep, even cadence of sleep.

Mine doesn't. For a long time, I lie awake, just holding her. Praying to God that I've done enough to tie her to me. There is no other choice.

I'm still awake when my phone buzzes close to midnight.

I reluctantly grab it off the bedside table to see a message from Rafe.

Valentino: My place. Now.

Fuck.



"Where the fuck have you been?" Rafe growls forty-five minutes later, spinning to glare at me as soon as I step through the front door.

"Busy."

His brows pull together in a severe line. "With her?"

I slide into my seat at the table, buying myself a moment before I have to answer that. He isn't going to like anything I have to say, I already know that much.

"What's the issue?" I ask instead of telling him anything I should be telling him.

"You," he growls, pinning me with a hard stare.

"What the fuck did I do?" I glance around the table, but Coda, Domani, and Mattia studiously avoid my gaze. Luca's scowling at me exactly like Rafe. And Gabriel isn't here.

"You talked."

"How the fuck do you figure?"

"Marcello," Luca states.

Cazzo. Of course, Athena went to him for confirmation on who killed Genovese's men. And of course he fucking ran to Rafe. He has every bit as much reason to want the whole thing kept quiet as we do. His sister is married to a Valentino now.

"I see you aren't denying it," Rafe says, shaking his head in irritation. "What the fuck are you doing, Diego? Are we really going to do this all over again?"

"Jesus Christ. It's not even like that. You think I'd put Amalia at risk for the hell of it?" I narrow my eyes at him. "I had to tell her something to gain her trust."

"How much did you tell her?" Mattia asks. "I think that's the important question here."

"More than any of you would prefer, but nothing that implicates anyone in this room in any sort of crime," I admit, not willing to lie about it. If I want their trust, I have to earn it. Lying won't get me there.

"*Mafankulo,*" Rafe mutters up at the ceiling.

"It's a moot point, Rafe."

He tips his head down, spearing me with another dark look. "Oh? Please explain how talking to the FBI is a moot point, Butera."

"She won't be FBI much longer."

"You seduced her?"

I grit my teeth at the way he says it, as if what we've shared was simply a task on a list. Christ, to him, I guess that is what it is. He doesn't know that I...what, exactly? That I can't get her out of my head? That I'm obsessed with everything she does? That I'm so fucking far in love with her I can't see straight?

I started falling the minute she tried to hit me in the garage. I don't know when I landed. In my kitchen last night? In the interview room earlier yesterday morning? In my office the day after we met? I don't know. I can't point to a single moment and say that right there is when I landed because, in some way, every single one of those moments is when I landed.

I just didn't know what the fuck to call it until she was asleep in my arms tonight.

I'm in love with her. That's why I've pushed and pulled and dragged until I got her right where I wanted her. Because not getting her there wasn't an option. I'm willing to fight as dirty as I have to fight to claim what belongs to me. And Athena belongs to me. Body and soul, she's mine.

"Yes," I growl to Rafe.

"You have proof for her bosses if they need it?" Luca demands.

"I put in an appearance at her office yesterday to lay the groundwork."

"Good," Rafe grunts. "What's your next move?"

To marry her.

"That's what we need to tal—"

"What the fuck?" someone says outside the door. "Who the fuck are you?"

Everyone in the dining room turns toward the door at the same time.

"Let me go!" Athena cries.

My heart leaps into my throat as soon as I hear her voice. I jump to my feet,

crossing the room in three steps to yank the door open. Luca's man, Alessio's holding her as she tries to break free of him.

I take one look at him with his hands on her and launch myself at him, grabbing him by the throat. We crash into the wall across from the dining room, knocking a painting off the wall. Glass shatters at our feet.

"Don't fucking touch her," I snarl.

Alessio's face turns red as he nods, holding his hands up.

"Diego, goddammit. Let him go," Rafe growls behind me.

"Touch her again and it'll be the last thing you do."

