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queen

*Love &
Power*

INTERNATIONAL BEST SELLER
ELIZABETH KNIGHT

Love & Power

Elizabeth Knight

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Dear Readers,

Love & Power is a book that contains quite a bit of darkness,
that could be triggering to some people.

If you feel like this could be a problem for you, please
protect yourself. No work of fiction is worth your mental
health.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Elizabeth Knight". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, decorative initial "E" on the left side.

The full list of content warnings is available on my website.

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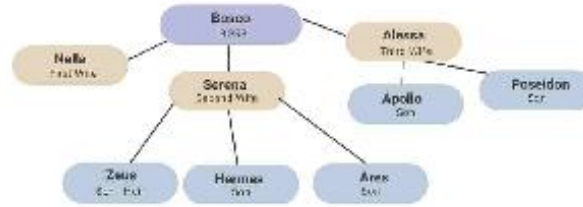
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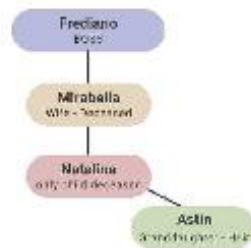
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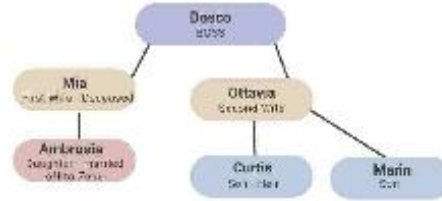
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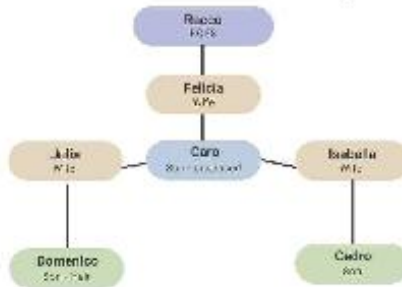
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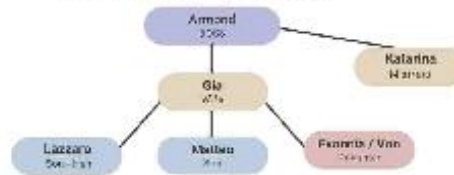
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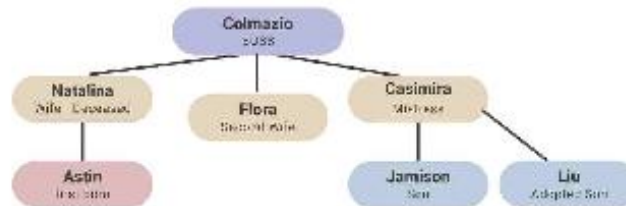
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One



My back slammed against the wall of the airplane as Luca kicked the door. Grabbing a fistful of my hair, he forced my head back, bearing my neck to him. His hot mouth latched onto my skin, kissing and nipping down the column until he got to my collarbone. My nails dug into his shoulders as I ground against him, desperate to feel the cock hidden under his slacks deep in my pussy.

“God, baby girl, I’ve missed you. Craved to touch your skin, kiss your lips, and fill that perfect pussy of yours with my cum,” Luca whispered in my ear as his hands slipped under my shirt. “I thought I could hold out longer, but there’s no fucking way I’m going to make it nine hours until we land.”

I wrapped a hand around his tattoo-decorated throat and pushed back so I could see his face. Luca’s amber eyes blazed with a possessive passion and an undertone of relief. My stoic assassin, who controlled Springmont’s port, smuggled in and out all the contraband needed to run the dark side of Caprioni

Enterprises. The man had been stuck in jail, waiting for me to get him out, trusting that I wouldn't leave him there. Every time I looked at him, it felt like a knife sliced my skin as I burned with guilt for allowing him to even be taken. Now he was free, and we were getting the hell out of dodge, ensuring they couldn't drag him back to prison.

The moment I got Luca home, it had been all hands on deck to prepare for leaving first thing the next morning. My men and I had carved out all the rot growing within our territory, allowing me to finally deal with the root of the disease. With my grandfather being the only one alerted to our arrival, we quietly packed our bags and left without warning. Once I was in the car on the way to the private airport, I called the Old Guard, alerting them to my trip and placing them in charge of keeping things running while I was gone.

Now here I was pinned to the wall by a man I'd missed more than I ever thought possible. Luca had spent most of yesterday sleeping, getting a decent meal, and watching movies with the rest of us. When I finally turned in for the night, he wrapped himself around me like an anaconda, just wanting to hold me. It would appear his needs have changed to a more primal nature.

"Who the hell told you to wait?" I asked with a smirk. "I know it sure as hell wasn't me."

"God, I fucking love you, Astin," Luca stated before slamming his lips to mine.

Releasing my hold on his throat, I wrapped my arms around his torso, hugging him tightly as he pulled away from the wall. It only took a few steps to reach the bed where he dropped me, only to pounce before I even hit the mattress. Gripping my button-down shirt, he ripped it open, sending the tiny pearl buttons flying across the small space.

“I kinda liked that shirt,” I shared.

Luca buried his face in my breasts, hooking a finger at the top of the red lace cup containing one of them. “What I have planned for you, I don’t think you’ll be upset with me for long.”

My comeback was cut off by the moan that burst from me as he enveloped my nipple with his mouth. The feel of his tongue swirling around the taut bud had me arching and begging for more. Using his free hands as he tortured me with his mouth, Luca shoved up my skirt and ripped off my matching red lace thong. I hissed at the fleeting bite of pain when the lace dug into my skin.

“I’m sorry, baby girl, my control right now is nonexistent,” Luca apologized as he moved down my body, sliding his hands behind my knees, pressing them up and open, and bearing me to him. “Everything about you is driving me crazy to the point I can’t seem to stand anything getting in my way. Don’t worry, I’ll kiss it better.”

A strangled cry was all I could manage as Luca released his pent-up need on my pussy. Spearheading me with his tongue, he moaned as if I tasted like the best he’d ever eaten. Grabbing

fistfuls of the blankets, I tried to keep from thrashing under his lethal attention, but I failed, forcing him to pin my legs down with his body weight.

“Oh fuck,” I whimpered. “Luca, I’m gonna come.”

At that declaration, he jerked back just before I fell over the edge. “I’m sorry, what was that, baby girl?”

Something that might be a mix of a pterodactyl screech and a snarl erupted out of me as I tried to sit up, but I was trapped. “I didn’t tell you so you’d stop.”

Luca grinned as the lower half of his face shone in the dim light, wet from my pussy. “Sorry about that, but you’re gonna have to trust me. When I let you come, it will rock your world so hard you’ll black out for a second. Then when your pussy walls are still shaking, I’m going to fill you with my cock and make you come again, and again, and again.” With each *again*, he slipped in a finger, stretching me, but I was more than ready for him.

“You’re lucky I like you and have an I-just-got-out-of-prison pass,” I managed to say before he started to move those three fingers.

Luca chuckled, his hot breath teasing my clit as he resumed his place between my legs. “Baby girl, we both know what’s between us isn’t as simple as *like*.”

“While I love the words coming out of your filthy mouth, I believe there is more important work to do with it,” I pointed out.

Wasting no time, it took Luca mere seconds until I was screaming his name, fisting his hair, and grinding on his face. No matter what I did, the moment he felt my walls clenching down on his fingers, he'd slow or stop altogether, and then he'd start all over again. Sweat soaked into the shirt I was still half wearing with my bra pushed up around my throat. The bunch of my skirt around my hips was uncomfortable, but none of that mattered as Luca ate me out with two fingers in my ass and his thumb in my pussy.

Just as I readied for him to back off when I came close to coming, he sped up. He wrapped his lips around my clit, letting his teeth scrape over the sensitive ball of nerves as he sucked sharply. Removing his thumb, he switched it for his other hand, using one finger to stroke over my G-spot. I was beyond sensitive—it had gotten to the point where everything was overstimulating and just this side of painful. Now that I was allowed to come, it's like my body didn't believe it would happen, stalling out with me peering over the cliff.

“Please, please, Luca, let me come,” I begged, desperation evident in my words as tears pricked my eyes. “I can't take this. I need to come.”

Luca released my clit and gazed into my eyes with calm authority. “Trust me, baby girl, I've got you. I'll give you what you need.”

In a quick movement, he pulled his fingers out of me and shifted to lay on his side so he could kiss me. I whimpered, my body twitching as it searched for the stimulation we craved but

seemed to elude us. Luca's tongue teased mine, trying to get me to engage with him, but my mind was focused on one thing—the need to fucking orgasm.

Shocking me, Luca slapped my pussy sharply twice before hooking his fingers inside it and working them in a furious frenzy. “Come for me, Astin,” Luca ordered. “Come *now*.”

And come I did.

The orgasm that slammed into me had my eyes rolling into the back of my head as the walls of my pussy clamped around his fingers. A sensation I'd never experienced before erupted in me as my entire body went rigid.

“That's it, squirt all over my hand, baby girl,” Luca praised as he continued to attack my pussy with his fingers.

Again, my lower body clenched, and that sensation of exploding happened again. “Fuck yes, soak these goddamn sheets so there is no question that our queen isn't getting taken care of properly.”

When he tried to go again, my hand grabbed his wrist. “You're going to finger fuck me raw at this rate, and I have six other men who like to use this as much as you do.”

Luca's smile was so smug I wanted to slap him, but I was riding the high he'd given me and didn't want to ruin it. “Would you look at that? Our queen has seven dark knights to do her bidding. I wonder who called that one?”

Using all the strength I could muster, I flipped him off. He caught my finger and sucked it into his mouth, letting his

tongue swirl around it before letting it pop free. “Don’t worry, I’m gonna do that in just a second.”

My sex-fogged brain didn’t catch the double meaning until he rolled me over and stripped me of all my clothing. Just as I was testing to see if my limbs still worked, hands wrapped around my ankles and dragged me half off the bed. With my feet on the floor, ass up in the air, and my upper body sprawled on the bed, Luca gripped my hips and thrust into me. I screamed as the sensitive flesh of my pussy submitted to his entry.

“Fucking hell, you’re squeezing me so tight,” Luca grunted as he slowly pulled back, only to ram right back in. “Not to mention you’re so wet it’s dripping down your legs as I fuck it out of you. Don’t worry, I’ll make sure to fill you up with something real special so you don’t feel empty after I finish.”

When someone says they were fucked into the mattress, I now understand what they mean. Hound and I had some rough primal sex that had me questioning my life choices. However, it felt like Luca was making it his life’s mission to rearrange my guts with his cock as I was in heaven.

“Yes, yes, yes,” I chanted. “Fuck that pussy like you want to split me in half.”

Clearly enjoying my encouragement, he draped himself over my back, resting one knee on the bed, giving him a deeper angle. “Is this what you wanted? Just think, I’m deep enough now that I’m fucking your womb, and when I come, I’ll paint

the walls white. Who knows if your birth control will be strong enough to stop me from fucking a baby right into you.”

“Give. It. Your. Best. Shot,” I gasped out between thrusts, knowing full well there was no chance Luca could do what he said. The man had made sure I was well aware of his kink and the lengths he went to ensure he protected his partners.

Luca slid an arm under my chest and hugged me tightly to him as his hips pistoned into me. His breath became more ragged, letting me know he was getting close. Knowing I wouldn’t be able to keep up with him being this aggressive for much longer, I clenched around his cock, causing him to hiss.

“Does my baby girl want my come that badly you’re willing to squeeze it out of me?” Luca asked, nipping at my ear. “Keep holding me tightly like that, and I’ll give you every single drop I’ve got.”

Finally, Luca roared as he slammed into me, forcing his cock as deeply as he could inside, sending me headlong into my climax. It might have been the euphoric state I was in, but I could feel every drop of his cum filling me. The warmth of it had me trembling as I came again with the pressure of his hand on my stomach so I could *feel* his cock rooted in my body.

“Holy fuck, can you feel that, baby girl?” Luca whispered in my ear. “Now I know for sure no matter what happens or however long we might go in between, your pussy will *always* remember me.”

Of that, I had no doubt, but right then my body wanted nothing more than a nap. He'd wrung every ounce of energy I had out of me in this sexcapade. Oh, it had been worth every second of it, but fuck, if I didn't need a quick nap before even trying to move.

"If that was your goal, then I'd say mission accomplished," I mumbled, attempting to brush some hair out of my face, but my arm wasn't listening.

Lovingly, Luca combed his fingers through my hair then pressed kisses across my shoulders as he bundled me up. Without removing himself from me, he shuffled us farther onto the bed and pulled a blanket over us.

"Are you just going to leave it there?" I asked, shifting to look over my shoulder at him.

Leaning down, he kissed me languidly before answering, "I don't want you spilling a drop of my cum until we shower. Call me selfish, but I'm making up for lost time right now. You've had six other men showering you with their attention when I couldn't."

"Lu—" He stopped me with another kiss.

"Don't," he warned. "There is nothing to apologize for. We have had this conversation numerous times, and my feelings on the matter aren't going to change. The more you push the fact, it makes me dig in and find other ways to make you understand. Can we please move forward instead of being planted on this single moment in our relationship?"

I knew he was right but didn't know how to let go. For most of my life, I only had Glenda to worry about, and now there were ten times that many people. "I hear you, Luca, and I don't want to be stuck here feeling guilty every time I look at you, but I don't know how to change that."

Luca sighed as he nuzzled my neck, kissing the crook under my ear. "First, you have to accept that I don't hold you responsible for how things turned out. Then you need to wrap your head around the fact that men who are madly in love with a woman will do anything to keep her safe."

My whole body froze. "What?"

"Sorry, was that too subtle?" Luca asked as he slipped out of me, rolled me on my back, and boxed me in with his arms. "See, being in solitary gave me a lot of time to think and figure out if I was left to rot in the cell, what would I regret more than anything. Well, Astin Caprioni, if there is anything you need to take responsibility for, it's making me love you. I'm not talking about lust that feels like love. Nor is it loving you for your power or position. It's not that simple, shallow, or selfish. When I cut through all the bullshit and noise, I was left with one regret that would have had me doing anything to get out of that cell."

When he didn't elaborate, I took the bait and asked, "What was it?"

"Telling the woman who found the heart I didn't know I still had that I love her," Luca confessed, stroking his fingers along my jaw. "Trust me when I say I'm prepared to carve my heart

out of my chest and hand it to you, just to be sure you believe me.”

At the mere thought of him daring to do that, my hand shot out to cover his heart, making sure I could still feel it beating in his chest. “You fucking say something like that to me ever again, I’ll cut everything out of you except your damn heart. Did you hear me when I told you I can’t lose you? I’m not joking when I say that, Luca.” My eyes burned with unshed tears as my throat tightened, making it impossible to speak.

He dropped his head to rest his forehead against mine. “That’s when I knew you loved me too, Astin. I promised myself I wouldn’t wait to tell you how I felt once you got me out. God forbid something ever keeps us apart again, but our world is full of twisted people and danger lurking in the shadows. Despite all that, I knew if I could tell you I loved you, it wouldn’t matter because you’d know how I felt. I won’t let a day go by when you don’t hear me say that to you.”

Tears slipped out, ignoring all my efforts to keep it together. “I love you too, Luca, and I’m sorry it took having you taken from me to realize it.”

“Then, in my book, it was well worth it,” Luca murmured against my lips as his cock entered me once more.

There was nothing hurried in our actions as we soaked up the feeling of being together as one. It opened up a whole new level of intimacy that ran soul deep and seemed to cement what was growing between Luca and me. As we climaxed together, I hooked a leg over his hip, holding him tight to me.

“I want to fall asleep with you inside me,” I explained. “This is the closest two humans can ever be, and I just need to feel every inch of you right now.”

“Whatever my queen wants, I will happily give,” Luca answered, adjusting so we were a woven pretzel of naked limbs as we slipped off to sleep.

Two



After sleeping for a few hours, I was awakened by some rough turbulence, but I felt completely safe trapped between Luca and Hound. I knew it was him because his black and teal hair was a dead giveaway. When Hound had snuck into the bed, I couldn't tell you, but it felt heavenly to be the center of this man sandwich.

Removing Hound's hand from my ass, I slipped under Luca's arm, freeing myself to pad over to the bathroom. The moment I felt something leaking out of me, I realized it was Luca's cum. "Shit," I swore silently as I hurried to the bathroom cupping my pussy.

Thankfully, it had only coated my thighs and didn't drip on the floor. Forgoing the toilet, I went right for the shower, knowing this was going to take more than airplane toilet paper to clean me up. Hot water cascaded over my body, relieving some of the soreness from the rough fucking I'd been blessed

with. Taking the washcloth from the rack of neatly rolled towels, I got to work.

“Luna, everything okay?” Hound asked.

I grinned as I slipped my fingers into my pussy, trying to clean out as much of this shit as I could. “Everything is perfect, why do you ask?”

Hound pulled open the small frosted glass door to see me as he leaned against the wall. “Just wanted to make sure he wasn’t too rough on you. I’ve got some pain meds and numbing cream if you need them.”

My brows shot up as I rinsed off my fingers. “Aren’t we prepared,” I commented. “Luca wasn’t any rougher than you were in the parking garage. That being said, I think my lady cave is off-limits for the rest of the day. She needs a short break after the double beating.”

The smirk on Hound’s face looked far more sinister than it was, with his spiked lip piercings and contact lenses that made him look like he had lizard eyes. “Moonflower, we all heard everything that happened in this room. Planes weren’t really meant to have soundproof walls, but fuck if it wasn’t the hottest thing ever. Ryker, the possessive bastard, gave all the flight attendants earplugs once the first of your delicious screams hit.”

I let out a huff of laughter as I tilted my head back to wet my hair. “The way that doesn’t shock me even a little bit. I suppose I should be lucky he didn’t feel the need to kill them for hearing things.”

“Oh no, that was my suggestion,” Hound interjected. “I was outvoted, though.”

That grabbed my full attention as I locked eyes with the man. “Please tell me you were just trying to scare them and weren’t serious.”

Hound shrugged. “Sorry, Moonflower, I can’t say that. No one should hear what you sound like when you surrender your body to a lover. That is for the seven of us to treasure, protect, and ensure that no one would dare to use something like that against you. We are at war, Luna, and the only people I trust with *you* are the men on this plane.”

Hearing him say that had my shoulders sagging as my heart fluttered at the romantic gesture, twisted as it was. “Hound...” I started reaching out to place my hand on his arm, but he grabbed my wrist and pulled me against his body.

“Nope, sorry you don’t get to be upset about this,” Hound informed me. “I didn’t kill them. We went with Ryker’s plan, allowing them to survive this flight. However, I will not apologize for the lengths I will go to keep the woman I love safe.”

I closed the tiny space between us and kissed him deeply. “You’re kind of jumping the gun here, lover. I wasn’t going to scold you. In fact, I thought it was rather romantic.”

“Oh...” Hound answered, a little lost in how to respond.

Pressing another kiss to his lips, I started to pull away. “Can I finish my shower now? I’d ask you to join me, but I barely fit

in here.”

“It’s fine. I’ll just enjoy the view from right here,” he said with a grin as I rolled my eyes. “This is your fault. If you hadn’t told me you’d rather me own my voyeuristic tendencies, I’d have set this jet up with all the tiny cameras I needed to keep an eye on you.”

Raising my arms, I soaped up my hair, turned my back to him, and wiggled my ass. “Look all you like,” I encouraged, pausing to look over my shoulder. “Hound, I was serious about it being a *way* bigger turn-on to see you watching me. It’s hot as hell to watch how much just looking at my body affects you.”

“I’m so fucking screwed,” Hound muttered as he unbuckled his pants, causing me to grin. “You have to be a demon. There’s no other way to make sense of how you stole my soul right out of my chest. Now I’m helpless to fight against you and your seduction, teasing me with my deepest desires.”

I’d never had much experience with someone like Hound, who craved watching as much as participating. My breath caught as he spat in his hand before fisting his cock and pumped the length of it as his eyes took in every inch of me. The sight of Hound’s piercings had my pussy dripping as it remembered the feel of those bars running down the underside of his dick.

Trying to collect myself, I worked the conditioner through my hair before stepping up to my sexy stalker. “Something tells me that a little spit isn’t enough.”

Lifting a leg, I set it on the tiny shelf for the soap, bearing my pussy to him. “I think I can offer you something better to work with.”