"Diego, goddammit." Luca grabs my hand, trying to pry it off Alessio's throat.

Athena makes a sound behind—a choked sob. As soon as I hear it, I drop Alessio, spinning to face her. She's pressed up against the opposite wall, eyes wide and face pale. She's in my shirt, the ends tied up to make it fit her. Her hair is loose and natural around her face. She didn't take the time to put it up like usual before she followed me here.

Jesus. *She followed me here.*

"*Bella*," I whisper, moving toward her.

"Don't touch me."

"It's okay, *bella*. It's me." I reach for her, trying to calm her down.

"I said don't touch me," she cries, stumbling out of my reach. "Don't ever touch me again."

Everyone is crowded around, watching in complete silence. I don't think anyone knows what the fuck is going on, who she is, or where she came from. I suddenly understand all too well, however.

"You heard."

"I heard everything," she spits, tears spilling down her cheeks.

No, she didn't hear everything. She only heard enough to kill whatever was blooming in her heart for me. It's written all over her face. Betrayal. Anger. Disappointment. *Regret.*

"I was so stupid. So freaking stupid."

"*Bella.*"

"Don't call me that!" she yells. "You don't get to call me that anymore."

"That's my cue to get the fuck out of here," Coda mutters, ducking back into the dining room.

"Same," Domani says, following behind him.

Alessio retreats too, but no one else makes a move to follow.

They simply stand in silent witness to my worst nightmare. And yet again, it's one of my own making.

"What do you think you heard, be...Athena?" I ask softly.

"I don't think I heard anything. I know what I heard." She swipes at her eyes. "Was any of it real to you or was I just a means to an end?"

"Jesus Christ," Rafe mutters. "You two need to resolve this on your own. We'll be in my office."

I jerk my chin in a nod, not taking my eyes off Athena. We stand silently while Rafe, Luca, and Mattia file down the hall past us, not speaking. Only when they're gone, do I speak again.

"You think it was a game?"

"Wasn't it?" She glares at me. "Seduce and ruin the rookie FBI agent so anything she has to say is no longer credible." A hysterical laugh chokes her. "God, I was so stupid. Of course, that was your plan. Why didn't I see it?"

"That's not—"

"Don't." She gives her head an angry shake. "Don't stand here and lie now, Diego. I heard everything."

Fuck. This isn't how this was supposed to go. We were supposed to talk. I was going to lay out the reality of her situation and explain why I made the choice I did. But anything I say now will fall on deaf ears. Any trust she had for me was shattered the minute she overheard that fucking conversation.

"You don't understand what's at stake here. I did what I had to do, *bella*. If we go down, this entire goddamn city will turn into a warzone. We're trying to prevent that." I scrub a hand through my hair. "We've been trying to prevent it for a fucking year."

"So you had to sleep with me?" she demands. "God, you're such a liar, Diego. You didn't seduce me to stop a war. You did it because I was something you couldn't have, and you couldn't stand it."

She's not entirely wrong. Maybe I could have found a different way, but I didn't want to find one. I wanted her. Right or wrong, I *still* want her.

"Maybe there was another way," I acknowledge. "But you still don't understand what's at stake, *bella*."

"Then explain it to me!"

"If the Valentino empire falls, the other families will go to war to claim the throne. This city hasn't seen a mafia war in decades. It won't survive one of this caliber. No other agent assigned to look into this has looked too deeply. They've kicked a few rocks and then gone on. You weren't going to do that. You were determined to get the truth."

"I didn't have a choice."

"What did you think would happen once you had it?" I ask, the same question I asked her last night. I should have told her then what was at stake and what was happening. Before I ever took her to my bed, I should have spelled it out in black and white. I'm an asshole for not doing it. But I was

trying to keep this very thing from happening. "They would have killed you, Athena."

She flinches.

"They wouldn't have had a choice because we can't let Rafe fall. You think the FBI is the glue holding this city together?" I snort. "You couldn't stop Tommaso last year. You think you'd fare any better if all-out war broke out?" We both know the answer to that. The FBI isn't equipped to handle that kind of situation.