The sharp intake of breath as Hound’s gaze locked onto the hand I was using to gather my personal brand of lube told me I was winning at this game we were playing. There were still bits of Luca’s cum mixed in, but I knew Hound wouldn’t care about something like that. He was devoted to me in every way, but I knew he’d previously had male lovers, so he wouldn’t bat an eye. Nudging his hand until he let go of his cock, I wrapped my hand loosely around the hot, stiff velvety flesh and dragged my hand up its length.

Hound groaned, tossing his head back as I coated his cock in my offering. “There, that should be more enjoyable.”

“You sexy evil woman, how dare you torture me with such a sultry look on your face,” Hound said, his voice husky and eyes hooded as he stroked himself. “*Fuuuck*, I’m not gonna last long knowing I’m rubbing your pussy juices all over my cock.”

“Good thing since I’m pretty much done here,” I commented as I stepped back under the water. “Just need to rinse this out of my hair and double-check I didn’t miss any of Luca’s cum that dripped out of me when I got out of bed.”

I fell silent as I did exactly what I told him I would, ignoring the heavy breathing and grunts coming from Hound. Quickly, I washed my face with the body soap, knowing I couldn’t ask Hound to grab my face wash out of my bag. While it might not

be the best for my skin, it would survive a single washing. The soap slipped out of my hand, causing me to grin as I spread my legs and bent over at the waist, exposing my most intimate places to Hound.

“Holy fuck, I’m the luckiest man in the world,” Hound announced before he came, aiming his dick toward the shower as one hand braced against the wall. “Goddamn, I can’t remember the last time I came that hard from my hand. Ha, I’m even seeing fucking stars.”

Shutting off the water, I grabbed the washcloth and used it to wipe off Hound’s hand. When I switched to his cock, the movement had him moaning as he thrust into my touch. “I’m glad you enjoyed yourself. It’s helpful to find other ways to deal with the sexual appetites of seven men when I need to give my body a break.”

That comment seemed to sober Hound up instantly, causing him to zip himself back together. “What did you say? You know what, hold that thought. Let’s get you dried off first.”

Moments later, Hound had me dried, wrapped in a black silk robe, with my hair wrapped in a towel. He wasn’t done with me yet, though, as he took my hand, leading me out of the bedroom to the main cabin where the rest of my guys were sprawled about.

I was handed off to Braxton who pulled me onto his lap and kissed my neck. “Well, hello there, beautiful. Did the turbulence wake you?” I nodded absently as I tracked Hound marching back to the bedroom. “Pilot said we’re flying over

the ocean, and a storm is brewing, but we should be past it soon.”

“That’s good,” I murmured, still trying to figure out what the hell had set Hound off.

“We just have to watch out for the sharks that get flung in the air from the water tornados,” Braxton added. “It’s super rare, but if one of those sharks hit us, it could do some serious damage.”

“Sure... wait, what?” I demanded, shifting so I could see Braxton’s face. “Sharks don’t get flung into the sky, and even if they did, they’d never make it this high.”

Laughter shimmered in his dark brown eyes, a smirk tugging at his full lips. “Unless you’re in a *Sharknado* movie, then anything can happen,” he teased, then pressed a quick kiss to my lips. “So do I have your attention now, My Queen?”

“Sorry. Yes, I’m just confused. Something I said set Hound off, but I can’t figure out what or why,” I explained.

“Hmm,” Braxton hummed with a slight wrinkle appearing between his brows. “I’m sure he’ll explain himself. Hound would never do something to purposefully upset you. In the meantime, a fresh pot of coffee was made. Do you want some?”

I let out a sigh, relaxing into Braxton’s hold. “God, yes.”

Braxton chuckled as he shifted me off his lap to stand. “Want it like normal, or are we in need of something special or different?”

“Surprise me,” I answered, grabbing the blanket beside me, feeling chilled in the cool air of the plane.

“One surprise coffee for the most beautiful Mistress coming right up,” Braxton said with a dramatic bow, drawing a smile from me.

Looking around the cabin, I saw Ryker sleeping on the couch across from me with his arm tossed over his eyes. Liu was seated in one of the armchairs with his laptop on the table, the screen’s glow illuminating his face in the dim cabin light. Atticus softly snored in another armchair that was reclined with a book clutched to his chest. I didn’t see Jace immediately, but he exited the bathroom and smiled when he spotted me.

“It’s about time he let you surface,” he teased as he came to sit next to me. Jace tucked me close, only to catch my chin, tilting my head back for him to kiss me. “Did you enjoy letting Luca take control and have his way with your body, princess?”

While the dynamic between Jace and me was still settling into place, I knew he expected me to submit when he addressed me as princess. Of course, we agreed this would only happen in private moments or around those I was intimate with. Jace never wanted to compromise my standing as head of the Caprioni Family but instead offered me moments where I could let go, allowing someone else to take the reins.

“Yes, it was what we both needed,” I answered.

With a smile, Jace kissed me languidly, enjoying the intimacy of the action. “I’m glad you two could work through what you needed to. It’s more important than ever to be on the same page with everyone before we land. Something tells me this is going to be our last moments of calm.”

“My Queen, your coffee,” Braxton offered from where he kneeled before me.

I took the saucer from his hands and hummed at the scent of fresh coffee. Curious to see what he did with the drink, I sipped it, testing the temperature before taking a real taste. The smooth sweetness of chocolate greeted my taste buds as it enhanced the coffee’s flavor. A happy sigh slipped out as I took another sip.

“Oh God, this is exactly what I need,” I praised, reaching out to pull Braxton to me. “Such a thoughtful pet deserves a reward.”

I showered his face with kisses before placing one on his lips. Urging him to open his mouth so I could deepen the kiss, he obliged happily with a moan. Pulling back, I smiled and couldn’t hold back from one more quick peck as Hound returned with an irritated-looking Luca behind him.

“Did you wake him up?” I snapped.

Hound came to stand in front of me, his arms crossed as if bracing himself for my reaction. “Yeah, I sure fucking did because we have shit to talk about as a family that needs to be addressed before we land. A lot of shit has happened while he was in prison, but he’s not now, so no time like the present.”

“What the fuck is going on?” Ryker grumbled, sitting up. “You know damn well those of us out here had a hell of a time trying to fall asleep. This better be damn important.” He glanced at his watch and grimaced, rubbing his face. “Fuck my life... it’s only been two hours.”

Liu spun his chair to face us as Atticus stirred, hearing Ryker’s outburst. I watched as he adorably rubbed his eyes like a little kid, then groped around trying to find the glasses he’d set on the top of his head.

“There’s still four more hours until we land,” Ryker muttered as he continued to bitch, getting to his feet. “Did this need to happen right now? Or do you hate us all that much?”

Not waiting for Hound’s answer, he shuffled to the bathroom and slammed the door.

“And people say I’m the dramatic one,” Braxton commented, sitting next to me on the couch. “Well, Hound Dog, what’s so urgent that we need to wake everyone up?”

That got Braxton a scathing look from Hound, but he didn’t say a word until Ryker rejoined us. Having noticed all of us were in the main cabin area, the two flight attendants appeared.

“Is there anything we can get for you?” one woman asked.

“Coffee, black, leave the pot,” Ryker answered, flopping back on the couch across from me.

The others echoed their desire for coffee as well. Not wanting to share our personal matters, further conversation

waited until everyone had their coffee. The attendants also left a tray of fruit, nuts, and cheeses on the table between the two couches. Silently disappearing as quickly as they appeared, we were once again alone.

“All right, Hound, let’s hear it,” I urged. “What has gotten you so worked up?”

“I’m not worked up,” he countered.

I just raised a disbelieving brow at him but stayed silent as I drank my yummy coffee.

“Hound, if you wish us to have a particular discussion as you’ve alluded to, then I believe it would help if you tell us what it is,” Atticus reasoned.

All eyes were on the man as he chewed on one of his lip piercings, telling me he was nervous about what he had to say. “Fine, I’ll just get right to the point since I can’t think of a way to say this without offending someone.”

Ryker let out a huff of laughter. “What else is new?”

Hound flipped the man off but kept his attention on me. “Luna, you said something to me in the shower, and it got me thinking. There are seven of us and only one of her...” he paused to hold up his hand to stop anyone from cutting in, “... I know, I know, this is not news to any of us. However, I don’t think I really understood what that meant for *her*.”

“I’m not sure I’m following your logic,” Liu said after a moment.

Grumbling to himself, Hound rubbed the back of his neck. This wasn't a man to get embarrassed, but there it was right before my eyes, written all over his face. "Fuck... okay, let me spell it out this way. After the gala, Astin and I took the evening to ourselves as you know. None of us talk to each other about what happens during our alone time... it's nobody's business but our own. That being said, I think that needs to change *slightly*."

None of that cleared anything up, but I felt he was just pausing to collect his thoughts and had more to say.

"Hound isn't just a name for being able to sniff out any code, it's also because I'm a huge fan of primal play when it comes to sex. That night, I sent Luna into the parking garage to find the car and hunted her down. When I eventually caught her, there was nothing loving or gentle about the fucking I gave her. Forgive me for being crass, but that pussy was fucked rough and raw as she was bent over the car. Then when we got back to the house, we fucked a few more times, not as rough. Gentle lovemaking isn't my strong suit, but I'll do anything for my Moonflower," he admitted, his eyes locked on me as he said that last sentence. I smiled reassuringly at him, wanting to make sure he knew I wasn't upset and understood where he was going with this.

"Ah... I see what you're getting at," Luca said, scratching his jaw, looking slightly disconcerted. "Unknowingly, I came charging in a day later determined to split our girl in half when I should have reined it in a little."

Hound's hand snapped to point at Luca. "Yes, exactly that."

"Hold up a second," I cut in. "I'm fairly certain I was part of all this, and not once did I say stop, slow down, not so rough, or anything to indicate I wasn't enjoying myself."

"No, baby girl, he has a valid point," Luca stated. "I agree that you absolutely have the right to choose how, when, and with whom you have sex. That isn't the point of this, not really. As your lovers and partners, we need to be aware of what situation we're walking into. Had I known you and Hound got down and dirty primal style, what happened in that bedroom would have gone differently. Don't get me wrong, I still would have fucked you into the mattress, but there were things I could have done to prevent further discomfort."

I didn't see the point of this conversation or why it mattered. If I was happy and enjoying myself, then what was the problem? They'd been doing so well not treating me like I was fragile, well, physically that is. Yet right now, that's all I'm hearing them say.

A hand gripped my jaw and turned me so I was looking at Jace. "Babe, you're not listening to them. I can see it written all over your face that you have your hackles up. No one is saying you can't have rough sex whenever or how often you like... it's your body, your call. What you're not hearing is sex involves two people. No..." he warned, holding up a finger and gripping my jaw just a little tighter. "Listen to learn, don't listen to respond."

That had me blinking at him in confusion, but unable to ask what he meant, I just waited for him to continue.

“You know everything that happens between each of us because you’re there for it all. We only know what goes on between the two of us, leaving us in the dark about everything else. Let’s pretend that Braxton and I have an intense session where there’s a lot of impact play. On certain occasions, he and I explore the limits of his masochist tendencies, meaning learning where his pain threshold is. No matter how careful I am when he’s lost in subspace, he doesn’t safeword out when he should. As his Dom, I watch for the signs and check in, but he knows what his body can handle. I don’t. When those occasions happen, it can leave him sore, bruised, and hypersensitive to certain things,” Jace explained as he searched my face to see if I was following.

“Now, as it stands, you and I don’t have any agreement to share what happened in our session. The only communication so far in that regard is to alert the other if a rule has been put in place that the other needs to be aware of. So there you are unaware of Brax’s night with me, and he doesn’t say anything to you because our puppy doesn’t view it as an issue. How would you feel if you slammed him into a wall, fucked him against it, only to discover his back is covered in welts and bruises from the night before,” Jace questioned, smirking at the anger of this imagined situation sparked inside me. “Something tells me you’d be hunting my ass down to find out what the hell happened and why I didn’t tell you. Well, that’s how Luca now feels after learning about Hound’s exploits.

You consented, knowing the whole story, but Luca did not and that's not fair to him or Hound who now feels guilty he didn't bust in there and warn him."

Fuck. The man was making a point I seriously couldn't argue with.

Three



It was easy to see when the lightbulb went on in Luna's brain as her shoulders sagged. Jace released his hold on her, allowing her to look from me to Luca then back to me. From the moment the two of them went back into the room, I knew they were going to fuck—we'd all been surprised it didn't happen last night. Hell, I don't think I could have waited longer than getting to the house to savor the thing I'd missed most after three weeks in jail. Yet something had been nagging at me, and I couldn't put my finger on it.

When I was sure they'd fallen asleep, I snuck in there, needing to make sure she was okay. They were tangled up in a sexy embrace with Luca's cock still buried in her pussy. I tried to leave them be, to let them have their movement, but I couldn't force myself to go back out there. Instead, I climbed in behind her, kissing along her spine, letting her know I was there guarding her back. I hadn't planned to fall asleep, but

having her close, knowing she was safe, was all I needed to pass the fuck out.

The realization I felt guilty didn't hit me until she snuck out of bed, froze, swore, then cupped her pussy bolting for the bathroom. Fear that she was hurting had me stalking after her to fix what I'd done, only to be greeted with the frosted outline of Astin doing a Captain Morgan impression, muttering under her breath about cum everywhere. Relief had me sagging against the wall as I watched her, analyzing every movement to ensure she was okay. After watching her for years, I knew when she was hurting, and while I saw signs of discomfort, there was nothing to indicate what I feared.

Feeling better about the situation, I let her know I was there and gave into my favorite hobby—watching Astin. The joy I'd felt when she gave me the green flag to watch her in person would have terrified the average person. Thank fuck, my Moonflower was anything but average—she was a goddess. All that warm and fuzzy shit came to a screeching halt the second she confessed sex would need to be off the table for a day or so. Then the knife of guilt stabbed me in the heart at the fact that the woman I loved more than anything in the world thought she was responsible for dealing with all our sexual needs.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Astin Caprioni was our queen, and we were her dark knights, ready and willing to serve, protect, and love her in every way possible. She owed us nothing and certainly wasn't responsible for our needs, sexual or otherwise. This needed to be made clear along with a

few other things before we entered the labyrinth of hell the founding families created for us.

“I understand where you’re coming from, Hound, and what you are trying to say,” Astin said as she rose and walked over to me. The warmth of her hand on my chest, over the heart that beat only for her, caused me to let out a shuddering breath. “I’m sorry I put you in a position like that, and I’m glad you made us have this conversation. Having one relationship is hard for anyone who’s never experienced it, but juggling seven is on a whole other level of complexity.”

My hand covered hers a moment before I pulled it up to kiss her palm. “You’re not the only one trying to learn as we go along... we are too. That’s what this conversation is about if we cut to the core. We don’t know until we don’t know, then we have to find a way to fix it. Let me be clear, you are not responsible for taking care of my sexual needs. All of us are grown-ass men who have come up with ways to deal with our lower brain. It just took me a minute to really understand that while I have just you to devote all my attention to, you split that between seven of us, not to mention running the Caprioni Family. The last thing you need to worry about is when the last time you got me off was.”

She snorted in laughter, shaking her head as I hugged her. “Just to be clear, if you think the solution to deal with your needs is to stick your dick in someone else I’m not fucking, you won’t have that dick for long.”

That had me grinning as I whispered in her ear, “Does that mean you’ll share Jace and Braxton with me?”

“Maybe, but that’s a conversation for another time,” she mumbled into my chest.

I pulled off the towel wrapped around her hair and kissed her head. “That’s fair, and just to be clear, I won’t mention it again unless you bring it up. As long as I have you, anything else is a bonus. I got the grand prize right here.”

Astin groaned and looked up at me. “Would you like some wine with that cheese?”

“Nah, why mess with something when it’s already perfect,” I reasoned.

Rolling her eyes, she pulled away from me and sat in one of the armchairs. She automatically crossed her leg, causing the bathrobe to open, showing off her long, perfect limb and making my mouth water. Now that I’d finally tasted the forbidden fruit, I wanted nothing more than to live between her thighs, but as I just stated, that was a problem for me to deal with.

“So now that we’ve brought this concern to light, how do we move forward?” Astin inquired, acting like the queen she was.

Atticus raised his hand, drawing all our attention.

“Do you have a question, or are you offering a suggestion?” Liu asked.

“Neither, more of an addition since I believe both matters tie into each other, or at least they do in my mind,” Atticus

explained.

A-Dog wasn't everyone's cup of tea, but damn, they were missing out on a cool dude. He'd grown a lot since the last time I met him, but I had the feeling our Luna had everything to do with that. Astin had no idea how she'd changed us all for the better by being in our lives. I think it's one of the reasons we all love her as deeply as we do. I know for myself it's a major part of it.

Astin swiveled her chair to face the man. "Care to share what that addition is, Atty?"

"It was mentioned to me by Ryker that I might have taken your invitation to sleep with you anytime too literally. I'm aware that I'm not the only one who wants to sleep with you fairly often, but I respect that everyone deserves time as well. Perhaps we could create a way to know if we are welcome to join you or if it is a private night," Atticus elaborated.

The room fell silent as we contemplated this dilemma. It was something we needed to figure out but not that simple to fix. Of course, I would just see who joined her for the night and take my chances, but Atticus wouldn't do well with that approach.

"Would it be inappropriate to create a calendar?" Atticus questioned. "Then we can sign up for specific nights and make notes if we need to be aware of something. I'm certain that Hound could make it secure from others discovering it."

While it wasn't the most romantic idea, it would solve the problem. Although the wrinkle on Astin's nose told me she

didn't love the idea.

“Let's start simple. Who isn't willing to sleep in the same bed with others there on a regular basis? I'm talking sleep, good old-fashioned cuddling up and zonking out for the night,” I asked.

No one spoke up as they looked around the room at the others. We'd all crashed in her bed one night, and there'd be no issue. Well, no issue until Jace decided to get a little handsy and roped Liu into the shenanigans. I personally enjoyed every minute of it, but the others left, allowing the threesome to have their privacy.

Which led me to my second question. “Who would prefer not to share their sexy time with another lover in the bed or room?”

Pretty much everyone turned to look at Ryker since we all knew he was a possessive asshole about Astin. As this relationship evolved, he'd been the one to struggle most with it. Yet, I had a feeling things would get better now that Luna had forgiven him.

“What?” Ryker demanded. “Why is everyone giving me the side-eye? What about Atticus? I don't feel like he's one to be comfortable with the idea either.”

“Come on, man, you can't be surprised by our reaction,” Jace reasoned. “Since day one, you've been an ass about things. You tried to keep us from flirting with her and even became a major cockblock just to keep her to yourself.”

Ryker started to argue then stopped, realizing he didn't have a leg to stand on in this fight. "All right, you've made your point, but things are different now. I want what will make Astin happy and having all of you as her boyfriends, lovers, whatever we're calling ourselves does that. Sharing a bed when it's just sleep is one thing, but I don't know that I'm ready to watch someone else fuck her in front of me. Just to be clear, I'm not trying to keep her from anyone, and I'm not mad about her sleeping with you guys. What I struggle with is having to *see* it happen."

Leaning forward, he pinned Astin with his gaze, making sure he had her undivided attention. "Tin-Tin, I meant what I said. I'm not walking away from you or this relationship we all have together. Remember, I told you that I'd do just about anything for the person I love? Well, I'm working on accepting that this..." he gestured toward us, "... is our future, and I need to find peace with it so I can love you the way you deserve to be loved. While I'm working on that, I ask that you all give me the time to adjust and respect where my boundaries are right now. My hope is one day none of this will bother me in the slightest, but I'm not there yet."

Damn, if that wasn't the most vulnerable I've ever seen that man, laying it all out there for everyone to hear where he's at. That was a request I could respect, and I bet the others felt the same way. None of us would want to be forced to accept something just to make others feel more comfortable. If Ryker needed time, and his one request was no sex in front of him, we had no reason not to oblige.

“I’m glad to hear I’m not the only one working to adjust to this unconventional relationship,” Liu admitted. “As you already know, I have no problems with sharing a bed or room, no matter the activity, with any of you. However, I would like for us as a unit to possibly consider having a daily check-in. I don’t mean I want us all to chat about our day or go over any issues we’re having with each other unless we need to. More as a chance to let others know if we need time with Astin, alone.”

“Can you explain what you mean a little more? I’m not sure I’m following,” Braxton commented.