Rafe is the only thing these motherfuckers fear. So long as he's on the throne, they'll tow the line because they don't want to end up like Tommaso, shot in the head and made an example.

"You don't have to like my choice," I say. "You don't even have to understand it, *bella*. But I didn't make it for the hell of it. I made it to keep you safe. Because at the end of the day, that's what mattered to me. Ensuring *you* survived."

"Maybe that's what you tell yourself, Diego, but it's a lie." She dabs at her eyes again. "Because you had another choice. You could have chosen to trust me, but that thought never entered your mind, did it? You were so sure I'd have chosen my job over you that you decided not to even give me a chance. You're so used to watching you back, that you were looking for a knife from me the whole time." She smiles sadly. "I trusted you. But I never stood a chance of earning your trust because you aren't capable of giving it."

"I trust you, Athena."

"No, you don't. If you did, you would have told me the truth and let me make the choice myself. Instead, you made it for me."

"Then make your choice, Athena. Right here and now."

"What's the point? You already made it for me."

"Tell me, *bella*. What would you have chosen?"

"You, you idiot. I would have chosen you." More tears spill down her cheeks. "Despite everything, I still choose you."

I take a step toward her, my heart in my throat.

"But this is over, Diego." Her voice cracks as she stumbles backward, inching toward the end of the hallway. "I'll keep your secrets, but whatever was between us is over."

"Athena, *bella*." My stomach twists into knots. My heart threatens to shatter. She means it. Christ. She's walking away. Not because of her job but because of me. Because I fucked up. And this time, I don't think I can fix it. I lost her before I ever had her, and nothing I say now will convince her that I trust her. The proof she needed is too little, too late.

"If you come near me again, I swear to God, I'll shoot you and claim it was self-defense," she vows, her watery eyes full of righteous fury.

I bow my head, truly ashamed for the first time in my life.

Chapter Ten



Athena

No one stops me as I stumble out of Rafe Valentino's house. They just let me go. Either they aren't concerned about me talking, or they don't plan on me living long enough to be a problem. I'm not sure which it is. Right now, I'm not sure I even care.

I stumble to my car on numb legs. Everything feels numb, frozen solid. I want to scream and rage and cry, but I can't. I have to get the hell out of here before I let him convince me to stay. He could do it so easily.

God, even now, he has such power over me. I guess that's what love does. Makes us stupid. It certainly made me a fool. Even knowing he was up to something, I fell right into his arms. I gave him my heart. I let him do things to me that I'll never be able to take back or forget.

And God help me, as much as I want to hate him, I don't. I can't. I feel sorry for him. He lives in a world of vipers. They plot and deceive and betray as easily as they breathe. Of course he expected the same of me. It's all he knows.

That doesn't make it hurt any less.

I would have given up everything for him. I *did* give it up for him. The moment he touched me the first time, I knew my career was over. I think I let myself fall because I knew I was over. But in his eyes, I was always the enemy.

In his eyes, I'll always be the enemy.

I shove my key into the ignition with shaking hands. Somehow, I manage to make it through the gates without crashing. I make it an entire two blocks before I'm forced to pull to the side of the road.

Great, heaving sobs wrack my body.

I lay my head on the steering wheel and sob.

I cry so hard I choke. I just lost everything. My job. The man I love. Everything. And I have no one to blame but myself. I knew what I was getting myself into, and I got myself into it anyway.

Love doesn't make us stupid. It turns us into lunatics.

"Call Ceres," I gasp, stabbing the button on the navigation menu.

My car confirms the call and then ringing blares through the speakers.

He picks up on the second ring.

"Athena? What's wrong? Why are you calling so late?"

"Ceres," I sob, needing my brother more now than ever. "It's o-over."

"What's over? What's wrong?"

"Everything."

Everything is over. Everything is wrong.