Liu nodded and rubbed his hand nervously on his slacks. “I suppose what I’m trying to say is I feel late to the party, and my relationship with Astin isn’t at the same level as all of you. The five of you were picked to be Astin’s lieutenants, allowing you to spend far more time with her since she moved in. My whole existence was centered around our late boss. So having the chance to ask for time alone with Astin while keeping everyone in the know prevents any hard feelings. All of us are on the same page and can do the same if it’s needed.”

“So you’re talking about going on dates,” Astin said, looking to Liu for confirmation.

The normally stoic man looked about as awkward as a teenager asking a girl out on a date for the first time. “Yes, I suppose that would be correct in the most basic sense.”

“Might I point out this is where the calendar would come in handy,” Atticus interjected. “This way, if any of us are out of

town or unable to be part of the conversation, it will be noted on the day and time in question.”

As crazy as it sounds, Atticus’s calendar was sounding more appealing as we talked. Astin absently twirled a strand of hair between her fingers as she considered everything. None of us spoke up having a better idea to offer, so we let our queen and her brilliant mind work.

“I don’t think this is something we’re going to solve before we land,” Astin determined. “Partially because there are so many unknown factors and because I don’t think we’ve officially been a *thing* long enough to see if a natural rhythm occurs. Jace and Brax have their relationship in addition to the one I share with them, so I think it would be safe to say there are times they’ll want to be together without us. One of you might not enjoy sleeping in my room and want me to sleep in your space. There are too many factors to make a firm call on how things will work in the long run, so my suggestion is we test things out and find what works or what we need to change,” she reasoned, making perfect sense to me.

“Atticus, if you could work with Hound to make a secure calendar, I think no matter what, with eight people to keep track of, we’re going to need it. For now, I plan to keep breakfast mandatory for us all to be at just like always, even if we’re in my grandfather’s home. Should there need to be a discussion or any of you want to claim some one-on-one time, we can do it then. Nothing will be set in stone in this relationship, ever. Something tells me it will always be growing and evolving just as we will over the years we’re

together. How does everyone feel about my suggestions?" Astin inquired, making it clear she was asking as our girlfriend and not as our boss.

My cheeks hurt as I grinned widely. "You just admitted to seeing if our relationship could last for years. That's a good enough guarantee for me that we'll figure this shit out one way or another."

With a sexy wink in my direction, she rose once no one had anything more to add. "Since we have roughly three more hours left, I'm gonna pull myself together. I think the smart choice is for everyone to try and stay awake. When we land, it's going to be eleven, and grandfather said it would be an hour's drive to his estate, meaning it will be midnight or later, and you can sleep all you want when we get there."

Ryker groaned but didn't argue as he grabbed the carafe of coffee and filled his cup. "If I'm forced to stay awake after getting blue balls from hell, better believe I'm sleeping in her bed when we get there."

I chuckled as I watched Braxton follow our girl back to the bedroom. It's official. No matter what, I was making sure this plane had cameras everywhere. Then I can watch her get ready and let one of the others have time with her. Who said stalking couldn't have its advantages?

Four



When we exited the plane, my grandfather stood before four black SUVs with armed men standing guard. Frediano Raffa was an imposing yet handsome man, even in his old age, dressed smartly in a three-piece suit. He kept his dark gray hair long but pulled back in a low ponytail. The salt and pepper beard was neatly trimmed and shaped to show off his strong jawline. While I'd only seen her in pictures, I knew he had the same blue-colored eyes as my mother.

He'd been the one to suggest timing our arrival so we landed late when a minimal number of people were at the private airport. The longer we could keep my arrival in Nepreea a secret, the better. Frediano hugged me and shook the guys' hands before ushering us into two vehicles. I was a little startled to be driving at breakneck speed down the highway, but my grandfather seemed unbothered.

"Care to share why we're driving like we're in the Indy 500?" I asked. Frediano seemed confused by my question, so I

elaborated. “Your driver is maxing out the speedometer. Is there a reason we’re going so fast?”

Understanding shone in his blue eyes. “It ensures we don’t have a tail following us back to the estate. If anyone else is driving as fast as we are, it would be easy to spot.”

“Are we worried about that?” Jace questioned.

My grandfather turned to look at the man seated behind him. “We Raffas always worry.”

Frediano let that statement linger as if it should be a known fact before continuing, “It’s how we’ve managed to exist for so long when the Accardi and Leoni Families have been trying to wipe us off the face of the planet for years.” He shifted his gaze back to me. “There is a lot for you to learn about being born from one of the five families, my girl. It’s going to take every skill you possess to do what you have planned.”

Worry niggled at the back of my brain, wondering if I miscalculated this move. Then Darkness reached out to me, almost as if trying to offer me comfort in her own way. It was an odd feeling but one I genuinely welcomed, knowing this marked progress toward bringing the two pieces of myself together.

Grandfather patted my leg. “Take a breath, my girl. I made sure you were prepared for when the time came to avenge your mother. Why do you think I pushed you as hard as I did when you were younger? You needed to be the best of the best... more ruthless than anyone who’s come before you in the Raffa

line. You've already shown me you have what it takes to destroy those closed-minded bastards."

"Thanks, old man," I said with a teasing smile. He grunted his disapproval but didn't comment on the term of endearment. "So tell me, who lives on the Raffa Estate and what do they know about me?"

"They know my granddaughter is the heir to the Raffa Family. That hasn't been a secret even if it was kept from you. It was your late father's choice, and one I know you're aware I didn't agree with. As for tonight, only the staff I trust implicitly knew when you're arriving and where you'll be staying. I felt it was prudent to minimize the spread of information," Frediano shared. "Even those who are loyal to the family can unintentionally say something in public that could be overheard by unwanted ears. My plan is to give you a day to settle, show you what has always been yours, and introduce you to a few key allies."

Nodding, I ran my hand through my hair. "While I know all the key players of the five families and the basic history, not much was shared about their estates. I don't even know what yours looks like or its location. Are we heading to a city? Out into the country? Who knows... it's pitch-fucking-black out there, not even a streetlight to be seen in the distance."

"There would be no reason for you to spend time learning that information. Each of the five families owns many properties throughout the country that are used for various reasons. I have a lovely villa in Capsurta, one of our largest

cities in Nepreea, but there are ten other properties I could pick to stay at as well,” Frediano said, flicking his fingers as if this was no big deal.

“Tonight we are going to the oldest property owned by the Raffa line, the La Prosperità Estate. It’s in wine country and was once a monastery, but the monks abandoned it during a war about a century ago. It is a vast estate with a main house created from the living quarters of the monastery, barns for livestock, and with various outbuildings for supplies and tools to farm the land and tend to the vineyard. Some people rent part of the land and the houses built on those plots.”

“Smart way to keep eyes on the property without making it obvious,” Luca commented approvingly.

Frediano smirked. “I thought so, which is why I keep up the tradition. We keep a vast amount of the family history at this estate in the old catacombs under the main house. They wind and weave all over the property, allowing us to move goods in and out with none the wiser.”

“This sounds like a perfect place for a mafia family to own,” I mentioned wistfully. “Seems to me the biggest advantage is the history of Nepreea. You’d be hard-pressed to find anything older than five hundred years.”

“Astin, have you already forgotten this estate is yours?” Grandfather chided. “Everything ever owned by a Raffa is now yours as the sole heir to the line. This is what makes you so dangerous.”

He was right. I had no idea what it meant for me to be the heir of the Raffa line. My father willed everything to me with the exception of the house Casimira and Jamison lived in. Daddy had also ensured that Jamison had a trust to pay for college as well as leaving an account in Casimira's name, leaving her set for life. Even with that removed from what I was given, I'd never have to worry about my future. Caprioni Enterprises was a billion-dollar company in its own right without all the illegal work done through the channels it provided. Now here was my grandfather telling me that on top of all that I had over a century's worth of money, land, and history just sitting here waiting for me.

The rest of the ride was silent as I tried to digest the reality that I'd mentally *known* about, but knowing and understanding are two different things.

My whole life had been in preparation for me to take over the Caprioni Family, but why had he been so against anything to do with Mother's side of the family? Thinking back on the video of Daddy marrying Mother and Casimira, I knew there was a time when Grandfather was furious with them. Yet that changed once I was born. They'd even allowed Frediano to train me like all Raffas were, so why ignore the rest of it? When I thought I'd figured it all out, more questions seemed to appear. Maybe being here where it all started will give me more understanding.

Lights in the distance drew my attention as we approached an ornate-looking metal gate. A guard stepped up to speak with the driver in the car ahead of us before the gate was

opened. Soon the gate rolled back, allowing us to enter a narrow gravel road. We traveled slowly down for what seemed like an eternity before the main house came into view.

My jaw dropped at the sight of the beautifully preserved stone monastery. It still had its bell tower as if to pay homage to its origins. Stepping out of the vehicle, I took a moment to gaze at the masterpiece that had been built hundreds of years ago. Oh, how the monks buried on this land must be rolling in their graves to know what kind of work is done here now.

I felt someone step up behind me, resting their hands on my hips. “Tin-Tin, is that what I think it is?”

Ryker had been in the car behind us, so our destination was a complete surprise. “Yup, only the mafia would take over an abandoned house of God and use the catacombs to smuggle shit through.”

He laughed under his breath. “We’re all going to hell, aren’t we?”

Leaning against him, I tilted my head back. “As long as we all go together, I don’t really care where we end up.”

Ryker’s eyes softened as he kissed my forehead. “You have no idea how much it means to hear you say things like that. Damn near thought I fucked it up for good the way you were so mad at me.”

“Yeah, well, don’t fuck up again. Then there’s nothing to worry about,” I reasoned. “Come on, let’s see what this place looks like inside.”

Frediano was waiting for us at the massive arched wooden door that looked like it could withstand just about anything. Standing on either side of the door were men with guns, not at all trying to be subtle about their purpose being there. They bowed their heads in greeting as I passed through the archway into the home's main room. The intricate mosaic tile on the floor was not what I'd expected, but I had to remember this hadn't been a monastery for a long time. I assumed this used to be the main worship area with the vaulted ceiling and stained-glass windows at the top where the sun was sure to illuminate them. Now it appeared to be a formal sitting room with a giant fireplace and a cheerful flame burning in it to greet us.

“*Benvenuto.*” Two women greeted in unison with a slight bow.

“*Piacere di conoscerLa,*” I responded with a warm smile, then turned to my grandfather and spoke in a low voice, “I forgot to ask if your staff only speaks Nepreeian... some of my lieutenants don't.”

“It is common for Nepreeians to speak more than one language. However, I ensured all my staff and members of the Raffa Family could speak English since it is one of the most spoken languages in the world,” Frediano assured me. “Your men will be able to navigate this country just fine, but it wouldn't hurt to get them started learning. They say immersion is the best teacher.”

Resting a hand on my back, he directed me forward until we stood before the women. “Beatrice, Gemma, this is my granddaughter, Astin Caprioni.”

The women gasped and curtsied as if I were royalty, keeping their eyes downcast. Frowning, I looked at my grandfather, but he seemed pleased with the response, so I let the matter drop—*for now*.

“These two ladies will help you with anything you need, Astin. Their families have been loyal to the Raffa name for generations, and I picked them personally to assist you while in Nepreea. I know you have a loyal man in Boykov who will be joining us tomorrow, but I felt it might be best to have two more bodyguards who won’t be quite so obvious,” he explained, smirking at my startled expression. “Don’t let the uniform fool you. These two ladies are deadly with a blade and near-perfect aim with a gun. They will keep you safe if you let them do their jobs.”

As surprised as I was, grandfather made a valid point. I was used to having a home full of people who were loyal to me and security measures in place should things go sideways. Here in Nepreea, I was at the mercy of my grandfather who I was forced to trust if I wanted to take down two of the strongest families. Boykov was one man, a fact I was facing even at home with the addition of Thad to my personal security team. Beatrice and Gemma would help relieve some of the stress from my main man, Ralph, allowing him the chance to stay on top of his game.

I extended my hand to Gemma, a sweet-looking woman about my age with hazel eyes, freckles, and red hair. “It’s nice to meet you, Gemma.”

She took my hand hesitantly as if she was sure I was going to play some trick on her. “*Signora Astin.*”

“I prefer to be called Lady Astin or Mistress,” I shared.

“Apologies, Lady Astin,” Gemma corrected, releasing my hand.

“Nothing to apologize for... you didn’t know. Besides, I think *signora* translates close enough. However, it helps if we have an established name for you to use so I know if something’s wrong. Otherwise, people could be calling me all kinds of respectful things, and I’d never know if you’re trying to signal me to a problem,” I explained, causing both women’s eyes to widen in surprise. “I just didn’t want you to think I was fussy for no reason. You’ll learn fast that I always have a purpose behind my requests whether you realize it or not.”

“*Che figata,*” Beatrice said in awe, shaking my hand with hers. “The rumors are true then... you do have a mischievous mind, always thinking and plotting.”

Beatrice seems slightly younger than Gemma with dark curly hair and eyes as green as fresh grass. Her energy reminded me a lot of Braxton—playful and full of life. It was going to be so much fun to see how seriously old Ralph was going to deal with these two. I’d left him behind to make sure that the Old Guard was set up with whatever they needed to watch over things while I was gone. It would also make people

question if I really left the town, let alone the country. People were well aware I didn't go many places without my looming bodyguard.

"I suppose so." I laughed, flattered at the rumor.

One of the guys snorted behind me. "Don't even try to deny that, Luna. It's one hundred percent true."

I scowled at Hound over my shoulder and flipped him off. In turn, he held his hands up in the shape of a heart and fluttered his lashes at me.

"Oh God," I groaned, returning my attention to the two ladies. "I think it's about time I get him to bed. He becomes far more annoying the longer he stays awake."

Beatrice tried to hide her smile by dropping her head, but the way her shoulders shook, I knew she was laughing. Gemma cleared her throat forcefully at Beatrice, who instantly righted herself with a neutral expression resting on her face. While Gemma might look sweet and gentle, I was getting the feeling she might be the opposite.

"Signor Raffa, would you like us to take them up to their rooms?" Gemma asked, her tone full of reverence.

Grandfather nodded but took both my hands in his. "You and your men will have the whole third floor to yourselves. My rooms are on the second level should you need me. There are ten bedrooms along with a private sitting room for you to enjoy in peace. The only people on my staff who will step foot on the third floor are these two ladies and two maids who

maintain the house. I will introduce you to them tomorrow so you know what they look like. Sleep well and sleep as long as you like. We need you rested and your mind clear.” He kissed my cheeks before squeezing my hands.

Beatrice gestured for us to follow her as she took us down the hall to a flight of stairs. The ornate manner of the polished wooden staircase had me guessing this wasn't original to the monastery but was still old. When we got to the second floor, Beatrice pointed out Grandfather's personal study and bedroom among the row of doors. There were also men standing guard as if this was the royal palace, but as Grandfather had mentioned before, I was going to need to adjust my thinking. I was safe for the most part with an ocean between the lions who were hunting me down and me. All that changed the second I set foot in Nepreea. This was their world, and I was the fish out of water.

“Only two rooms have a bathroom connected to them,” Beatrice informed us. “Both are at the end of the hall opposite each other. The remaining eight rooms have two bathrooms to share with double sinks. I'm sure this will be an adjustment for you all, but there is only so much you can do with a historic building. All the rooms are prepared so choose whichever you like, and we'll bring your luggage to you.”

I felt a little guilty about the number of suitcases I'd packed, but I had no idea what to prepare for. While I could go shopping, easily finding the latest fashions and trends, there were just some things you needed to guarantee you had with you. Walking to the end of the hall, I opened the door to the

left first, peeking into the room. It was incredibly small compared to any room I've had before, but the furniture was high quality and looked comfortable. Poking my head into the room opposite, I smiled at the sight of a canopy bed.

What caught my eye was the canopy wrapped in aster flowers and ivy instead of being shrouded in sheer fabric. They were my mother's favorite flowers and something that inspired her for my name. A vintage cream and gold vanity sat just under a window with a short, round stool providing the perfect height to use the mirror. Walking farther into the room, I found a small sitting area with a sage green chaise and two matching armchairs with a cream-colored coffee table. A pair of doors just beyond the seating area caught my eye. The glass panes had been frosted for privacy since the bathroom was just to the right.

The handles turned easily, and I pulled them toward me, revealing a balcony. It was only big enough for one chair to sit on it with a slender table beside it. The railing was lined with boxes of flowers draping over the edge. Moving the chair out of the way, I gazed down and with the soft light from the house illuminating the space, I discovered a courtyard. In the shadows, it was a whimsical sight with a fountain in the center, cobblestones, and lush plants giving life to the harsh stone home.

"This was your mother's room, you know," someone said from behind me.

Five



Startled, I spun to face the intruder, gun drawn. Gemma raised her hands, showing me she was unarmed and took a few steps back. “I apologize, Lady Astin, I didn’t mean to startle you.”

It took my brain a minute to register that she was speaking in Nepreeian. “What did you say?” I asked in the same language without lowering my weapon.

“This room was one your mother used when staying here. Signor Raffa guessed you might enjoy it as much as your late mother did, which is why he’s having you stay on this floor,” Gemma explained, not moving a muscle. “Lady Astin, I mean you no harm. There is no need for the gun.”

“Words mean nothing. People will say whatever they need to to get the results they want,” I stated, having learned this lesson firsthand. “Why did you come into this room without making yourself known and speaking a language you had no

way of knowing I was fluent in? I believe my grandfather asked the staff to speak English around us.”

She nodded. “Yes, Signor Raffa did give that order, but you forget he picked me to be one of your bodyguards.” Slowly, she lowered her hands to clasp them loosely. “The Don of our Family entrusted me with the sole heir to the Raffa name, and you don’t think he mentioned you speak perfect Nepreeian? Lady Astin, I do not say any of this to frighten or alarm you, but I don’t think you understand the importance you hold. For me to be selected, given the honor and trust of our leader to guard your life is the highest reward imaginable.”

“These are still just words,” I pointed out. “All I hear you saying is that you’re loyal to my grandfather. That he is the one you’re willing to die for, and since he asked you to protect me, you’ll do that... *for him*. None of that gives me any confidence in your ability to keep *me* alive. What if one day your Don changes his mind and tells you to kill me? Better yet, if you do kill me, then he’ll name you heir for your show of loyalty.”

Gemma held my gaze unflinching as I questioned her intentions. There was far more to this woman than you saw at face value. She’d been through hell and come out the other side stronger despite all the scars hidden deep inside. “Ivy told me you’d be the only one to take down the families and help us. I’m beginning to think she’s right.”

“Ivy, you mean Ivy Foxxx?” I asked, caught off guard by the shift in the conversation.

“Yes, Ivy called me a few days ago. She knew you’d be coming to Nepreea soon and wanted to make sure I’d say yes to being one of your bodyguards. You see, Ivy saved my life five years ago when I was taken off the streets and sold by the Accardi Family to be a sex slave,” Gemma said as she extended her wrist to show off a brand of an ‘X’ with a dot above and below. It was the same mark I’d seen on Ivy when we went dress shopping. “They knew my family was connected to the Raffas and wanted to prove they weren’t scared of Signor Raffa. The older he gets, the more bold they become, and no one knows why. Well, except for Ivy who wouldn’t tell me much but enough to look at things differently.”

I tried not to dwell on the fact that once more, Ivy was acting on information she definitely shouldn’t have. Thank fuck she wanted to be my best friend, and I really liked her too because I would hate to have to kill her.

“Well, here I am and so are you. Did Ivy’s call influence your decision to be my bodyguard? A moment ago, you said the honor of being asked by my grandfather was too vast to say no. So which is true? Are you here to see if I’m worthy of your loyalty because of my grandfather or Ivy?” I challenged, feeling like this conversation was going nowhere, and my arm was starting to get tired.

In a surprising move, Gemma walked right up to the gun, pressing her forehead against it. “It doesn’t matter what I think if you don’t believe I can ever be trusted. Both Signor Raffa and Ivy have my respect and trust. Being picked for this job *is*

one the highest honors for me and my family for years of loyalty. However, I have yet to find someone to give *my* loyalty to, and the things I hear about you gives me hope.”

For the first time since we were introduced, I felt like I was seeing the real Gemma. Just for a moment, her shield slipped, and I could see the survivor before me, filled with so much rage at what had been done to her. In that second, I knew I could trust her to keep me alive, at least long enough to get the revenge Gemma so desperately craved. Who knows, maybe along the way, she’ll discover a reason to share her loyalty with me as well as her anger.