Yes, that sounds about right.



Eventually, I calm down enough to tell Ceres everything.

"I'm going to kill that dirty son of a bitch," he swears. "Who the fuck is he?"

"It doesn't matter," I mumble numbly. "It's over now."

"It does matter. I want a name, Athena."

"Ceres, please," I plead, squeezing my eyes closed. "I can't do this right now."

"Shit." He expels a hard breath. "I'm sorry. I'm not trying to make you feel worse. I'm mad as hell that you're hurting. What can I do?"

"Take me back in time and tell me not to fall in love with him?"

"I wish it were that easy, kid."

"Yeah," I sigh. "Me too."

"What are you going to do now?"

"I don't know. Quit my job, I guess."

"You don't owe him that, Athena."

"I know, but it's not just about him. I wanted to quit when Dennis gave me this case," I confess. "But I'm stubborn and he annoyed me, so I decided to stick it out just to prove him wrong." An abrupt laugh erupts from my lips. "I guess that ship sailed, huh?"

"No. You proved him wrong. You did what no one else was able to do, and you got the truth. That's not a small thing, baby sister."

"Yeah, but I didn't get it because I'm good at this. He gave it to me because he knew it didn't matter if he told me or not." My bottom lip quivers. "I hate him."

"No, you don't," Ceres says quietly. "You hate that you don't hate him."

"Yeah." A tear slips down my cheek. "It'd be easier if I did." Maybe it'd hurt less. Isn't that what I really want? For it to hurt less? Because right now, it feels unbearable, like I just lost a part of myself.

How did he become so important so quickly? How did I fall so fast? God, I didn't even feel it happening. I didn't even know it was happening until it was

too late to change it. By the time I realized I was falling, I was already head over heels.

But I think I loved a lie.

And, perhaps, that's what hurts the most. I gave him all of me. But sitting here now, I'm not sure I knew him at all. I just knew what he wanted me to know. I was right about him that first day. He is one of the most dangerous men in this city. But even knowing that, I underestimated just how dangerous he would be to me.



When I wake up the following morning, it's to find him sitting on my front porch. My heart clenches in my chest, threatening to shatter all over again. He looks as wrecked as I feel. But I don't see how that's possible. He's the one who played me.

God, he played me like a freaking drum.

Fury bubbles to the surface with the thought. I spin on my heel and march back inside, going straight for the weapon I keep in the drawer beside the couch. I stomp back outside with it in my hands.

"Leave," I growl. "Now."

"Jesus Christ, Athena." He hops up from my porch swing. "Put the fucking gun down."

"Not until you get the hell off my porch."

"Put the damn gun down."

"Get. Off. My. Porch." I aim it at his feet. "Now."

"Not until you hear what I have to say."

"You said more than enough last night. In fact, you said more than enough to last night." I flip the safety off. "I'm counting to three, and then I'm pulling the trigger."

"I swear to God, if you shoot, you better shoot to kill, *bella*." His eyes glitter with fury. "Because if you don't, there will be hell to pay when I get my hands on you."

"I changed my mind," I say. "I'm not counting to three."

I pull the trigger.

Diego doesn't even flinch as the gun goes off. He doesn't move at all. Not even when shards of wood splinter inches from his feet. Splinters fly up, showering down over his shoes.

He glances at me and then down at the damage, and then back to me. "Run."

"Leave."

"Run, rabbit. Now."

Something in his tone tells me he's serious. Or maybe it's the fact that I actually just shot at him. I'm not sure. But suddenly, standing here pointing a gun at him doesn't seem like the wisest idea. In fact, it seems a little insane.

I turn on my heel, sprinting into the house.

Before I can even attempt to slam the door on him, he's coming through it, his face a thundercloud. He grabs me, yanking me up against him.

"Let me go!" I shout.

"Drop the fucking gun before you shoot yourself," he growls in my ear,

trying to pry my fingers off the weapon. "If you hurt yourself, I'm going to be pissed."