Lowering my gun, I slipped it back into the inner pants holster hiding under the jacket I wore. “Hope is a dangerous thing, Gemma. It can change your life for the better or destroy it in a second. Lucky for you, I love a good high-stakes game.” Letting out a sigh, I dropped into one of the armchairs and pointed at the bedroom door. “Now, you better unlock that before one of my men figures out something’s wrong. Their loyalty is so strong it’s blinding. My lovers won’t hesitate to destroy anything they suspect might be dangerous to me.”

Gemma blinked at me as if confused with the change in my demeanor. She’d catch on soon enough that I gave back whatever energy was given to me until I’ve made my point. Since I’d figured out what I needed from her, there was no reason to exert extra effort.

I watched as she pulled out a key and fit it into the second lock high on the door. “Gemma,” I called out to her in English.

“Don’t ever fucking try something like this again. I am a Raffa, after all. We don’t normally give second chances, and we damn well don’t give a fucking third.”

“Understood, Mistress,” Gemma answered, refusing to look at me. “I’ll be right back with your luggage.”

The moment she opened the door, Ryker stepped in, grabbed her throat, and slammed her to the wall. “Why the fuck did I hear the door unlock?”

“Let her go, Ry,” I ordered, shoving out of the chair and walking over to him. “Gemma and I needed to have a heart-to-heart without interruptions. It’s nothing you need to worry about, just setting expectations with one of my new bodyguards.”

Ryker looked from me back to Gemma and slowly released his hold on the girl. “Next time, you will come to me as head of the Caprioni Family security if there are any issues, not her.”

“There won’t be a next time,” Gemma assured. “Lady Astin has made that quite clear, and I had all my issues addressed. I’ll make sure Beatrice is aware to come to you and save everyone the trouble of this conversation happening again.”

Gemma slipped out of the room before Ryker could have anything else to say on the matter. He then turned to me with an expectant look. “Care to fill me in?”

“Not particularly, since I’m not really sure what happened in that conversation. What I can tell you is that there is way more

to this whole situation than any of us ever guessed,” I shared, wrapping my arms around his waist and resting my head on his shoulder. “Right now, all I want is to get some sleep and start fresh tomorrow. I fucking hate feeling like I don’t know what the hell is going on.”

A knock on the door had me pouting as I pulled away from Ryker, but if it were my luggage, it would mean I was one step closer to sleeping. Opening the door, I found Beatrice with two of my large suitcases and Gemma with the three smaller ones.

Quickly, I stepped out of their way. “You can leave them just inside. I’ll deal with them from there.”

“Are you sure, Lady Astin? I’m happy to help you unpack,” Beatrice offered.

“Really, it’s all right. I don’t want to settle in just to find out we’re leaving for another location in a few days,” I explained.

Beatrice smiled and bobbed her head in understanding. “Have a good night then, Lady Astin. Oh, I almost forgot...” she paused in her exit to offer me what looked like a bracelet, “... should you need me or Gemma, here is the button connected to our devices. Once activated, it will give us your exact location should we not be with you.”

“Hold on,” Ryker cut in. “Why would she need this, and why wouldn’t you be with her?”

The woman cocked her head in confusion. “Does Lady Astin not have a bodyguard who will be joining us?”

“She does,” he answered.

“Then would it be safe to assume there might be an occasion that she chooses to have him with her instead of us?” Beatrice reasoned. “Furthermore, Nepreea has been rife with people snatching women and selling them, regardless of their ties to any of the five families. It is my wish to be proactive and cover all possible situations, which this tracking device will help in many scenarios.”

I took the bracelet and smiled at her. “I’m impressed, Beatrice... you’ve made a well-thought-out argument. Let’s chat about this a little later after I’ve had some sleep and have a chance to get my bearings.”

“Of course, Lady Astin. I’ll leave you to get your rest.” With a quick curtsy, the woman exited, shutting the door behind her.

Ryker took the bracelet from me, looking it over as if trying to find something wrong with it. “Hound should look at it before you wear it. For all we know, it could be sending your location and who the hell knows what to the Leoni or Accardi Families as we speak.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” I commented as I laid the smaller suitcases on the bed, opening them up. “Please know that I don’t plan on trusting anyone or anything at face value. Just because my grandfather trusts them doesn’t mean I should. These are his people, not mine, even if I’m to inherit all of this. Look at how things have gone back home... the blood I’ve had to spill just to prove my place as their leader. The Raffa are known for being ruthless, bloodthirsty, and a little crazy. What if I’m too tame and civilized for this fight?”

Ryker snorted as he came up behind me, wrapping his arms around me. “Tin-Tin, never would I ever use the word *tame* to describe you. What you need to do is stop looking at this like you don’t belong in this world. I can’t think of a person more suited for the job. Your father knew you’d be the heir to both families. Do you really think he’d let his precious daughter come out of hiding if he didn’t think you could handle whatever these bastards would throw at you?”

Twisting in his hold, I looked into the gaze of the man who knew my father almost as well as I did. “No, even if there were still more for me to learn working alongside him, he’d never risk revealing me if I couldn’t hold my own. On the plane, I knew this had to happen, and I was more than ready to do whatever it took to destroy those who stole my family from me. Then why do I suddenly feel so uneasy?”

He cupped my face, letting his thumbs stroke my cheeks. “Because you’re human.”

I rolled my eyes at him. “Come on, be serious.”

“Trust me, I’m being deadly serious,” Ryker argued, scowling at me. “Astin, one of the things I love about you is that you’re fearless, always believing you’ll have a plan to work things out in your favor. I think it’s fair to say that’s true, and you’ve managed to turn every single attack against us back at them. However, there is a cost to each of those plans, including Luca being sent to jail. What you’re learning now that you never had the chance to, growing up so isolated, is how to deal with backlash. No matter how calculated or

planned your strike is, there always have been and will be repercussions. You just never cared who got hit with them as long as it wasn't you."

"God, that makes me sound like a hideous person," I mumbled.

Ryker closed the distance between us, kissing me softly. "No, Tin-Tin, it makes you sound like a person who had to do everything alone. All that needs to change is how we look at our plans and decide if it's worth the price. This battle won't be over quickly, or even in our generation. Sure, we'll take down the current Accardi and Leoni Families, but these people have long histories. All it will take is for someone down the family tree to start an uprising, and we're having this fight all over again. What you need to decide is if you're in this fight for the long haul or if you're going to level the playing field and hand it off. Both choices will have their own challenges, but if we choose as a family, then it's not all left on your shoulders."

Overwhelmed with feelings, I grabbed his face and kissed the hell out of him, nipping his lip so he opened to me. We tumbled onto the bed, but I flipped him so he was on his back, giving me control over the situation. Kissing down his neck, I shoved up his T-shirt so I could continue my way down his sculpted body. As I teased his nipple, my hands were undoing his belt and pants.

"Astin, wa—" Ryker started to say but was cut off by the groan that burst from him as I took his cock in my hand.

Sliding off the bed, I stood between his legs, slowly stroking his cock. “I’m sorry, what were you saying?”

Ryker just waved his hand, brushing off my question. “Nothing, absolutely nothing.”

“So you weren’t going to tell me to stop? I will if you want... we value consent in this family,” I offered, dropping to my knees and running my tongue from balls to tip.

“No,” he growled out.

I pulled back. “No? Well, that settles it. I won’t continue.”

Before I could stand, Ryker sat up and grabbed a fistful of my hair, keeping me right where I was. “No, I don’t want you to stop, is what I meant to say. You have my full consent to use that sassy mouth of yours to swallow my cock until I’m coming down your throat.”

Smirking, I pointed to my lips. “This mouth? Are you sure you can handle that much sass?”

“Open, now,” Ryker ordered.

The moment I did as requested, Ryker used his hold on my hair to direct my mouth over his cock. I didn’t fight his manhandling, allowing him to control my movements as my hands rested on his knees. Maybe Jace was onto something—this whole giving up control when I was feeling stressed. Once Ryker realized I was giving him the reins completely, he shifted to hold my head with both hands. This way, he could keep me still as he fucked my mouth with every ounce of pent-up energy.

“Fuck, your mouth feels so good,” he praised. “That’s it, relax and take it all in.”

Closing my eyes, I fought the panic of not being able to breathe from his cock so far down my throat. My eyes started to water in response to my supposed choking, but I didn’t make any sign for Ryker to stop or slow down. This was exactly what I needed—something to get me out of my head and force me to be in the moment. At one point, I thought I heard someone enter the room, but I couldn’t worry about that as I gasped for air.

“God, your mouth is fucking perfect... everything about you is perfect.” Ryker grunted as his thrusts began to become more erratic. “Now your sassy, sexy mouth is going to swallow every drop of my cum.”

With a sound that seemed to be a mix of a yell and a snarl, Ryker shoved my head so far down his cock I was kissing his balls. “That’s it, swallow just like that. Take your punishment for making me listen to Luca getting his fill of your pussy.”

He held me there for longer than expected, and just when I was about to signal him to let me up, he pulled me off his cock. Spit coated my lips and trailed down my neck as I gasped for air.

Ryker gently brushed my hair out of my face before resting his forehead against mine. “Holy shit, that was amazing, Astin,” he shared, kissing me almost breathless. “Thank you for giving me that experience and the trust to put me in

control. With everything between us, I know we're still working on rebuilding that part of our relationship."

"I do trust you, Ryker," I assured him. "There's no way I could love a man I don't trust. Hell, I gave you a piece of my heart. How much more could you trust someone?"

"In my opinion, giving someone your social security number would be a much bigger show of trust," Atticus interjected. "With that information, they could destroy your life to the point no one would believe you are who you say you are."

Leaning so I could see past Ryker, I spotted the surprise guest sitting in the armchair, looking out at the night sky. "Atty, when did you join us?"

"Is it safe to turn around?" he asked.

Ryker tucked his dick back in his pants but pulled off his shirt and offered it to me. "You might want to ah..." He drifted off, motioning for me to wipe my neck and face.

At this rate, it might be best just to take a quick rinse-off in the shower, but I cleaned up the best I could. Ryker pulled me to my feet, my knees a little sore from the stone floor, but it had been worth it. Grabbing my toiletries and pajamas, I headed over to Atticus, still waiting for the all-clear.

"You're safe now, but I'm gonna duck into the bathroom quickly before something else happens," I shared, kissing his cheek.

Not bothering to close the bathroom door, I shrugged off my jacket before pulling my shirt over my head. Turning on the

water, it was ice cold, so I let it run as I changed, just skipping the step of putting on my nightshirt.

“Did something else happen before you gave aggressive fellatio to Ryker?” Atticus questioned, meeting my gaze in the mirror.

I nearly choked as I brushed my teeth at his choice of words. “What?”

Deciding it was best to take a moment to spit and rinse before answering, I held up a finger to keep him from repeating what he said. Using the washcloth, I wiped myself down and slipped on my shirt.

“Sorry, Atty, you just surprised me with your choice of words for what happened between Ryker and me. Speaking of, why did you stay once you noticed what was going on?” I inquired.

“Because I asked him to,” Ryker answered. “I told you I’m working on accepting what it means to share you. So when Atticus knocked, I answered, then asked if he could stay but sit somewhere I couldn’t see him. That way, I knew someone was in the room, but I didn’t have to worry about interacting with them. I guess you could call it baby steps.”

“You were fine with that?” I inquired, directing the question to Atty.

He nodded. “While I see the logic in assuming I wouldn’t be comfortable sharing intimate moments with others, it’s far from the truth. The more research I’ve done into non-

monogamy, I support the theory that a person should have more than one person to meet their emotional and physical needs. Asta, you think I do well meeting your emotional needs, but it's my hypothesis you believe that because you have seven people to spread that need across so others exceed when I fall short."

"Huh," I commented, mulling that idea around in my head. "You're right... that does make a lot of sense. Anyway, sorry to derail this whole conversation, but did you need something from me?"

"It was my hope to join you in bed tonight," Atticus answered, leading me to note he was wearing pajamas.

"You absolutely can join me. Ryker, are you staying or going?" I asked.

"Tonight, I'm going to sleep in my room, but it's right next door if you need me," Ryker said, leaning in to kiss me. "Goodnight, sleep well, and I love you."

"Love you too. I'll see you in the morning, but if you change your mind, you can join us," I offered.

"Not tonight," he responded with one more quick kiss before heading out.

Setting the suitcase on the floor, I pulled back the sheets and crawled in. "I don't think I've ever been so excited for bed. Seems you're rubbing off on me, Atty," I said, fighting a yawn.

He slid in, wrapping his arms around me, and shifted me so I was lying mostly on his chest. “There are worse qualities to adapt to. I suspect you’ve never been one to get much sleep.”

“That’s probably true,” I murmured, sighing as he stroked his hand gently up and down my back. “Maybe it’s because I’m not sleeping alone anymore, and I got rid of my nightmares.”

“Shh, Asta, there is time to ponder this later,” Atticus whispered, kissing my head. “Sleep, my love.”



My mind was much clearer and calmer when I woke up. This was a new day, and I planned to treat it like any other day. I was the queen of the Caprioni Family, by birth and blood spilled by my own hands. Right now, I might be the princess of the Raffa Family, waiting to take over the throne from my grandfather. However, the Raffa Family was known to be bloodthirsty, ruthless, and a bit crazy. Blood would once more cover my hands and coat the path I walked to the throne, but what true mafia leader doesn't have that? It sounds to me like the perfect place to embrace my Darkness and see if two pieces can finally become whole.

Gemma led the way to the dining room on the main floor. It was the beginning of fall in Nepreea, which brought out the start of autumn colors. Yet the sun shone with hardly a cloud in the sky, keeping the summer warmth around longer. Every window I passed was open, allowing a light breeze to drift through the halls, but the warmth was stolen by the cool stone

walls. It made it impossible to know how to dress when there was a twenty-degree difference from inside the home to the outside.

The tapping sound of my heels echoed off the walls, making me smile. Having been forced to wear flats for far too long, I would never again take for granted the ability to wear my favorite shoe style. My burgundy wide-legged pants hid them from view, but the telltale sound of my stilettos always made their presence known whether seen or not.

Grandfather was seated at the head of the table reading as he sipped his espresso. He looked up and smiled upon hearing me enter the dining room. The room was more like an atrium with all the outer walls being glass then fitted with three sets of doors opening to a courtyard. A long, polished wooden table was the centerpiece of the room with enough space to seat at least twenty people.

“Are you expecting more people to join us?” I asked, taking a seat to his right.

The second my ass hit the seat, an older woman appeared at my elbow out of nowhere, silent as a ninja. “Can I get you a coffee, latte, espresso, or would you prefer tea?”

Still trying to figure out where she came from, I stared at her dumbly. “Ah...”

“She’ll take a latte with three sugars,” Liu answered for me as he sat next to me. “I would love a cappuccino.”

Just as quickly as she appeared, I blinked, and she was gone again. “What the fuck was that?” I blurted, looking around the room. “Where did she even go?”

Frediano chuckled, setting down the papers he’d been reading. “That is Anselma. She has been with our family since my father was running things. Anselma is one of the few staff I have travel with me at all times instead of assigning her to one location. That woman has developed more connections with the locals at every property we own than should be humanly possible. I fear what we will lose when she passes.”

“One would think she’d pass those connections to a family member,” Liu commented as he filled a plate with the food set out on the table.

“If she had any family, I suppose she might have,” Frediano shared. “But Anselma chose to take care of those who lead the Raffa Family like her own instead. She truly doted on your mother, Astin, almost as if she knew my wife wasn’t going to be there for her into adulthood.”

I knew from studying the families that my grandmother, Mirabella, died in a car accident when my mother was sixteen. My mother had been in the car too, but the driver hit the back passenger side where grandmother had been sitting, killing her instantly. Frediano’s face took on a melancholy look as if he remembered a time when his wife and daughter were still alive.

He looked up and caught my gaze, holding it for a moment before speaking, “Take a lesson from a man who’s lost the

love of his life far too soon. There will never be a perfect time for romance or love, so be greedy and take all the time you can to be with them. You'll feel like it's wrong to focus on something that seems less important, but I was a damn fool not to realize it was the most important thing. We Raffa are a feral bunch, prone to madness and instability. However, when you have that one person who loves you despite that, it keeps the devil in your head from taking control."

"The devil in your head..." I echoed, my mind instantly going to Darkness. "Are you telling me that we all have this alter-ego thing?"

"Not all... some just go plain mad, broken from the training and likely end up killing themselves or forcing us to put them down. Others become twisted, perverse, and heedlessly slaughter those around them. They're why we've been labeled the way we are in the families. Finally, there are those who, like you and me, find a way to manage what we've been through. Our minds lock away the experience to help us, but all it has done is create something dark and evil within our minds," Frediano explained. "Of course, modern medicine has evolved and helped to stabilize such issues, which is why I didn't want your father to hide what happened to you with hypnosis. Given time, your alter would have understood and seen it wasn't needed anymore since your training had been complete."

The more I learned about my training and how everyone had mishandled it, made me want to scream. How could people who loved me put me through all that? Training or not, what

was done to me was criminal. To this day, I still don't know what they did, but the flashes and glimpses were more than enough to tell me I didn't want to see.

"You don't need to remember because I am here. It's my job to remember everyone and everything that has ever hurt us," Darkness assured me.

"Is there ever going to be a time when your job is done, and I am just me?" I questioned.

I got the sense Darkness didn't want to answer that, but she did. "Yes." With that begrudging confirmation, Darkness retreated until I couldn't feel her, yet I knew she was still a part of me.

"*Omae,*" Liu called, resting his hand over mine on the table. "Come back to us, *omae.*"

Blinking a few times, I shook my head, feeling rather disjointed. "What just happened?"

"Your alter, Darkness, I believe she called herself, had a few things to share with me," Frediano answered, his tone telling me she had, and it wasn't anything good.

"Fuck," I cursed, dropping my head and rubbing my brow in discouragement. *Things had been going so well. Why the hell did she do that now?*

Liu's hand settled on the back of my neck as he leaned in to whisper harshly in my ear, "Sit up *right now*, Astin Caprioni. A queen never bows her head in the presence of enemies."

Startled by the harshness of his tone, I quickly schooled my face and acted as if I'd gotten something in my eye. "Damn eyelash," I muttered, combing my loose hair back with my hand as I straightened.

Three men I didn't know had joined us in the dining room, but Ryker, Hound, and Jace were blocking them from getting closer to the table. I spotted Braxton and Atticus lingering in the doorway, ensuring there weren't any other people to sneak up on us.

"Oh, I didn't realize we had anyone else joining us," I commented, glancing at Frediano. "Didn't you say the morning was going to be a quiet one, Grandfather?"

"I did, but I believe you're forgetting I mentioned some key allies would be joining us as well," Frediano reminded me.

"Hmm..." I hummed, shifting my attention to the three men. "Seems a tad early for visitors to be stopping by, don't you think?"

Frediano stood pushing back his chair. "Astin, tell your men to back down. It's rather rude to treat my guests and our allies in such a manner."

"No," I stated, resting my chin on the back of my hand.

All three newcomers were older, dressed in expensive tailored suits, and had an air of commanding power to them. Two of the three men closer to my grandfather's age looked irritated at my behavior, but the third, who was younger, seemed rather pleased. Right out of the gate, I felt this person

was here with the right intentions, but I didn't trust the other two.

“*Astin*,” Frediano snapped, glaring at me. “You are not the Don of the Raffa Family yet. You're my heir, and I still run things around here.”

“All true, but there's one thing you're forgetting. I am the Don of the Caprioni Family with enough power and reach to make the five families rather nervous. These men are *your* allies... they are not mine,” I explained, pausing to sip of my coffee. “However, if they'd like to introduce themselves and allow my men to remove any weapons they might have, I'd be happy to meet them. Until that is done, they can continue to stand right there, where I can keep an eye on them. One can never be too careful these days.”

Frediano lost all traces of the doting grandfather urging me to make time for the people I loved. The man who stood before me was the one I remembered from my training days. Family be damned, Frediano Raffa didn't tolerate being disrespected in front of anyone.

“Is that how you want to play things?” Frediano demanded, his tone flat, void of emotion.

A smirk tugged at my lips. “Put your demon away, Grandfather. I don't want to be forced to kill you when I know you'll be useful in this fight. There might come a time for our demons to meet, but trust me when I say it's not now.”

“How dare you—”

The man was cut off as Jace shoved the muzzle of his gun under the older man's jaw. "Unless you're going to introduce yourself or apologize to our Mistress, there's no need for you to speak."

There was an audible gulp as the pressure from the gun made it hard for the man to swallow. The whole thing made me chuckle, but once I let the laughter start, I couldn't hold it back. Setting down my cup, I grabbed the cloth napkin and dabbed at my eyes.

"Oh fuck," I managed to say, trying to get ahold of myself. "Here I was worried that things here would be different from back home. That was rather silly of me. No matter where you go, men hate it when women end up in a position of power they believe a man should hold."

"Not all men," the youngest of the three interjected, handing over his gun. "I'm Armond Zuccaro, Don of the Zuccaro Family."

I sat up a little straighter, knowing this was Durant's son and remembered the Old Guard mentioning something about his granddaughter. Armond stepped forward, extending his arms, allowing Hound to pat him down. Two more weapons were found before Hound caught my gaze and nodded.

"Please have a seat," I offered, gesturing to the one across from me.

Frediano seemed to have gotten under control and resumed his place at the table. While he didn't comment on anything, I

knew we'd have a heart-to-heart about this situation when we didn't have an audience.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Lady Astin. My father speaks rather highly of you," Armond shared once he was seated. "You'll have to forgive the other two. They have one foot in the grave and refuse to see the world is changing."

"Mondo, you know that isn't true," Frediano argued, making me feel like this wasn't the first time they had this conversation. "Renato is a lifelong friend who's been loyal to me and the Raffa Family. He has every right to challenge someone for being outright disrespectful toward me when it happens in front of him."

Armond's gaze flicked to me for a moment before he returned it to my grandfather. "Yes, Renato has always been quick to challenge those who speak ill of you. Guess it was too much of me to assume he'd realize doing that to your granddaughter and future heir wasn't the smartest choice. Then again, we all know his loyalty is yours and yours alone, not the Raffa name."

My brows rose as I read between the lines of what Armond was saying. *Did my grandfather have a secret male lover? Could that be why he never remarried or followed through with cutting ties to my mother?* My, my, I knew this trip would bring about some revelations, but this wasn't one I'd been expecting.

"Good morning, all. I hope I'm not too late for breakfast," a man greeted as he walked in from the courtyard.

Like a true assassin, Luca appeared from the shadows of the courtyard where he'd been watching. Faster than the new arrival could process, he was on his knees with a gun pressed to the back of his head.

“Who the fuck are you?” Luca questioned.

The man looked so startled as he kneeled there, arms raised, and not moving anything but his eyes. When he didn't answer Luca's question, I saw the shift in Luca's stance as he readied to strike the man.

“Luca, wait,” I called out, shooting to my feet.

Once I approached the man, I squatted down to look at his face, feeling like I recognized him from somewhere. As my brain tried to track down that memory, he held my gaze without wavering.

“I know you...” I whispered, cocking my head as I felt like I was so close to grasping the connection. When the dots connected, a memory came flooding back to the day of the wedding.

Before I knew what my body was doing, I grasped the man's face, my heart beating so hard I could feel it in my ears. “You, you were there.”

“Forgive me for not remembering you, but you're going to need to give me a little more reference to work from,” he said, frowning as he studied my face.

“You're Demaso, correct?” I asked, not wanting to say more if I'd been mistaken. The video was made over twenty-five

years ago, after all.

He tried to nod, but I still held his face, preventing the motion. “Ah... yes, that’s my name. Would you do this old man a favor and tell me yours? I apologize, but I can’t seem to recall it.”

Smiling, I hugged the man tightly. “We’ve never met, but you and my father were best friends. In fact, you were the only person besides the priest at their wedding before he fled to Mansara.”

“Good heavens, you’re Colmazio’s child,” Demaso murmured as he returned my hug. He then pulled back so he could see my face, cupping my cheek. “I’m so sorry to hear you lost your parents in such horrible ways. God, poor Casimira must be beside herself having him taken from her so suddenly. How is she managing?”

Rising to my feet, I brushed out my pants as if I’d buy a fabric that would wrinkle. “Daddy made sure both Casimira and Jamison, my half-brother, would be safe and comfortable for the rest of their lives. Unfortunately, I don’t have much of a relationship with either of them, being kept in hiding. Last I saw Casimira, she was starting to take the first steps to not let her grief overwhelm her. My bitch of a stepmother didn’t help matters, making a scene and viciously attacking her in front of the Family. However, I dealt with that situation so it would never happen again.”

Luca offered Demaso a hand, helping the older man to his feet. “Thank you, son. I’m glad to see my friend’s little girl has

sharp people around her.”

“I apologize for that. We were in a battle of wills with these other two gentlemen when you arrived,” I explained, hooking my arm through his and guiding him to a seat next to Armond.

Demaso glanced at the two men and huffed out a laugh. “Those two stubborn goats will never make things easy. They’re too used to being the people in power with their money and connections. However, if you’re anything like your father, then they should know better than to fuck with you.”

I resumed my seat with Atticus and Luca joining while the others still kept an eye on our petty guests.

“So you know those men?” Atticus asked.

“You’ll find that anyone with money or power of any kind is connected to one of the five families. It’s only through them they could get where they are today,” Demaso explained.

Looking down, I noticed a plate full of food had been placed before me. One look at Liu told me he was the person responsible. I reached out, grabbed the lapel of his suit coat, and pulled him to me. “Thank you,” I murmured before kissing him sweetly.

Liu didn’t let me retreat, holding me there with a hand on my throat until he’d gotten a proper kiss. “You’re welcome, *omae*. Now you have to eat some of it,” he warned. “If you don’t, then I’ll be forced to bring this to Jace’s attention.”

His threat was real, and I knew Jace worried more than the others if I wasn’t eating. Jace had past trauma from watching

his mother waste away from depression, resulting in his father killing her in a drunken rage. Even though I knew Liu was trying to make a valid point, it lost some of its bite as I knew Jace's punishment would also come with pleasure.

"Duly noted," I said, keeping my voice low. "You know, it sure seems like you want to be invited if I were to get in trouble."

A glint of excitement told me I'd read him right. "That's a conversation for later when we don't have guests." With a quick peck, he let go of me and made a show of looking from me to the plate in a silent reminder.

"Fuck, why is it so hot to see her with you guys?" Hound asked as he adjusted himself crudely in front of the men.

"It's called compersion," Jace answered. "The feeling of joy seeing your partner being loved or taken care of by another partner. Simple answer is it's the opposite of jealousy."

"Huh..." Hound grunted, using his gun to scratch his cheek. "That's pretty cool. I'm beginning to think these non-monogamous people have been right all along. Maybe as humans, we weren't meant to be with only one person."

Armond cleared his throat, drawing our attention. "Forgive me, I don't mean this question to be rude in any way, but how many of these men are you... *intimate* with?"

My mouth was full of toast, so I swallowed quickly and sipped my coffee before speaking, "I'm in a relationship with

all seven of these men, but Jace and Braxton are also together.”

Armond and Demaso stared at me with surprised expressions. However, the two older gentlemen didn't take that information as well.

“Blasphemy,” the man whose name I didn't know roared and tried to shove Ryker out of his way to approach my grandfather. “Frediano, did you know about this?”

To his credit, my grandfather hadn't said a word about my situation, but then again, I hadn't come out and said it. Although, for a man who might have a secret male lover, he had no room to judge me in any way. I would never allow our relationship to be a secret.

“Yes, I knew she had more than one lover,” Frediano answered. “The exact number I wasn't certain until just now, but it's none of my business, and it certainly isn't yours. Face it, Aldo, times are changing no matter how we wish to ignore it. It's one of the reasons the future generation needs to take over things.”

This response seemed to take all the steam out of Aldo's anger. They'd been so sure my grandfather would back him up, yet quite the opposite happened. “Frediano...”

Aldo was cut off as my grandfather slammed a fist against the table, rattling all the dishes. “*Enough*. Introduce yourselves to my granddaughter, hand over your weapons, and stop treating my blood like she's the enemy. If you can't manage that, then get the fuck out of my house.”

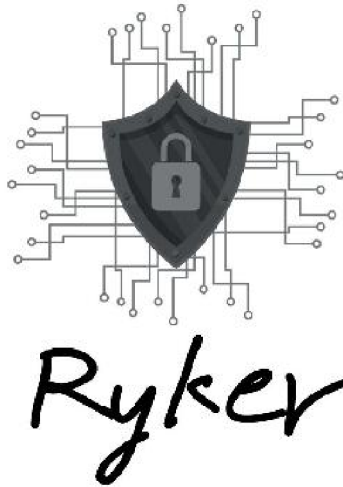
Biting into my toast, I watched as the two men made their decision. Finally, Renato flung out his arms, allowing Jace to pat him down. I was surprised to see he didn't have any weapons on him, but Armond did say he was a businessman. Aldo had a gun in an ankle holster, telling me he didn't really plan on using it but wanted the protection. Both men approached the table, pulling out chairs, but Hound grabbed the back of their shirts, stopping them short.

“Seems you two are having a senior moment, but there's one more step before you can sit at this table with our Mistress,” Hound pointed out.

Renato shook off Hound, squaring his shoulders and meeting my gaze. “I'm Renato Pisano, owner of Sunsea, one of the largest transport companies in Nepreea.” His gaze shifted to look at my grandfather for a moment, almost as if he was considering telling me how close they were. “Your grandfather and I have been close friends since university. I apologize if I overstepped in defending him when it wasn't my place.”

The way he spat that last word solidified my thoughts on their relationship. Renato wasn't pleased with how my grandfather laid down the ultimatum to give in or leave. I had a feeling there would be a rather heated lovers' spat later today.

Seven



Everything in me wanted to remove this Aldo prick from the room, but I knew I couldn't. It was clear that Aldo provided something important to this fight, or Frediano wouldn't have invited him to this breakfast. However, that didn't mean we should trust Aldo if he couldn't respect Astin. She'd made the right call, forcing them to respect her place in this world, but the older they are, the harder it is to get them to bend to change.

As Renato took his seat, Aldo slammed his shoulder into Hound's chest, trying to knock him off. Hound, the crazy bastard, just rocked back on his heels, absorbing the impact before shoving his knee forward, dropping the asshole to his knees.

"Are you trying to make me shoot you?" Hound asked, the gun an inch from the man's head.

Aldo glared at him. "You wouldn't dare, not unless your whore gave you permission."

“Hou—” I started to yell, but my words were lost in the sound of a gun going off in the room.

“*Gah*, you shot me,” Aldo screamed, clutching his arm to his chest.

Fuck, please tell me he didn't shoot this prick in the gut to slowly bleed out. Dropping to my knees, I grabbed Aldo's arm and pulled it away, but no blood showed on his chest or stomach.

“Dude, calm down,” Hound grumbled. “I only shot you in the arm, clean through-and-through... you'll live.”

The black color of Aldo's suit hid the injury, but knowing where to look, I found the wound. Sure enough, there was a hole on one side of his bicep and an exit on the other. Taking a moment to feel the arm, I determined the shot hadn't damaged the bone, making this a minor injury.

“He's right. Get a few stitches and an antibiotic shot to ensure there won't be any infection, then you'll be good as new,” I said, grabbing a napkin off the table to wipe my hands.

Aldo struggled to his feet with only one arm to use for leverage. Once he was standing, my hand snapped out to grab his shirt and yank him forward. Now nose-to-nose and confident I had his attention, I spoke, “Aldo, I don't care who you are or how important you think you are, if you fucking dare to utter a word against Lady Astin *ever* again... I can't guarantee you'll be walking away from it.”

Why my threat seemed to hit home and getting shot didn't, I haven't a clue, but all that mattered was that he believed me. Roughly, I shoved him back and pulled out a chair at the farthest end of the table, gesturing for him to sit. Meekly, the man sat clutching his arm, blood seeping through his fingers, making me hope there was a doctor on this compound.

Leaning in close, I whispered, "You have two seconds to introduce yourself and salvage your chances with either Raffa letting you live or Hound using you for target practice. Trust me, he's one fucked-up bastard who won't be quick to end his fun."

Aldo grabbed the crystal glass full of water and gulped it down, leaving a bloody handprint behind.

"Lady Astin, it's a pleasure to meet you," Aldo greeted as if there hadn't been any issue. "I'm Aldo Forte, owner of Forte Engineering, a company that specializes in weapons design for the Nepreeian military and other governments who contract us."

Astin didn't respond, choosing to pluck a few grapes from the bunch and pop them in her mouth. I knew from personal experience what it felt like to be on her bad side, and it wasn't something I'd let happen again. Aldo deserved to sit in the situation he caused, left to wonder if he was going to live through this day or not.

"Gemma," Astin called out.

Seconds later, the woman entered the room, stopping beside her new mistress. "Yes, Lady Astin?"

“Is there a doctor or vet on the property? There seems to have been a small accident, and Mr. Forte has gotten himself hurt,” Astin explained.

“Dr. Necci isn’t on the property at the moment, but we do have his assistant,” Gemma offered.

“Can they stitch up a wound?” Astin inquired. When Gemma nodded, she smiled. “Perfect, if you could bring them and whatever supplies they need, we can keep Mr. Forte from bleeding all over the floor.”

I watched as Gemma left the dining room, still unsettled about what happened last night between her and Astin. How none of us knew Astin was locked in that room with a fucking stranger, one skilled enough to be a bodyguard, had my blood boiling. It was part of the reason I didn’t stay. How could I hold her as she slept when I failed to notice something was wrong? Instead, I stood guard, sleeping in a chair just outside her door, ensuring that the woman I loved could have a peaceful night’s rest.

While Hound got bored, sat next to Jace, and began filling his plate, I didn’t move from my spot behind Aldo. This is where I would stand until I was satisfied this man posed no threat to my queen.

“Ryker,” Astin said, pulling me out of my thoughts. “Sit and eat. I’m sure Mr. Forte has a clear understanding of what will happen to him if he chooses to do something stupid.”

“I woul...” the look Astin gave me had me rethinking my life choices really quick, “... love to have some breakfast.”

Braxton snickered, but Jace placed a hand on his boyfriend's arm. Instantly, Brax took the hint and sobered his expression. Grabbing the spot next to Hound, I looked around for the coffee, but there wasn't a pot on the table.

"You want coffee?" a raspy voice asked from behind me.

"What the—" I swore under my breath as I twisted to see the ancient-looking woman waiting for my answer. "Ah... yes, just black is fine."

She didn't say anything but moved on to take coffee orders from the others and replaced Astin's empty cup with a full one.

"I didn't see her either, if that helps," Hound shared as he buttered his toast. "Luca is good at being a sneaky bastard, but that woman is straight-up scary shit."

"Oh, thank you, Anselma. I was just about to ask for another," Astin said, smiling at the woman.

Hound and I watched as the creepy old woman smiled warmly at Astin, patting her cheek as if Astin was a child. "You look so much like your mother, it brings back many happy memories. It is a pleasure to watch over her child."

Holy shit. How had I not considered what it would be like for Astin to learn about her mother from people who watched her grow up? She only knew what her father told her in his letters, which wasn't much. Then again, he was trying to keep hidden the fact he was married to Casimira also so that must have made it harder to share. She'd mentioned that the room she

picked was her mother's, and I didn't even check in to see how she was handling that part of this visit. Goddammit, I was slipping as both a boyfriend and a lieutenant. Thankfully, there were six others to pick up my slack.

“Are you satisfied with your introductions?” Frediano asked dryly once Anselma returned to the kitchen.

Astin scoffed. “This is your fault, you know. If I'd been warned there would be guests at breakfast, and who they were, none of this would have occurred. You, of all people, should understand not being the type to enjoy surprises.”

“I suppose there was a misstep in my choice since I consider you, first and foremost, my heir,” Frediano admitted.

If that was an apology, it was the weakest I'd ever heard, but coming from a Don of one of the five families, I suppose it's all she was going get.

Astin rested her chin on the back of her hand, studying her grandfather. Up until a month ago, she didn't know he existed or that she was heir to the Raffa Family. Yet when she needed him after her father was killed, he dropped everything to be there for her. In my personal opinion, this friction between them was caused by being far too similar in personality and having vastly different expectations for the future.

“That will be an acceptable apology for now, but you and I need to have an honest conversation on a few matters. However, I think it's best for now if we move forward and conduct this breakfast as you had planned,” Astin suggested.

Frediano ran his hand over his close-cut beard as if trying to figure out what to do with this shit show. Having come to a decision, Frediano gestured to Armond. “My goal for this breakfast was to allow you to meet some of the people who I believe will be valuable to us as you take down three of the five families. As you know from previous conversations with the Old Guard and myself, the Zuccaro Family has been a long-time ally to the Raffa Family.”

“I agree we need to change who holds the power. The Accardi Family is stealing women and children off the street and selling them. They don’t care who those people might be connected to or whose children they might be. The five families might not all like each other, but there was a level of respect for earning our place in the criminal world. We all agreed on certain limits and lines we wouldn’t cross, and children were at the top of that list. For some unknown reason, something has changed within the Accardi Family, and I believe their ultimate goal is to wipe out the Raffa and Zuccaro Families, leaving them with more power,” Armond shared.

Anger welled up in me at hearing about innocent people being snatched off the streets. I knew every country had its issues, and some were worse than others, but hearing about children being mistreated always made my blood boil. You’d think being part of a large criminal organization, I wouldn’t be surprised, but like Armond said, there were lines you don’t cross. Everyone has family or children they treasure. By the Accardi opening that door, it leaves them open to retaliation

on the same level. You come after my kids, then I'll come after yours, simple as that, and no one's safe.

“Gemma had mentioned to me she'd personally been dragged into a van and sold off until a mutual friend was able to rescue her,” Astin mentioned.

Pausing in my eating, I was curious to hear what our queen had to say. Astin was as complex as a Rubik's Cube with so many sides and pieces that made her who she was. Something I learned a long time ago was she didn't like bullies of any kind. Jace had mentioned a situation on their date where Astin offered to help a woman get out of her marriage to a cheating bastard. I hadn't been surprised by that at all—it was exactly the type of thing she'd do.

“This is absolutely a problem. However, taking the Accardi out of the picture will only be the first step. Let me be blunt and honest with you,” Astin said, squaring her shoulders, preparing for potential backlash. “While I will offer whatever support I can to make sure the rampant human trafficking is dealt with, that is not my main focus. The entire reason I am here is to annihilate those who have been seeking to destroy my family. Once I've dealt with all those who participated in my parents' deaths, my job is done.”

Clearly, this wasn't what any of the older gentlemen sitting at the table expected to hear. Frediano looked as if Astin had just slapped him in the face the way he pulled away at her words. Armond's brows knit together as he tried to understand what Astin was saying to him. Demaso appeared to be more

contemplative, but the slight downturn of his mouth betrayed his true feelings.

“I’m sorry...” Demaso started, then paused, “... you’re not here to lead the new generation of families?”

“Precisely,” Astin said, then sipped her coffee. “I’m here for revenge. You’re gonna need to find someone else to be the ringleader of this circus. Besides, how would that even work? My first priority is leading the Caprioni Family and upholding everything my father built. He left Nepreea and created a criminal empire to rival that of the founding families against all odds. That is the legacy I choose to protect, grow, and devote my time to. Eventually, that will shift to include my Raffa heritage once Grandfather can no longer lead, but by then, I’ll have things well in hand at home that I can split time between both countries.”

The room fell into a heavy silence at Astin’s announcement, but I couldn’t be more proud of her. Just last night, I asked her what she was willing to give to this fight, and Astin just gave us all her answer. There was no doubt her grandfather would be trying everything in his power to change her mind. What he didn’t know was once Astin made up her mind, there wasn’t much that would reverse her choice.

Gemma hurried into the dining room with a man who seemed to be in his twenties right behind her. Their entrance broke the uncomfortable moment, but it caused Gemma to stop so abruptly, the man behind her almost crashed into her.

“I apologize for making you wait, Lady Astin. Dr. Necci took the medical bag prepped for situations like this, so I needed to collect those supplies before coming,” the presumed assistant rambled, snatching off his cap.

Gemma hissed something as she elbowed him in the ribs. “Ah... I... I’m Cleto. Cleto Necci, Dr. Necci’s apprentice. I... I mean assistant.” Sweat beaded on his brow as he twisted his cap nervously. “How can I be of service?”

Astin leaned forward and caught my gaze, signaling me to take the lead on this. Seeing how nervous this guy was, I didn’t blame her for handing it off to someone else. Plus, I was the one who examined the wound.

“Mr. Forte is the one in need of your attention, Cleto,” I explained, gesturing to the end of the table. “He was shot in the arm, through-and-through, with no signs of major damage. However, I’m not a medical professional, so I suggest you take a look yourself just to be sure.”