"Aren't you already?"

"You haven't seen mad yet, *bella*." He wrestles the gun out of my hand, anchoring me to his body while he turns and places it on the credenza. As soon as it's out of his hands, his hands are on me again.

He picks me up, tossing me over his shoulder.

"Put me down," I shout, trying to kick him. I pound on his back, doing everything I can to make him drop me. The overgrown jerk doesn't even miss a beat as he stomps through my house, heading straight for my bedroom.

He drops me on the bed, wrestling me into a prone position as he crawls over me. Within seconds, I'm flat on my back and he's pinning me to the bed with his body, his face inches from mine.

"You shot at me." He enunciates each word, his eyes blazing with fury.

Tears well in my eyes, spilling over. I don't want to cry. I don't even mean to do it. But he's right. I just shot at him. "I'm sorry," I cry, cracking apart.

His expression softens. His hold on me gentles. "*Bella*," he breathes, pain flaring in his expression. "Ah, *bella*. You're breaking my fucking heart."

"You already broke mine, Diego." I sniffle, glaring up at him. "You should have just let Rafe kill me. At least then it would have been a quick death." This one promises to last a lifetime. One endless day of grief after another.

"Never," he vows. "I will never let anyone hurt you."

"You hurt me. You *broke* me."

"I know." He swallows hard. "I'm going to fix it, Athena."

"It can't be fixed."

"It can," he argues. "I know it can."

"It can't."

"You wouldn't be crying so hard right now if that were true." He cups my cheek, brushing tears away. "You wouldn't have tried to shoot me if that were true."

"I want to hate you."

"Do you?"

I sniffle instead of answering.

"I'm going to fix it."

"It can't be fixed, Diego."

"It can. I already talked to Rafe. First thing tomorrow, you're taking me in for Genovese's murder."

I blink at him. "What?"

"You think I didn't give you a choice because I didn't trust you," he murmurs. "That's not true, goddess. I didn't give you a choice because I know your choice *shouldn't* be me. I'll never deserve you. I'll never be good enough for you. But I'm a selfish motherfucker and I wanted you anyway I could have you. But that isn't fair to you. You're good at your job, Athena. A helluva lot better than those pricks want to give you credit for, so this is the third option."

"Diego, this is insane." I push against his chest, demanding he let me sit up. "You can't turn yourself in for murder. You'll go to prison."

"Maybe. Maybe not." He shrugs like it doesn't matter to him either way. "But Rafe won't. And you won't lose your job because of me. Everyone wins, *bella*."

"Everyone except you!" I cry.

"You asked me if I had any regrets. I told you I had a couple. Not being able to spare you was one of them, *bella*. You weren't supposed to find out the way you did, but I always intended to tell you what was happening and

why. I just intended for you to be in love with me first." He gives me a rueful smile. "I guess I should have asked for more than twenty-four hours for that."

I stare at him, trying to formulate a response.

"If I have to lose to protect you, then I lose, Athena."

"Did you even kill Genovese?"

"It doesn't matter."

"It matters to me."

He refuses to answer, which is answer enough. He didn't do it. But he's willing to take the fall anyway. For me.

"No." I scramble into his lap, pushing him backward. "No."

"It's my choice, Athena."

"You made the choice for me. I'm making it for you. If keeping my job means you go to prison, I don't want it, Diego. I'd rather be the agent that failed than the woman who let you go to prison for a murder you didn't commit."

"I might not have pulled the trigger, but I was there when it happened. Technically, that makes me culpable under the law."

"If you turn yourself in, I'll still tell them we were sleeping together. You'll have done it for nothing."

"You won't."

"Watch me."

He glowers at me. "I'm doing this for you, Athena."

"And I'm telling you I don't want it. I refuse to watch the man I love destroy himself to save my career. It's insane, Diego!"

He falls still, staring up at me. "You love me."