Cleto bobbed his head and tried to bow at the same time, making him look more like a nervous chicken than a doctor in training. Gemma assisted in getting Aldo’s suit jacket off which had the old man swearing up a storm.

When Cleto started to roll up the sleeve, trying to get to the wound, Gemma stopped him. “I think for this, it might be best if you just cut the sleeve open.”

“Yes, yes, of course,” Cleto mumbled, taking a pair of scissors from his makeshift kit.

Unable to watch anymore, I noticed I wasn't the only one trying to ignore the ineptitude happening at the end of the table.

“Armond, your father mentioned you have a daughter,” Astin said. “He seemed so certain we'd get along. I'm surprised you didn't bring her with you this morning.”

“I'll bet he did.” Armond chuckled. “My father has a soft place in his heart for my youngest. Although you're right, I would have brought her with me, but she's in jail at the moment.”

Why her father seemed so amused about this fact was strange to me. He didn't sound like the father who would let his daughter wind up in jail, and we all knew he had the money, power, and influence to get her out if he wanted to.

“I really shouldn't be surprised at how Von turned out. You see she's the only girl with two older twin brothers who never seemed to remember Von was a girl. The three of them are so close that she learned everything they did as they were learning it. At the age of six, she was learning at a nine-year-old's level, refusing to be left behind by her brothers. If they could do it, then so could she, and damn if Von didn't prove it to all her teachers as well,” Armond shared, a warm smile on his face.

“Being the third child and a girl, I didn't see the harm in Von learning how to fight or shoot, knowing how dangerous our world is. Hell, if that girl didn't take to it like a duck to water, surpassing her brothers in skill. Lucky for me, my boys didn't

care and are equally proud of her success.” Armond paused, shaking his head as if he thought of something funny. “Now, my baby girl has put all that hard work and skill to good use. Von is the biggest weapons dealer and smuggler on three continents. If you need something and you’re willing to pay for it, my little girl will make it happen.”

“If she’s as skilled as you say, how did she end up in prison?” Atticus questioned. “Even if her skills failed her, I would think that her being your daughter, she’d be able to avoid such detainment.”

Internally, I cringed at his question, knowing he didn’t mean it to sound offensive. My fear wasn’t that Armond would feel insulted by the question but how he responded. Astin was an extremely rational woman, but when it came to protecting Atticus, she would shoot first and damn the consequences. I’d been a little jealous of their connection, but seeing how torn up she was having Luca taken from her helped me realize she’d do the same for all of us. However, Atticus has spent his whole life fighting against ignorant people treating him like shit all on his own. Astin was just helping to even the score and ensure everyone gave him the respect he deserved.

“You’re absolutely right... she can leave anytime she wants,” Armond agreed. “Yet that stubborn-ass child of mine won’t go until she has the information she’s looking for.”

“Holy shit,” Braxton blurted. “You’re saying she purposely got caught and sent to jail? That is fucking ballsy.”

“That’s one word for it,” Armond grumbled. “I tried to explain how important this meeting was, but she said she was too close to getting the answer. The brat wouldn’t even tell me what information she was looking for so I could help.”

I glanced at Astin’s face and knew that expression meant she’d be asking to visit yet another prison. For a minute, I’d hoped we’d be done with those for a while, but it looks like I’d been wrong.

Eight



Breakfast concluded with Aldo patched up as good as new, although a little more humbled. Renato remained silently sulking as I talked with the three other men about the current situation with the families. When I reached the point I couldn't ignore his glare in my direction anymore, I lashed out.

“Oh, for fuck's sake, Renato, stop acting like a wounded animal because you were scolded by your lover in public,” I snapped. “How did you think he would react to you being so disrespectful to me and my men? The only person you have to blame for how this morning turned out is *you*. All I wanted was for you to introduce yourself and allow my men to ensure my safety. This could have been a lovely morning, but you chose to do things the hard way.”

You could have heard a pin drop in the silence that followed my outburst. Everyone's attention shifted to my grandfather, waiting to see his reaction. To his credit, Frediano had a

perfect poker face, betraying nothing as he gazed at Renato. It was clear to me that Frediano wasn't going to be the one to break the silence and expected Renato to speak up for himself.

Angrily, Renato shoved back his seat and tossed his napkin on the table. "I don't need to sit here and listen to you berate me like a child. If you'll excuse me, I have things to attend to."

"Ren," Frediano said, stopping the man in his tracks. "If you walk away right now, you walk away from everything."

The ice in my grandfather's words as he refused to even look at the man he was speaking to had the hair on my arms standing. Though his words were cold and brusque, the pain in his blue eyes told a different story. *Could it be that he wasn't the one keeping their relationship a secret?*

"Don't say that, Fredi. You know what my choice will be," Renato warned.

I watched my grandfather's hand ball into a fist as he closed his eyes. "Raffas rarely give second chances, but they will *never* give a third. You've made a fool of me long enough, Ren. Get the fuck out of my house and consider all benefits of our relationship revoked. I suggest you tell your wife why you must leave your home, give up your car, and lose your business all in a day. Then your wife can realize the man we loved didn't give a shit about either one of us."

"Fredi," Renato gasped, horror written all over his face.

He started back to the table, but I stood, freeing my gun from its holster, and aimed it at the man. “Take one more step, and there will be a bullet in your brain, saving your wife the trouble of doing it herself later.”

Renato dropped to his knees, sobbing. “Fred, don’t do this.”

“*Lazzaro*,” Frediano barked, rising from his seat.

A hulking giant of a man who might give Ralph a run for his money entered the room. “Yes, Don Raffa?”

“Remove Mr. Pisano from my sight. Have two men escort him home and stand witness as he confesses his sins to his wife,” Frediano ordered, then turned his gaze to Renato. “As the priest says during mass, you’re only as sinful as your secrets. Well, now’s your chance, Ren... free yourself from the burden of being an adulterer who’s been in a secret relationship with a man for over forty years. Although, I doubt it will save you.”

Turning his back on the scene, my grandfather strode into the courtyard. I placed a hand on Liu’s shoulder, pulling his attention away from the screaming man. “I’m going after him,” I said. “He shouldn’t be alone right now.”

“Go, I’ll tell the others,” Liu assured me, kissing the back of my hand. “Just keep in mind, *omae*, the two of you are more alike than you realize.”

With a quick nod, I moved quickly, exiting the dining room with Beatrice as my shadow. There was only one path to exit the courtyard, with the walls of the monastery boxing it in.

The path led me to a large garden with miles of pasture land beyond. Scanning the area, I couldn't see where he'd gone, but there was a cobblestone path off to the left. My pursuit slowed as I discovered heels and centuries-old cobblestone didn't mix well.

I continued down the path even as it veered away from the main house toward a barn-like structure. There was no sign anyone entered the barn, so I walked around it until a cemetery was revealed. A wrought iron fence surrounded it, but the entrance was clearly marked with a gated archway. One side of the gate had been pulled open, confirming what I'd guessed. Quickly, I removed my shoes to walk through the thick, well-maintained grass, fearing my heels would sink in the soft soil. Inside the cemetery were rows and rows of cross headstones on one half and more varied types on the other. Taking an educated guess that the crosses were for the monks who'd been here originally, I headed to the right.

When I got to a slight hill, I spotted the man I'd been looking for kneeling next to a grave marker that looked like an angel with its wings spread out. As I got closer, I could hear him talking, making me hesitate to interrupt.

"I was such a fool, my angel. You warned me, told me he'd never risk his reputation to be with me openly. After I lost you, I thought I'd be fine keeping it to ourselves as long as he loved me. I suppose I was, for a time, taking comfort in the stolen moments we had as I grieved. Oh, my angel, why were you taken from me so soon?" Frediano demanded, falling forward to press his hands on the smooth stone below the angel's feet.

“The life I had planned for us and Natalina would have been so perfect, leaving me no need to fall under Ren’s toxic hold on me. How you managed to still love me after Ren and I parted ways the first time, I’ll never know. I didn’t deserve you or your love, but you gave it to me regardless.”

Just as I was about to leave feeling more like an intruder, I heard the first sob. I glanced over my shoulder at my grandfather, and I saw his body shudder as he cried. Leaving my shoes on a nearby bench, I approached my last living blood relative, unsure how to comfort him. We didn’t know each other, but then I remembered what Liu said. How would I want my grandfather to comfort me if the roles were reversed? Dropping to my knees beside him, I rested a hand on his back without saying a word, just letting him know I was there. I stayed with him for some time, even after the tears stopped. We just sat enjoying the sun and the breeze, keeping it from being too hot in our fall clothes.

“I was furious with your father for many years,” he said, breaking the silence. “It wasn’t until your mother called me to tell me she was pregnant with you that I realized why. I told Natalina I wasn’t going to come when you were born because I’d forbidden them from marrying. Well, that ticked her right off, and she let me have it much like you called Ren out today. I don’t know how she found out about my relationship with Ren. We did everything to keep it from her after her mother died. Yet there she was, calling me out on my double standards.”

Frediano let out a sigh, turning to look at me. “Your father, the bastard, had what I always wanted. The chance to live a life with the two people I loved most in the world. Mirabella would have happily shared me with Ren because she loved me that much. Problem was, Renato didn’t. Well, not enough to tell the world he loved a man. So he broke things off, and I proposed to your grandmother. We created a beautiful life full of love and life, then brought your mother into this world, making our life even more amazing. That’s how authentic love should be between people. Yet it can also make you blind and look past things just to get a taste of what you lost. Things should have ended with Ren long ago, but then I would have been alone, and that fear kept me trapped.”

“Manipulators know exactly how to dig their claws in and keep you from realizing the truth,” I agreed, pulling my legs up to hug my knees. “While I haven’t had a lover do that to me, I think I understand your feelings in a small way. As you know, my uncles, the only family I had besides my father, betrayed and manipulated me for years. It really makes you question if it’s worth the risk to trust anyone.”

Frediano grunted his agreement. “That, dear girl, is the trade we make for the life we live. Our world is in the shadows skirting the law, pushing the limits of what we can get away with to gain more power and wealth. Yet, with anything in life, there is a price or give-and-take, if you will. Power breeds enemies from those we’ve trampled to climb to the top. However, wealth brings out the leeches and vultures, circling, waiting for you to make a mistake they can swoop in and feast

from. Hard to see how trust fits into it all when you're constantly waiting for the attack you know is coming."

"Wow, that's one hell of a sales pitch there, Gramps," I muttered. "Hell, if I'd known that was the life I was being groomed for, I would have stuck to being a thief."

"How would that have been any different?" he challenged. "You'd constantly be worried if you covered your tracks well enough, never staying in one place long or let someone really get to know you for fear you'd slip, and they'd know. At least in this line of work, we don't shy away from who and what we are."

Resting my head on my knees, I looked at my grandfather, seeing the real man underneath without any shield. Gone was the imposing force that seemed to follow him everywhere, and instead, was a man who'd been through hell and back. Feeling me watching, he met my gaze, allowing me to meet the man my grandmother fell in love with and the father who raised my mother to the best of his abilities. Yet there was a deeper truth I saw—Frediano Raffa was tired.

"Astin, can I ask you a question and have you answer it truthfully, grandfather to granddaughter?" Frediano asked.

I lifted my head to nod, curious to hear the question. "What's your question, Gramps?"

"Do you want this life?"

Out of all the things I expected to hear coming from Frediano Raffa, third-generation mob boss, that had not been

one of them. It shocked me so profoundly that I just had to sit there absorbing the fact I don't think anyone has ever asked me that before.

Did I want this life?

My immediate response was yes. This was what I was raised to do and had always been expected to do with my life. However, I don't know that I've considered anything other than taking my place next to my father. The more I sorted through my feelings brought up by this question, I realized it wasn't as simple as a yes or no answer. So many factors went into how I ended up where I am right now, and I knew I wouldn't change anything.

“Yes, this is the life I choose for myself, but I didn't always feel that way,” I answered as best I could.

“Can I ask what brought you to that answer?” he pressed as if he wasn't satisfied with my choice.

Sitting up straighter, I crossed my legs and decided, in an act of trust, I would lay all my cards on the table. “This life gives me all the power and influence I need to protect the people I love. Saying that, I need to make it clear I don't believe this means they won't be in danger or they'll be safe from everything... you and I both know that's not reality. Alternatively, if I were to walk away and live a *normal* life, whatever that even is, I would be left with nothing but the protection of public servants who don't give a damn about me or my men. So if being the dark queen of the Caprioni Family

and heir to the Raffa Family is what it takes to provide me with unlimited resources, then that is what I choose.”

Reaching out, I placed my hand over his, where it rested on his knee. “I don’t know about you, but I’m really fucking tired of watching people I love get taken from me. That’s what this is all about, Gramps. I’m going to make it crystal clear to the world that if you fuck around with me or mine, then the full wrath of the Caprioni Queen will descend upon them, wiping those who dared off the face of the planet. There will be nothing left for them to rebuild with, and if they try, I’ll stomp them under my heel like the cockroaches they are.”

Frediano smiled as he cupped my face and kissed my forehead. “Well said, my girl. Spoken as a true queen who will change the criminal world.”

“I don’t want that responsibility. It’s not what I’m trying to do here,” I argued, pulling away from his hold. “What I said at breakfast wasn’t for show... it’s how I truly feel about this whole thing.”

“Astin, you might not want this responsibility, but you’re going to shoulder it whether you like it or not,” Frediano countered. “We might be criminals, mob bosses, and the seedy underbelly of the world, yet I don’t think you realize we’re also the ones who keep the balance. There will always be those who have no rules or boundaries walking over the dead bodies that litter the ground around them. Most of the time, those more powerful keep them in check, limiting their

resources or taking them out permanently if they can't be managed.”

He must have seen that I wasn't following his logic, so he switched gears. “Back when I visited for your oath ceremony, you mentioned trouble with the lower-level criminals. Such as that biker gang thinking they had the power to demand more from you or set new terms because you *need* them. First, you explained how wrong they were and warned them what would happen if they continued to press the issue. Now they ignored everything you said and took over one of your warehouses, killing your people in an act of defiance. What was your response to that?”

“I killed them all and put a new MC in their place who was chomping at the bit to prove their worth,” I answered.

“Exactly,” he said with a smile. “Now, instead of a biker gang, picture a black market organ dealer who's slaughtering a remote village and bringing too much attention to themselves. That one dealer could be connected to many other criminal organizations, and if he were to get caught by law enforcement, its effects could ripple out to cause trouble for everyone. Those who work in the shadows are all part of the criminal ecosystem whether they like it or not. Allies or enemies be damned when the ecosystem is threatened.”

A dull ache at the base of my skull warned me a headache was brewing from all these revelations. “Okay, so there's an ecosystem. What does that have to do with me and this fight?”

“The Accardi and Leoni Families are the ones who are stepping out of line,” Frediano announced, getting to his feet and pacing as he talked. “This whole trafficking business is moments away from bringing every law enforcement agency down on us. The five families are some of the most powerful and oldest mob families in the world. We’re always being watched, fending off undercover agents, and our homes or offices being bugged. The De Santis Family is their shield, running interference and serving up other targets for the cops to hunt. Problem is Rocco’s going fucking senile and can’t handle things. He’s slipping. It’s bad enough his grandson is making moves to take over, but no one knows him well enough to determine if this is better or worse for us.”

Grinning to myself, I stood, brushing the grass and leaves off my pants. “Oh, don’t worry about Domenico. The two of us have come to an agreement that I think will work out quite nicely.”

Faster than I’d expected from an old man, Frediano grabbed my arm, turning me to face him. “What did you say?”

“Domenico and I have created an alliance,” I explained, tugging my arm free. “Before I explain, let me make something clear between us. Family or not, you fucking grab me like that again or lay a hand on me in anger, I’ll break your fucking hand.”

The shocked look on my grandfather’s face had me questioning how harsh I’d been. “Look, I’m not trying to be a bitch after we did some bonding here today. I’m just struggling

to help you understand that we are equals, and I won't allow you to treat me like a damn grunt. The diplomatic approach wasn't working, so I did what I always do, give back exactly what I'm being given."

He glared at his hand as if it had betrayed him, flexing it before stuffing it into his pocket. "Forgive me, Astin, you had every right to react as you did. I don't mean this to sound like an excuse, but I know you'll be the only person to understand. The older I get, the control I have over the anger and violence inside me slips when my emotions run high. Your grandmother was gifted in her ability to help me regulate my emotions. After she passed, I did my best to remember what worked, but somewhere along the way, I stopped caring."

"I do understand and know exactly what you mean," I said, running my hands through my hair as the breeze picked up. I locked eyes with my grandfather. "I also know that in your eyes, I'm still that young girl you trained and not the leader of the Caprioni Family. If we are going to take down two of the strongest crime families, then I can't be worried about you undercutting my authority. I want to do this with you, but if you can't tell me here and now that you'll let me lead this fight, I'll figure out another way that doesn't involve you."

Without saying a word, he continued to stare at me for what felt like an eternity. Reaching a hand behind his back, he pulled free a knife and sliced his hand. "As flows this blood, so will my soul be lost if my oath is not true. Life, loyalty, and honor to the heir who claims leadership of the Raffa Family."

“With your vow, you now have been baptized by blood,” I responded, completing the oath between us.

Grabbing the handkerchief from him, I wrapped his hand. “Why the hell did you just do that? This means nothing when I’m not the head of this Family, you are.”

“I just abdicated my place as head of the family, and you accepted to lead it,” Frediano announced.

Blindsided by this information, I yanked roughly on the cloth, tightening it to the point it made him grunt. “Shit,” I muttered, working at loosening the knot. “That’s not how things work, old man, and you know it. I didn’t cut my hand or say the opening part of the oath. All you did was slice up your hand for no reason, and we don’t have anyone around to stitch it up.”

Pulling his injured hand from me, he tucked it under my chin to force me to look at him. “Why would the new Don bleed for the old man stepping down? I owe my loyalty to you, Astin, as the head of the Raffa Family, not the other way around. Abdications don’t happen often, but if you don’t believe me, then speak to Armond. His father was the last to step down, allowing his son to run things in his place. This is how things need to be. There can’t be two people in charge here, and this is exactly what your father and I trained you for... to be a leader. So from this point on, I will be your adviser and teach you all there is to know about running the Raffa Empire.”



What the *fuck* just happened?

Backing away from him, I needed some distance between my grandfather and me. Unable to process everything with all my emotions coursing through my body, I started to pace, mumbling to myself. “I can’t... why would...”

Pausing, I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, letting the air out slowly before facing him once more. “How the fuck am I going to manage leading two families when they’re in different countries? Not to mention the fact I’m planning to, as you put it, change the criminal world as we know it. Look, I can handle a lot and have been handling more than my fair share since coming out of hiding. You’ve seen what I’ve had to go through just to get the Caprioni Family to take me seriously, and they are a fraction of the Raffa Family’s size.”

“Astin,” Frediano snapped, cutting off my rant. “You might not have been prepared for this moment, but I am. Of course, the timeline of things has sped up with your father’s death, but

I have planned for you to take over the Raffa Family since the day you were born. I understand asking you to trust me is not going to be easy, however, that's what I need to make this transition as smooth as possible."

Narrowing my eyes, I studied his face trying to figure out what my next fucking move should be. "We need to take this conversation back to the house. I don't want you to utter a single word about what just happened here or what your plans are until my guys know about this new development."

To his credit, Frediano didn't react to the venom in my tone. I'm sure this isn't how he planned this moment would go, but I was really fucking done with my family moving me around like a pawn. Snatching up my heels, I headed back toward the house. I spotted Beatrice standing guard at the entrance to the cemetery, keeping an eye on me but giving us privacy.

"Beatrice, I'm heading back to the house. Is there a faster way to get to my room than retracing my steps?" I asked once I reached her.

"I wouldn't say it's faster, but it's more direct," she offered.

After I slipped my shoes back on, I gestured for her to take the lead. We walked in silence, which I needed to get my thoughts in order before dropping this bomb on the guys. What I couldn't figure out was why it bothered me so much that Frediano just handed me the key to the castle. It's not like he'd kept his intentions a secret, yet I couldn't shake this feeling I'd been played.

“Your men are all in the main living room, Lady Astin,” Beatrice informed me once we entered the house. “Gemma stayed with them while I was with you,” she added, noticing my questioning look.