He says it almost as if he's afraid to hope. It's part question, part prayer... the most vulnerable words to ever come from his lips. If I didn't love him

before, the unsteady shake in his voice would have tossed me over the edge. For someone so powerful, someone so damn indomitable to be discomposed by three little words is devastating and beautiful at the same time.

"Yes," I say, my voice clear and firm. "I love you, Diego."

His eyes drift closed on a silent prayer. It's the most peaceful he's ever looked. Until they spring open again approximately four seconds later. Adoration, vast and bright and pure, blazes in obsidian depths, searing me with the strength of his devotion.

"Ah, *bella*," he groans, moving like lightning. One minute, I'm on top of him. The next, I'm pinned beneath him again, his legs between my thighs, his hands in my hair. "You've really done it now, rabbit."

"D-done what?"

"Sealed your fate." His lips descend on mine, his kiss hungry and raw. His hands move over me, moving at the speed of light as he strips me bare, desperate to get me skin to skin. "You're supposed to run from danger, not fall in love with it."

"Guess I missed that memo," I moan, popping buttons on his shirt in my haste to get it off his perfect body. "You'll have to send it again."

"Fuck the memo. This is all mine now." He runs his hand down my body to indicate what he means. Possession blazes in his eyes as they meet mine. "All mine."

"Not unless we do it my way."

He pauses, eyeing me curiously. "And what is your way, goddess?"

"With us together, not separated by prison walls, no FBI job standing between us. But truly together."

"This is what you want?"

"You're what I want, Diego. However I can get you." What's a lifetime of

answering to men like Dennis Respert when I can spend a lifetime loving this infuriating man? They don't even compare. Maybe he was right all along. There was no choice except for this one. Not for him, and not for me, either.

Maybe Dennis was right, too. Maybe I'm not cut out for the FBI. Not because I'm a woman. Not because I belong behind a desk. And not because I'm too dainty to do a man's job. But because my heart is right here with the criminal who owns it.

"I suppose we can do it your way," he says, reaching between us to undo his pants. "But only if you promise me something."

"What?"

He doesn't say anything for a long moment as he kisses his way down my body, pulling one nipple and then the other into his mouth. He lingers for a moment over my belly, and then inches lower, blowing a hot breath over my sex.

Only when my legs are over his shoulders does he speak again.

"Only if you promise to remember that I love you more than life itself while I'm fucking you through the mattress for trying to shoot me."

My heart leaps and plummets at the same time. He loves me. And I am so screwed.

"Yeah, *bella*. You're in so much fucking trouble now," he growls, dragging me up to his wicked, smiling lips. "If you believe in God, you better start praying."

Dear God...

That's as far as I get. For a long, long time.

Epilogue



Diego

O ne Year Later

"What the fuck are you doing?"

Athena jumps a foot in the air, spinning around to face me. "Jesus, Diego! You scared me."

"I noticed. What are you doing, *bella*?"

"Nothing." One thing my wife is not is a good liar. It's still a mystery to me how the hell she graduated from Quantico when she looks guilty every time a lie passes her lips. She's wearing that look right now.

She's also trying to hide something behind her back.

I stomp into the bathroom, determined to find out what it is.

"Touch me and die, Diego Butera," she says, throwing a hand up to halt me.

I cock a brow, smirking. "You really want to play this game again, goddess?"

"No." She glowers at me. "I mean it this time."

All the more reason for me to remind her that her rules mean nothing to me. I break them because I can. Because we both know how much she loves it when I do. I'd kill for her, no questions asked. She's my heart and soul. Everything I do is for her. But no one tells me that I can't touch what belongs to me. Not even my perfect wife.

I stalk her across the bathroom, smirking. "Lose the shirt, *bella*."

"Diego, I mean it."

"So do I. Lose the shirt."

She decides to stop retreating and stand her ground. If she thinks that's going to stop me, she's wrong. I pace toward her, dragging my shirt off over

my head. It's been a long fucking day. Being in charge is for the fucking birds.