It seems Gemma is working overtime to make sure I don't have anything to question about her performance. We headed deeper into the house, passing various rooms I'm sure at one point served a purpose but now sat empty. I spotted one of the maids Frediano had mentioned dusting what appeared to be a library. I guess it kept them busy to have so many rooms to maintain.

Entering the living room, I paused at the sight of a gigantic portrait of my grandfather, grandmother, and mom hanging on the wall. It must have been painted shortly before Mirabella's death since my mother seemed to be around fifteen or sixteen years old. It was crazy to see how similar we looked and that we'd both gotten our looks from Mirabella. Although Mother seemed to have inherited Frediano's proud-looking nose, it fit her graceful features.

“Astin, earth to Astin,” Braxton said, waving a hand in front of my face.

“Huh?” I responded, pulling my gaze away from the painting. “Sorry, were you talking to me?”

Braxton smirked at me. “Nope, it was someone else who looks an awful lot like my girlfriend. Guess that explains why she was ignoring all of us.”

I scowled at him, but he grabbed my face and kissed me until I gave in, wrapping my arms around his neck.

“There she is,” he murmured against my lips. “You want to join us on this weird, uncomfortable circle couch and fill us in on why you looked ready to murder someone?”

“A what couch?” I asked, taking in the whole room. “Oh...”

Two semicircle couches that seemed to blend the feel of a modern sectional sofa along with a more ornate vintage style sat in the middle of the room. Seeing the others as they attempted to sit comfortably on the couch with how low the back of it was made me snort.

“Yeah, looks pretty cool in a room like this, but appearance is about all this thing is good for,” Braxton shared, taking my hand to lead me over.

“Why did you guys stay here if it’s not comfortable?” I questioned.

“After the whole thing went down with Renato and you went after Frediano, the staff moved us in here. They brought coffee, tea, and snacks to munch on while we waited. Armond even stayed to hang out. In fact, he just left a little while ago needing to take a call,” Braxton explained.

Hound caught my other hand as I passed by, pulled me onto his lap, and made me yelp in surprise.

“Trust me, it’s going to be way more enjoyable to sit on my lap than the cushion,” he assured me, perching his chin on my

shoulder. “That, and it looked like you could use someone to lean on.”

That was absolutely what I needed right now, so I relaxed against him as he used an arm across my hips to hold me in place.

“Is there anything stronger than coffee or tea to drink?” I asked.

Jace stood and walked over to a cabinet, pulling open the door to reveal three rows of liquor bottles. “Let’s see... we have gin, scotch, rum, or mezcal if you want to drink it straight.”

“Double scotch, please,” I said, rubbing my forehead.

A strong, firm hand gripped the back of my neck and used its thumb to hit the pressure point at the back of my skull. Groaning in delight, I let my head fall back, putting more pressure on the spot as they made small circular motions with their thumb.

“*Omae*, your neck is as hard as a rock,” Liu gasped. “When’s the last time you had a massage?”

“Braxton rubbed my neck a few days ago, but I don’t typically like strangers touching me. Oh God, that feels amazing,” I moaned. “You, on the other hand, are more than welcome to do this anytime you like.”

“Babe, you might want to tone it down, or the maids are going to think we’re fucking,” Jace commented with a smirk

as he handed me my drink. “Not that I would have a problem doing that if you think it will help your stress level.”

I took a sip of the amber liquid, letting it slide down my throat and warm my belly. “I might take you up on that offer later, but first, I have to tell you guys something.”

My tone caught their attention, causing Liu to pause his work on my neck and the rest to sit up, focusing on me.

“What did he do,” Ryker demanded, a slight growl to his words.

It was clear to me there was no great way to ease them into this, so I said fuck it and went right for the kill. “I’m officially the new head of the Raffa Family. Frediano stepped down as of today.”

The silence in the room was deafening as I waited for their reaction.

“Holy fuck,” Luca blurted. “Can he do that? I mean, without witnesses, his lieutenants, or informing the Family this was going to happen? It shouldn’t be that easy, right? There has to be some kind of official announcement like when you took over the Caprioni Family.”

“Not necessarily,” Liu interjected. “While I’m not an expert on the Raffa Family, I know there was a process put in place for Master Caprioni to hand everything over to Astin if he became too sick. The legal part of it was already set up with his will and documentation that Astin would inherit all of it. As for the mafia side of things, there just has to be a verbal

transfer of power marked with blood witnessed by one unrelated person.”

“No one else was with her, though, so does that mean it still happened?” Ryker questions.

“There was another person there,” I said, turning my gaze to the entrance of the room. “Beatrice, could you come here, please?”

Immediately, the woman in question came to stand near the couches, hands clasped, waiting for my orders. “Yes, Mistress Raffa?”

Fuck, that simple change in title told me all I needed to know, but I still asked. “Beatrice, were you standing by the entrance to the cemetery the whole time?”

“No, I only moved there once I saw you were ready to leave. A bodyguard can only be effective if they are close enough to their protectee to intervene in a dangerous situation,” Beatrice answered.

“Were you close enough to hear what they were saying?” Jace pressed.

She shifted her gaze to meet Jace’s. “If you’re asking me if I was close enough to hear Master Raffa abdicate his place as leader of the Raffa Family to Mistress Raffa, then yes. Anything else that was discussed is not for me to remember or divulge.”

I was starting to think I’d misjudged Beatrice, assuming she would be soft based on her sweet personality. However, this

display of professionalism had me smiling. Boykov had my back no matter what—I was his sole priority to look after and protect. If I didn't tell Boykov he could share something, then he didn't give a shit what my guys said, his lips were sealed. This was one of the biggest reasons I had absolute trust in Ralph's ability to keep me safe.

“Have you shared that information with anyone else?” Ryker challenged.

“No, Master Ryker. I bore witness to the event, and it is my duty to confirm the actions were completed, nothing more,” she responded.

Ryker started to ask her something else, but I cut him off. “Thank you, Beatrice, that was all we needed.” She bowed her head before turning on her heel and exiting like a trained soldier.

Tipping my glass back, I swallowed what was left in it and set it on the side table. “Well, that confirms that.”

“Asta, I fear I'm misunderstanding something in this conversation the way everyone is reacting. Why are you upset about this when it gives you complete control over the Raffa Estate and all it has to offer? Wouldn't this be the best-case scenario? Now, no one, including your grandfather, can stop you from plotting to take down the families the way you want to,” Atticus expressed, shrugging his shoulders. “I might be wrong, but this all sounds like good things to me.”

Once again, my gallant knight of logic and discernment was coming to my rescue. While I was lost looking at the long-

term big picture of what this meant for my life, he focused on the here and now.

“It’s a double-edged sword,” I admitted. “You’re right. It does give me the power to direct this fight however I want to without anyone challenging me. However, in the long run, I have no idea how I’m going to manage keeping up with two major entities with an ocean between them.”

“That’s simple, you have help,” Atticus reasoned. “How do you think corporations who have hubs in multiple countries run things? They have a central office that deals with the major problems and a point person who’s in charge of the day-to-day dealings. No one person could run everything, but a team of people makes it manageable.”

Slumping against Hound, I let out a bitter laugh. “God, why do you always make things seem simple and logical? Here I am looking at the whole situation, wondering just how fucked I really am or if Frediano tricked me into coming here so I could lead the family if things go south.”

“Moonflower, take a breath,” Hound said as he swept aside my hair and nuzzled a kiss to my throat. “You’ve been running full speed since your father died, and things have only gotten more complicated since then. What I want you to do is close your eyes and let me hold you.”

When I wanted to argue, he stopped my words before they could even be said as he bit down on the crook of my neck. Instead of the argument I’d planned, a moan slipped out as my

head lolled to the side like he'd hit some magic boneless button.

“Good girl,” he whispered, trailing kisses up my neck. “Indulge me and close your eyes. I’m only asking for five minutes, then you can go back to ruling the world in those sexy heels of yours.”

His offer was too hard to pass up, so I closed my eyes. A moment later, I felt someone slip off my shoes and lift my legs so I was cradled in Hound’s arms. It made me wonder if this was what it felt like to be held by a parent as a child, knowing you were safe from any danger as long as they held you close.

“Breathe in through your nose until you can’t hold any more air,” Hound instructed. “Good, that’s perfect, Moonflower. Now let it all out slowly until there is nothing left, letting your body sink into my arms. Yes, just like that... let go of the burdens weighing on your mind. Focus on my heartbeat as you do your breaths three more times.”

During my training, I’d been taught meditation for the purpose of clearing my mind during a fight. The difference between life and death in many situations is how you react when shit hits the fan. What Hound was having me do was something entirely new but had a profound impact on my body. I could feel the stress coiled up in my body starting to release and muscles relax as I surrendered to just being still.

While I tried not to focus on anything but Hound’s heartbeat, this weightlessness was giving me clarity on a few things. As the small problems fell away, it gave me the chance to look at

the big picture. This is what I'd needed—a way to turn off the noise, allowing my brain to hone in on the root of the problem. To stop the whole plant from dying, you had to cut off the rot at its source, preventing it from spreading. This was the information I needed to discover, and I wouldn't be able to do that hidden out here in the countryside.

Eyes snapping open, I shot upright, nearly tumbling to the floor having forgotten I was sitting on Hound's lap.

“Oh fuck,” Hound muttered as he scrambled to yank me back against his chest. “What the hell, woman? Are you trying to give me a heart attack acting like a possessed spirit?”

Twisting, I grabbed his face and kissed him soundly. “Thank you. You have no idea how amazingly helpful that was.”

All irritation was lost and replaced with a pleased grin. “Anytime, Luna, but if you wanted to show your appreciation some more, I wouldn't mind.”

Our lips met once more, and he was ready for it this time, greedily deepening the kiss as he pressed me closer. The feel of his piercings on his lower lip and tongue always made for an interesting makeout. When I started to fight the urge to straddle him so I could test out a theory I had involving his cock piercings and grinding, I pulled back. My lady cave was on a strict no-friction timeout, and I planned to stick to it. It might be worth it in the moment, but the thought of having one of them lube up my vagina with ointment because it was rubbed raw wasn't my idea of fun.

“Okay, anyone else horny as shit now?” Braxton asked, followed by the others muttering or nodding their heads. “Thanks, guys. I just needed to know I wasn’t going to be the only one suffering from blue balls the rest of the day.”

Laughing, I slid off Hound’s lap to sit next to him, making it easier to resist temptation.

“You can come in now, it’s safe,” Jace announced, leaning forward to watch the entrance to the living room.

Ten



Catching Ryker’s gaze, I raised a questioning brow. He gave me a smile that would make the Cheshire Cat proud before he mouthed one word— *Grandfather*. Of course, he would walk in while I was making out with one of my guys. Isn’t that how it always works? Then again, I suppose not really having a parent present in my life, I was spared these moments for many years. It would seem I was playing catch-up on these experiences later in life.

When Frediano entered, the guys shifted to sit with me, leaving the other for him. Not having enough room for all of them, Braxton sat between my legs. Subtly, he curled a hand around my ankle as he rested his head on my knee. It was such a simple gesture, but it made me feel so loved. I couldn’t help but comb my fingers through his hair, something I knew Braxton enjoyed.

“I apologize for intruding,” Frediano said, clearing his throat as he took a moment to adjust his shirtsleeves. “You’ll have to

forgive me. I'm not used to having young love in the house. Next time, I'll make sure to announce myself before entering the room."

"I'll forgive you if you forgive me. The eight of us are still in the honeymoon stage of our relationship and need to work on how to adapt when we aren't in our own home," I explained. "That, and Ralph is really great at either warning us someone is coming or preventing them from entering the room. For a man that I'm not dating, he really does spoil me."

"Speaking of Boykov, he should be here by dinner," Ryker added. "He said to inform you that Thad is also with him, and I quote, 'he doesn't want to hear shit about it.' "

"Oh, Ralphy-Ralph, how I've missed thee," I sighed. "I suppose I should be grateful he's only forcing one new bodyguard on me. Wait, does he know about Gemma and Beatrice?"

"Yeah, he asked if there was adequate protection for you, so I mentioned them," Ryker answered. "Why?"

"He's been on my ass to add more people to my personal protection since he needs to sleep or something," I grumbled. "Thad is his first addition, but I'm sure he plans to add more. My money's on him planning to test out the girls since I haven't rejected them yet."

"You only have one bodyguard?" Frediano asked, his face betraying how idiotic he found that.

I held my hands up, stopping all comments. “Hold up, everyone. First of all, Ralph isn’t my only bodyguard. I have the seven of you. Unless you’ve all forgotten that you’re my lieutenants as well as my lovers. There is hardly a time when I’m not with one of you in addition to Ralph, so don’t make it sound worse than it is. Secondly, I spent my entire life being trained into a lethal weapon that could hold her own in the mafia world. Yes, I need protection... yes, I know I’m not invincible... and yes, I understand I have trust issues the size of Mount Everest. It’s just going to take time for me to feel comfortable with someone new who I’m supposed to rely on putting my life above theirs. Now I’m done talking about this, and I’m fairly certain this wasn’t what you came in here to discuss, Gramps.” Ryker chose the smart move and let the matter drop, which was a big step for him.

Frediano spotted my scotch glass and pointed to it. “I think I’m going to grab a glass, care for a refill?”

“Yes, that would be nice. Scotch neat, please,” I answered, feeling that both of us needed to take the edge off our similar personalities.

I haven’t a clue how I hadn’t realized the similarities before Liu pointed them out, but now that it had been brought to my attention, it was obvious. Frediano and I were proud, independent, stubborn people who didn’t know how to trust. What I found interesting is that so many have said I’m just like my father, painting a picture of what it must have been like between Daddy and Frediano.

“I’m a dark rum man, myself, but I do enjoy a good scotch in the evening with a cigar,” Frediano shared as he poured the drinks. “Anything for you boys?”

They all passed on the offer which surprised me, but then again, it could be they didn’t want him to have to make it for them. I accepted the glass he offered before taking his seat across from me. Frediano took a gulp of his rum, making me wonder if I needed to keep an eye on how much he was drinking. Going through a breakup, no matter if it needed to happen or not, wasn’t easy. Not to mention I knew how deeply my grandfather loved Renato.

“Earlier, you mentioned something about an agreement with the De Santis boy, Domenico. Would you be willing to share with me how that came about?” Frediano asked in a shockingly humble and respectful manner.

Had I been looking at this all wrong? Could it be that Frediano had to give up his power and title for him to let me take the lead? Thinking back on what I knew of my great-grandfather, he hadn’t been head of the Family for long before an illness cut his life short. They never determined what exactly he’d been sick with, and some called foul play. Either way, Frediano took over running the Family at nineteen, meaning he’s been Don of the Raffa Family for almost sixty years.

“In the process of getting Luca out of jail, I made a new friend. Actually, you might have heard of her... goes by the name Ivy Foxxx,” I shared, taking a sip of my drink.

Frediano's brows shot up. "As a matter of fact, I do know that name. She's quite the notorious assassin and spy who's managed to stay a free agent. Most of the time, a person like that will be hunted by a larger criminal organization and forced to work for them after getting caught in a trap. It's rather remarkable that she's sought you out."

"Truthfully, she's worked with Liu and my father on a few occasions, but I'm not sure my father knew she was the source," I shared, glancing at Liu.

"He did not. It was one of the conditions of her working with me," Liu added. "I wouldn't have ever revealed her to you, Astin, but Ivy made it clear she wanted a face-to-face meeting with you."

Smiling, I replayed that coffee-shop encounter, remembering how impressed I was with my new best friend forever. "Yes, well, you can't ask someone you've never met to be your best gal pal over the phone or text. Whatever her reasons are for choosing me to be her friend, I feel like I've gotten the better end of the deal."

"I'm sorry... gal pal?" Frediano questioned. "She risked her freedom and exposed herself just to ask if you would be her friend?"

"Yes, but she also had information for us on the judge and gave me a heads-up about who the puppet masters were pulling the strings on all the attacks against me," I explained. "Honestly, I think Ivy had been on her own, running to keep ahead of the danger, that she got lonely. We share many of the

same ideals, neither of us is big into drama, and I think she realized I needed a female friend too. Without her help, I'm not sure things would have gone as smoothly as they did."

Intrigued, Frediano leaned forward as he asked his next question. "So how did this friendship bring about an alliance with Domenico De Santis?"

"One day, we were dress shopping for a gala we were going to attend as part of our plan, and in walked the man. I had no idea who he was, but it was obvious he knew Ivy, and they had a history. Ivy had manipulated us both into being at the same place and time, in a manner that didn't draw any attention. There couldn't have been a more innocent run-in than that lunch. Of course, after she introduced us to each other, it was clear why Ivy had put in the effort," I said, swirling my drink absently.

"The part that's crazy about all this is Domenico asked me one question. That's it, just one simple question, and he was in. Yet, as with anything in our world, there's always a catch. Lucky for me, his terms were something I was more than willing to agree to. I help him oust old man De Santis and take over as head of the Family, then he will publicly announce an alliance with me," I revealed, smiling as I took another sip of my drink.

"With you..." Frediano echoed, brows furrowing. "Not the Raffa Family or the Caprioni Family, just you."

"*Yees*," I said, stretching out the single word, trying to figure out what he had a problem with. "This is an agreement

between Domenico and myself. I give him the bodies to win the takeover and my backing as head of the Caprioni Family to validate his claim as head of the De Santis Family. Well, I suppose I'm now head of the Raffa Family too. Either way, having one less family to contend with in this fight is a plus."

"Astin, I'm not trying to say you did anything wrong. All I'm trying to parse out is what the *exact* agreement was," Frediano assured me. "I agree this is helpful to the present situation, but my only word of caution would be to ask if your alliance ends if you were to die."

Dread over what that implication might mean sat in the pit of my stomach like a rock.

"Asta, what's wrong?" Atticus demanded, shooing Liu out of the way so he could sit next to me. Taking my hand, he placed two fingers on my wrist, checking my pulse. "You've gone completely white. Are you feeling lightheaded?"

"No, I-I'm fine," I mumbled, my brain racing a million miles an hour. "Liu, I need your phone."

Snatching it out of his hand, I scrolled through his contacts until reaching Bert Renolds. Hitting the call button, I placed it up to my ear and listened to it ring three times. Instead of going to voicemail like I expected, it clicked and started ringing again.

"Hello, Liu," Ivy's silky voice answered.

"Ivy, it's me," I corrected her.

"Astin—"

“I’m sorry, I don’t mean to cut you off, but I don’t have time for pleasantries. You and Domenico had a history, right? I get the feeling you know each other pretty damn well, and it has nothing to do with him being a client,” I stated.

“Ask me the real question, Astin, since we’re cutting through the bullshit.” Gone was the voice of the woman I considered a friend. Instead, I was speaking to Ivy, the assassin.

“Did I just agree to help Domenico take over the De Santis Family in exchange for an alliance that ends with my death? Ivy, did I just sign my own death warrant?” I asked, closing my eyes, preparing for the worst.

The call went silent, so quiet that I cracked open an eye to make sure we were still connected. Braxton took my glass, setting it on the coffee table as my hand began to shake ever so slightly.

“Ivy?” I ventured. “Are you still there?”

All of a sudden, noise filled the line once more. “Sorry, I had to put you on hold so I could call Dom. I just informed him if anything ever happens to you, it better not trace back to him, or I’ll skin him alive and use it to make a new pair of shoes. Then I can walk all over him for eternity for daring to harm my friend.”

“Wow...” I blurted. “That is one hell of a visual. Can I borrow that from you?”

“Darling dearest, Astin, you can absolutely use that threat. Better yet, let it inspire you to create something equally

visceral to the imagination,” she answered cheerfully. “Just don’t forget to share it with me.”

“What was Dom’s reaction?” I asked.

“You know I didn’t wait to hear a response,” Ivy admitted. “I said what I needed to say, and it’s better for all of us if I never find out if he was planning to stab you in the back. You see, knowing would mean I’d have to do something about it which, in turn, would leave you with three families to deal with when it could have only been two.”

God, just when I didn’t think I could have a bigger girl crush on this woman. “Have I ever told you how blessed I am to have you as a friend, Ivy? To be clear, I’m not at all saying that because of the skills you have or information you provide. I’ve never had someone I could call out of the blue, accuse them of setting me up, and have them turn around and threaten the person I thought you were working for. That is a friendship people dream of,” I pointed out.

Ivy chuckled. “Thank you for saying that, Astin. It means more than you know. Hey, what do you say we do lunch tomorrow? I’ll come pick you up.”

“I would love to, but I’m not in Springmont,” I explained.