I understand why Rafe and Luca hate it so goddamn much. It's been one problem after another for the last year, and we're running out of bodies to throw at problems. But somehow, peace still holds, and we're all still walking free.

The woman in front of me has a lot to do with that. She gave her boss a bullshit story last year about a Genovese coup before she quit. I don't know how she managed to sell it, but Marcello and Callandria agreed to back the fabricated version of events. As far as the FBI knows, Genovese was taken out by his own people in punishment for his crimes. If they have doubts, they haven't voiced them.

They've had their hands too full with other problems to fuck with us lately. With Athena working as an investigator in my law firm, we tend to know which way the wind is blowing with them before they make a move. It's working well for us so far. We're treading water, at least.

But I'm fucking tired of chasing problems. It's a never-ending shitshow. I just want to spend my time lost in my wife. That's my goal in life. To spend the majority of every day inside her.

Having her at the office has been a huge help, not gonna lie. She's made it a helluva lot easier to track down motherfuckers like Donato Burciaga when they try to disappear instead of showing up to court. No one escapes for long with her running point. But having her in the office isn't the same as spending my time fucking her over every available surface.

"Lose the shirt, *bella*. If I have to tell you again, it'll be while I'm ripping it from your gorgeous body."

"Fine," she huffs, fidgeting around behind her back.

Something clatters to the floor. She squeaks and spins to grab it, but I beat her there, scooping her up out of the way before she can get to it.

"Put me down!" she cries, squirming to get free.

I ignore her, of course. Whatever she doesn't want me to see, I most definitely intend to see right now. We don't keep secrets. It almost destroyed us once. I'll never risk that shit again, and I won't let her either. When James Tackett went missing nine months ago, and she asked if I had something to do with it, I didn't lie to her. Fuck yeah, I did. He had that shit coming for disrespecting her. She wasn't happy about it, but we handled it. Together. Whatever we face, we face together. Whatever we decide, we decide together.

I scoop the plastic bar from the floor.

She jumps, trying to grab it from me.

I hold it out of her reach, trying to figure out what it is. It's maybe six inches long with a weird ass stick on the end. It doesn't make any fucking sense why she was hiding it...at least not until I flip it over and see the little window.

"You're taking a pregnancy test?" I growl, dropping my gaze to her.

"No. Um, yes." She shrugs helplessly. "I don't know!"

"Athena, *bella*." I turn her to face me, trying to think through the clamor in my mind. "You think you're pregnant?"

"I don't know," she whispers, refusing to meet my gaze.

I've been fucking her bare for the last year, trying to get her pregnant. Every time she starts her period, she ends up disappointed. But she keeps putting off going to see a specialist. I think she's afraid of what they might say. She wants kids. If we can't have them, it'll break her heart.

"I'm late." Her voice shakes.

"How late, *bella*?" I usually keep track, but I've been distracted lately.

"A week."

"Shit." I drag her into my arms, pressing a kiss to her forehead. "No matter what the test says, I love you. No matter what the test says, we will have as many babies as you can stand. Believe that, goddess."

"I'm scared."

"Then we'll do it together."

"You are not watching me pee, Diego Butera."

I chuckle. "Pee on the stick and we'll wait together, *bella*. If you don't want to look at the test, I'll look for you."

"You will?" She eyes me hopefully.

"You think I wouldn't?"

"I...no." She shrugs, her gaze darting from mine. "I guess I just didn't want us both to be disappointed when it's negative."

"Nothing about you ever disappoints me, Athena. Nothing," I growl, kissing her hard on the mouth. If she doesn't know that by now, I haven't been doing my job. She is the center of my world. It revolves around her and always will.

"Okay," she whispers.

I hold the test out to her. "Go pee, *bella*."

She takes it from me, stumbling toward the private toilet. I pace outside the door, praying to God it's positive, for my sake as much as hers. I've wanted her round with my kid since day one. God knows, I've been trying my hardest to make it happen. But either God doesn't answer prayers from motherfuckers like me, or he's taking his sweet ass time giving me what I want.

The toilet flushes and then Athena steps out with the test wrapped in a piece of toilet paper.

"Here." She thrusts it at me as if she's afraid it might burn her.

I take it, pulling her into my arms at the same time. She comes willingly, resting her forehead against my chest. We stand in silence, holding one another for a long, quiet moment. Those are rare between us. We live for the push and pull. We fucking thrive on it. I find new ways to love her every single time she gets fired up. But in these quiet moments, I find a thousand new reasons to adore her.

"No matter what, I love you," I remind her.

"I love you too," she whispers back. Even now, hearing her say it stills the restlessness in my soul like nothing else. Every damn time she says it, I find joy, shining like a beacon in the darkness of my life.

I glance down at the stick and smile.

Maybe God is answering prayers from motherfuckers like me today, after all.

"Are you ready to look now, *bella*?"

"We have to wait three minutes. It hasn't been three minutes."

"It has."

"What? No, it hasn't. Wait longer."

"Athena," I chuckle. "We don't need to wait longer. Time is up."

She looks up at me with tears in her eyes. "Maybe we should throw it away and wait for a few more days, Diego. It's probably too soon."

"It's not too soon, mama."

"It might be too soon. How would you know? You aren't a..." Her mouth snaps closed with an audible click, her eyes widening. "What did you say?"

"I said it's not too soon, mama."

"Diego." She grabs my arm, trembling. "Is it...? Are you...? Does that mean...?"

"It is. I am. It does," I whisper. "You're carrying my baby, *bella*."

She bursts into tears, flinging herself at me.

I drop the test, scooping her up into my arms to rain kisses across her perfect face, more at peace than I've ever been, happier than I deserve, and more in love with her than ever.

Author's Note

Thanks so much for reading Diego and Athena's story! If you enjoyed it, please consider leaving a review!

You can now [pre-order Domani's story](#), releasing in February of 2024!

Up next is the final book in the Silver Spoon Falls Falcons series, [Gabbi's Goalie](#), as well as [Dear Santa](#), a filthy short Christmas romance!

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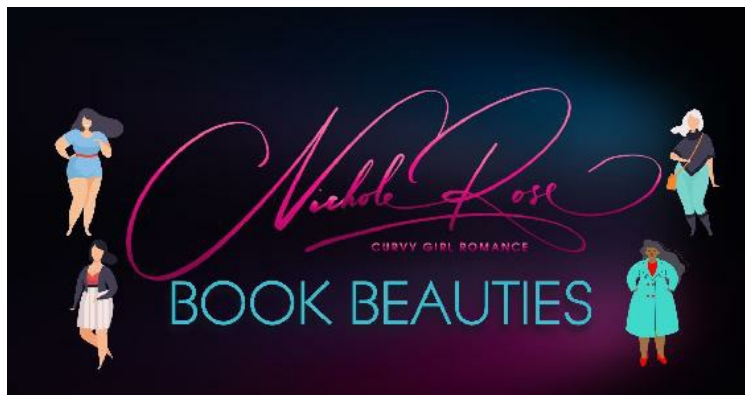


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Zane's Rebel

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Garrett's Obsession

About Nichole Rose



Nichole Rose writes filthy romance for curvy readers. Her books feature headstrong, sassy women and the alpha males who consume them. From grumpy detectives to country boys with attitude to instalove and over-the-top declarations, nothing is off-limits.

Nichole is sure to have a steamy, sweet story just right for everyone. She fully believes the world is ugly enough without trying to fit falling in love into a one-size-fits-all box.

When not writing, Nichole enjoys fine wine, cute shoes, and everything supernatural. She is happily married to the love of her life and is a proud mama to the world's most ridiculous fur-babies. She and her husband live in Arkansas.

You can learn more about Nichole and her books at authornicholeroose.com.