“Well, good because I was planning on picking you up from La Prosperità Estate. I’ll be around by eleven, and I suggest you have one of your new bodyguards come with you. Mr. Boykov has suffered long enough sharing this plane with me.”

“Hang up the phone now, Ms. Foxxx.” I heard Ralph grumble in the background.

“Ta for now, darling, see you tomorrow,” Ivy said, ending the call.

Like most of my interactions with Ivy, I had to take a second to process what the fuck just happened. Clicking on the contact name, I pulled up the messages exchanged.

Bert: *I know Mr. Boykov told you I'm on the plane. Do me a favor and keep that between us.*

Liu: *There are no secrets between Astin and me, so I'm going to need a reason to even consider keeping this to myself.*

Bert: *You are such a sweetheart, Liu, don't ever change, my girl needs that from you. As for why you should keep it to yourself, it's because I want to surprise her.*

Bert: *Truly that's all this is. If I wanted to keep this a secret, I wouldn't have hopped on with Mr. Boykov. It took all the skill I had to convince him not to call her right away and ruin my whole surprise. Who knows, he might still, he's not known for being fun.*

Liu: *Fine I won't bring it up, but if she asks, I won't lie.*

Bert: *Thank you, Liu, I know it's asking a lot, but I appreciate it. If the plan gets spoiled then so be it. I won't ask you to compromise your relationship for my silly needs.*

The whole interaction made me smile. How many people could count themselves so lucky to have a friend this thoughtful and willing to respect a boyfriend's boundaries

even if it might ruin the surprise. As for Liu, that man earned himself a night with me all to himself and the title of being the favorite.

“So I’m guessing from the happy smile that Domenico isn’t planning on double-crossing you?” Luca questioned.

“Actually, I’m not sure if he planned to, but I know for a fact he isn’t now,” I said, handing Liu back his phone. “The second she heard my concerns, Ivy called Dom and threatened to make him a new pair of heels.”

The guys all flinched, grimacing at the mental image.

“Yeah, I don’t think I’d risk that fate when a woman like Ivy makes the threat,” Ryker commented, shivering at the thought.

“I’m guessing she didn’t wait for an answer. Which is why you don’t know one way or the other if it was true,” Luca concluded.

“Ding, ding, ding, we have a winner,” I cheered, feeling my panic dissipating. “Holy shit, that was a reality check. Fuck, how did that not cross my mind even to consider? Gramps, you weren’t kidding when you said this fight was going to take everything I’ve got to stay ahead.”

Frediano chuckled. “It’s age and experience, my girl. Don’t beat yourself up. There is a lot left for you to learn that can’t be taught. Some things you have to experience firsthand. I know your father was supposed to have you learning alongside him, but life took you down a different path. It would be my honor if you’d accept me as your adviser, allowing me to share

my knowledge and experiences to help you avoid such situations in the future.”

It felt odd to tell him no when I didn't have a good reason not to accept, but the part of me that still mourned my father didn't want him replaced.

“Can I think on that?” I requested. “Today has been full of surprises, and I think it would be smart to take some time.”

“Of course, there is no pressure to accept either, Astin. However, I just want to make it clear that while your father and I had our differences, there was always one thing we could agree on...” Frediano paused for a moment and cleared his throat as emotions rose to the surface, “... that, my dear girl, was how proud we were of you and the woman you've become. We both put you through hell by keeping you isolated, forcing brutal training on you, and putting our need for revenge on your shoulders. A lesser person would have cracked under the pressure, but like a diamond, it made you stronger.”

There were no words I could grasp to respond to that confession. I teetered on the brink of tears, overwhelmed by the words I've been longing to hear for a long time. Yet I could feel Darkness stirring, reminding me that words were just words. If Frediano truly felt this way, then I would wait to see if his actions reflected his sentiment.

“Thank you for saying that,” I murmured, reaching out to run my fingers through Braxton's hair, using the action to soothe my emotions. “Once I've had time to mentally adjust to

the reality of being the new head of the Raffa Family and see how things are run here, I'll consider your request to be an adviser."

"I know we still have a lot of trust to build between us, Astin, but it was made glaringly obvious to me that you are all I have left that means anything in this world. Take all the time you need," Frediano reassured me as he stood. "I'm at your disposal day or night, just say the word."

Nodding, I dropped my gaze to focus on Braxton as he tilted his head back to look at me and smiled. There was something infectious about Braxton's smile—it was mischievous, and you couldn't help but smile back.

"Ah, yes," Frediano called, pausing at the door. "If you would like to join me for dinner, I usually eat at five thirty. Just let Gemma or Beatrice know one way or the other so enough food is prepared. Otherwise, there is a slightly bigger town twenty minutes away that I believe has a few restaurants and a bar. My one request should you go out is to keep in mind that the longer we can keep your presence here quiet, the better it is for us all."



There was no question we were going out.

Astin had been put through the wringer today by her damn grandpa, and I felt they needed a little space. I waited until I was sure he had left the room before twisting around to face my Mistress with a grin.

“As your lieutenant charged with managing your nightlife businesses, I feel it would be to our benefit to check out what the locals in Nepreea enjoy for a night out,” I suggested, taking her hand and tracing the lines of her palm. “Who knows what we could stumble upon? Maybe we can have our fortunes read, and they will tell us how to bring down two of the biggest crime families.”

She raised a brow at that, trying to keep a straight face.

“Hey, I’m only trying to help,” I said, holding up my hands in surrender. “If you want to hang out here with its warm, inviting atmosphere and super comfy couches, then that’s what

we'll do. All I'm saying is if you're tired of the old and want a little fun to blow off steam, I can make that happen."

Jace rose and walked behind the couch to rest his hands on Astin's shoulders. "He's right, babe. I think we should go out. People around here are loyal to the old man, and if they know that's where we came from, I doubt we'll have any trouble."

The moment she let out a moan, I knew he was using those magic fingers to soften her up to the idea. None of us appreciated how things went down at breakfast, and it took both Jace and Luca to hold back Ryker from going after Astin. Liu was right, though—those two needed to figure shit out between themselves, but it didn't mean I had to like it.

Astin's gramps, as she called him, went from hot to cold in seconds, which made it really fucking hard to know how he'd react to anything. How he'd let a man like Renato dig his claws into him made no sense. It was clear as day to me that asshole was only as invested in the relationship for as much as he could get out of it. I should know—I'd been that leech, taking all I could get before moving on to the next sucker.

Until Jace came into the picture.

That sexy bastard clocked me and my games from the moment I decided he was my next target. Three years together and that man had reformed me, loved me, and showed me there was far more value in a relationship than monetary benefits. Now, not only did I have a man who I loved and absolutely didn't deserve, but a woman who filled in all the missing pieces of my soul. If it weren't for Jace picking me all

those years ago, I'm fairly certain I wouldn't be alive now. People like Renato become hooked on the perks. Junkies, if you will, always needing more until you cross the wrong person, and instead of dumping your ass, they'll kill you.

I'm sure Renato was going to discover that truth for himself rather shortly. Powerful people don't like to be used.

"Okay, fine, you win, but I'm going to change first," Astin relented. "If we head out there soon, we can check out the businesses too. You never know what you can find in a small town."

"That's the spirit," I cheered, reaching out my hands to her. "Come on, gorgeous, I'll help you pick what to wear."

"You just want to watch me take my clothes off," she shot back with a smirk.

Unable to deny it, I just shrugged my shoulders and wiggled my fingers for her to hurry. Grabbing her hands, I pulled her up, but she surprised me as she continued her forward motion until her lips met mine. Fuck, I loved how she tasted normally, but with the added flavor of scotch, it just made it all that more decadent.

"Damn, what did I do to earn that?" I asked. "You know, so I can do it again."

Astin laughed, which was always a goal I had to accomplish every day. "Just for being you and reminding me to have some fun. I know I get caught up and lost in my head, but thankfully, I have the perfect pet to look after me."

I would never have called myself a sentimental person, but hearing Astin say that to me had my heart melting. This is what I'd been craving in all those pointless relationships that I supplemented with *things*. It was as simple as a genuine appreciation for what I brought to the relationship. Yeah, Jace loved and appreciated me, but it wasn't the same—he didn't need my support. In fact, I was the one who depended on him for support and keeping me grounded when I tended to spiral. However, when it came to Astin, I was able to make her life better in a manner none of the others could.

Some might look down on me for being a man who wanted to serve a woman, to be owned by her. Personally, I think it takes greater confidence and security for a man to submit and find fulfillment from it. Just because I would get on my knees for this woman in a heartbeat didn't mean I lost all power. With one word, I could end the whole thing—tell me that isn't power.

Lifting Astin's hand, I kissed it, holding her gaze and trying to pour all my feelings into these next words. "Thank you, Mistress."

While I *helped* Astin pick out her attire for the evening, I looked up what restaurants there were in the small town of Torma. We decided on a wine bar that offered a wide selection of seafood and an extensive amount of options for a make-your-own charcuterie board. What sold me was the fact the

restaurant was situated on a cliffside with a patio that overlooked a lake. It seemed like the perfect place for a little wine, romance, and distance from all that happened today.

We piled into two SUVs and headed out. It was nice to see the landscape around us since we arrived in the middle of the night. This part of Nepreea was rolling hills of pasture lands broken up by stretches of wooded areas and homesteads. Everything was lush, green, and quiet compared to back home in Springmont. It was a lovely change of pace, but I knew I was a city guy and soon I would miss the hustle and bustle.

I'd called ahead to make a reservation, and thankfully, the woman spoke better English than I did Nepreeian. When Colmazio first brought us on as lieutenants, he required us to take a course in basic Nepreeian. Some of the others, like Luca, Ryker, Liu, and Jace, who dealt with contacts in Nepreea regularly continued their education. I, however, did not, which I regret wholeheartedly. As they always say, hindsight is twenty-twenty and not all of us can be Atticus who learns shit after reading it once. Thankfully, I had Hound struggling alongside me to catch up to the others.

The town of Torma had roughly fifteen thousand people living there, but it was a tourist destination with a few historic sites and, of course, the beautiful view of Vetri Lake that was so large you couldn't see the other side of it. The homes we passed were narrow but tall, three to four stories clustered together, all painted in a color scheme that made me think of a sunset. Cobblestone roads made it impossible for anyone to

sneak around this town, but it just added to the overall feel of Torma.

Since we wanted to check out the place, our drivers dropped us off at the town's center circle, near the shopping area. Hopping out of the vehicle, I waited for the others to join me, along with Gemma and Beatrice who'd changed into street clothes to blend in. Jace came up behind me and wrapped an arm around my waist, pulling me close.

"Have I told you how sexy those pants make your ass look?" Jace murmured, nipping at my ear.

"If I say no, will you say it again?" I teased.

Jace laughed and kissed my cheek. "Always such a brat. Just take the compliment."

Grinning, I leaned my head back to kiss him, feeling like we hadn't had a moment together, even though I slept in his bed last night. "You know, it's really kind of nice that we don't have to hide this anymore."

"Brax, you sucked at keeping what was going on between us a secret," Jace pointed out. "But I know what you mean, and I have to agree, especially since you're officially mine."

"Half yours," I corrected.

"Half, whole, doesn't matter because I can now tell anyone who dares to make a move on you to fuck off," he explained, kissing me soundly before pulling back and taking my hand. "Come on, let's enjoy this family outing with our girl."

Slightly disoriented by how fucking turned on I was hearing him say that kind of possessive shit, I let him lead me to the others. How I managed to pull myself together and not beg Jace to find a place he could bend me over and fuck my brains out, I'll never know. But I deserved a damn gold star for doing it.

We wandered in and out of shops, most of them full of tourist trinkets. Then we stumbled upon a men's clothing store that had sharp-looking suits and pieces that screamed mafia. The shop also caught Luca's attention, giving me the leverage I needed to convince everyone to check out the place. Hound and Ryker complained the most, but they changed their tune when they saw how excited Astin was helping to pick things out with Atticus. None of us would deny our woman anything that made her smile after seeing it vanish for a time after her father's death.

I spotted a rack of rather bold colors and prints for a suit that I had to check out. "Hound," I called across the shop. "You need to come look at these."

Looking like a sullen child, Hound wandered over. "Look, I know you all wear suits, and it's the unofficial dress code, but I'm not..." His words trailed off the moment he saw the jacket I held up. "Holy shit, it has skulls all over it."

"Yeah, there's one here that also has computer code that looks like plaid," I pointed out. "Are you sure there's no way to convince you to dress up a little? What about switching out the studded leather jacket and hoodies for these?"

Hound clicked his tongue ring against his teeth as he considered my proposal. “I suppose I could do that, and it would help me blend in a little more.”

“Yeah...” I agreed hesitantly.

There were many skills Hound had, but blending in was absolutely not one of them. Together, we picked out a few for him to try on, and I grabbed Astin to help. If she liked it on him, he’d buy it in every fucking color. The dressing rooms and the one-eighty mirror were in the back of the shop, down a short hall. As far as I could tell, we were the only people in the place, and the others were keeping the owner rather busy helping with sizing and fit.

“Does that suit have mustaches sewn on it?” Astin questioned, trying not to laugh as Hound checked himself out in the mirror, pretending to be a male model.

“Fuck yeah, it does,” he announced proudly, flashing a toothy grin. “How the hell are there not more people who wear shit like this? Come on, who doesn’t want a suit with embroidered mustaches on it?”

All the jackets he picked were black, and the different elements added in various shades of gray. Some you had to really look to tell what the design was while others were blatantly obvious.

“I draw the line at SpongeBob, Hound. There is no way I could ever find you sexy wearing that,” Astin informed the man.

Instantly, Hound yanked off the jacket, threw it across the room, stalked over to Astin, and kissed the hell out of her. “Have I erased it from your mind yet, Luna? Be honest because there is no way I’m letting a damn talking sponge become a cockblock between us.”

“What sponge?” Astin asked, acting for all the world like she had no idea what he was talking about.

“Exactly,” Hound agreed, kissing her once more. “I think five is enough to start with, right?”

Astin and I both agreed it was a start, so he proudly collected his new jackets and headed up front to pay for them.

“He has no idea, does he?” Astin murmured.

“That no one but him would ever dare to buy those? Or the fact that the rest of us, even Atticus, have at least twenty full suits in our closet?” I asked.

“Both,” she admitted with a sharp nod.

Letting out a sigh, I turned to face her. “Not everyone can be blessed with good taste in clothes, but we have to accept them as they are and occasionally burn an item so they never can wear it again.”

Jace entered the fitting room with two suits, pausing as Astin burst into laughter. “What? You haven’t even seen me try them on yet.”

She waved a hand to tell him she wasn’t laughing at him.

“It’s not you. I made a joke just before you walked in,” I explained, coming to the rescue.

“Ah, well, I’m gonna try these on real quick. The others already have what they want and started to check out,” Jace shared, entering one of the rooms and pulling the curtain closed.

“Okay, I’m gonna head back up front,” Astin said, having composed herself.

The curtain pulled back to reveal a shirtless Jace, making us both freeze. “I could use an opinion if one or both of you wanted to help me out.”

“Yeah.”

“Sure.”

Astin and I both said, answering at the same time. Jace smiled mischievously and stepped back, leaving the curtain open. Not one to need a second invitation, I grabbed Astin’s hand and pulled her after me. Jace stood in just his boxers, leaning against the back wall next to the mirror. I fumbled with the curtain trying to hook the one side to keep it closed, knowing we were going to play one of my favorite games—don’t get caught.

“Princess, I want you to take off your underwear and sit in that chair,” Jace instructed.

The outfit I helped her pick out was a dress with a thin-lined black and white pattern. It was fitted to show off her bust and waistline then fell loosely to the floor. Astin did as she was

told without hesitation, handing Jace her white lace underwear when he reached for it. We both watched as he slipped them into his pants pocket hanging on the back of the chair.

“Pup, come here and kneel,” Jace ordered.

My mouth watered, knowing what was going to come next, feeling my rock-hard cock pressing against the fabric of my pants as I kneeled. Jace’s hand gripped my jaw, forcing me to look up and see the excitement in his gaze.

“You know the rules, right, pup?” he questioned.

“Yes, Sir.”

“Good boy, now tell them to princess so we can play our game,” Jace said, turning me to look at her.

“Rule one, don’t make a sound. Rule two, don’t stop just because we hear someone close by. Rule three, if we get caught, there will be a punishment given later,” I explained.

Out of all the times we’ve played this game, we’d only ever been caught once, and it was a drunken idiot who fell into the bathroom stall door. I never let myself get loud enough to be heard—the thrill was in the *almost* part of the situation.

“Still want to play, princess?” Jace asked.

We’d long suspected Astin was a thrill-seeker like us, but any good Dom knows nothing happens until there’s consent.

“Yes, Sir,” Astin answered, wetting her lips in excitement.

“Just to be clear, your pussy isn’t going to get fucked tonight,” Jace reminded her. “Penetration is off limits until

tomorrow.”

“I understand,” she said.

“Sir,” Jace corrected.

Astin shot him an are-you-serious look, but Jace just held her gaze and waited. I knew they hadn't flushed out their dynamic, but Jace had a way of instinctively knowing when to put his foot down about something. Since the moment he brought up things between him and Astin, the running theme was always giving her a break from being in control of everything. Jace didn't want her to be a dehumanized submissive puddle on the ground. He just wanted her to hand the responsibility of decision-making to him for a little while.

“I understand, Sir,” Astin responded.

Jace smiled and brushed the back of his fingers down her neck. “Good girl.”

Astin's whole body shuddered under his touch, making my cock ache even more. *Fuck*, this room was full of charged sexual tension you couldn't help but taste. Jace turned his dark blue eyes to me, and I practically vibrated with anticipation.

“Did you bring it?” Jace questioned.

Reaching into my back pocket, I pulled out two packets of lube, something I've learned I needed to keep on me at all times. Unlike women, we men don't produce our own lube, making it easier to get fucked anywhere anytime.

“What a good pup,” Jace said, taking the packets from my hand. “I think you've earned a reward for being so unusually

obedient.”

Everything in me wanted to sass back, but I really wanted to get fucked, and doing that would only delay things. Plus, we didn't have a lot of time before someone came looking for us. Biting my tongue, I hooked my fingers over the top of his boxers and pulled down, freeing Jace's hard cock. Tucking the edge of the boxers under his balls to keep it out of my way, I licked the piercing that crowned the top of his cock.

“We don't have time to play, pup. Get your fucking mouth on my cock,” Jace ordered, grabbing my hair and thrusting into my mouth.

I moaned at tasting him in my mouth, slightly salty from the precum leaking out of his cock. Jace held my head still as he set his own pace, making me gag as the tip hit the back of my throat. I'd learned a long time ago how to choke on dick without puking, giving them the feeling of power but not ruining the moment.

As abruptly as he started, Jace pulled out, letting his cock slap me in the face. “Do you want this cock in your ass, pup?”

“Yes, I want you fuck my ass until you come inside me, Sir,” I answered.

Using my hair, Jace pulled me to my feet and turned me to face Astin, whispering in my ear, “Pants around ankles, then get on all fours bearing that needy hole you want me to use.”

My hands shook slightly as adrenaline surged through me, but it didn't take me long to assume the position he described.

Jace shoved up the back of my shirt, keeping it from getting any lube or other bodily fluids on it. The cool sensation of the lube was all the warning I got before a finger was shoved inside me. I bit my lip to the point of almost making it bleed, keeping the scream of delight to myself.

“Princess, can you see what I’m doing in the mirror?” Jace asked. When there was no answer, his fingers paused, making me whimper. “No, princess, you will use your words when I ask you a question.”

Ah, she’d nodded.

“I can see what you’re doing in the mirror, Sir,” Astin answered.

“Does it turn you on?” Jace inquired as he slipped a second finger in and started to move once again.

I didn’t hear Astin’s response, having gotten lost in the feel of Jace pressing hard on my internal happy cum button. My cock bobbed, hitting my stomach as I teetered on the verge of a dry orgasm. Dropping my head to the floor, I panted like a bitch in heat as he continued to torture me, adding a third finger into the mix. Over our time together, we learned as long as he could fuck me with three fingers, it was safe to switch to his cock. I like the feeling of being just slightly too tight and him forcing that pierced dick inside me.

All time ceased to exist as Jace kept edging me to the point my cock started to hurt with how hard it was. When he pulled his fingers free and slapped my ass hard, my head shot up, arching my back in a silent scream as I came. Not every man

can dry orgasm just like not every woman can squirt, but holy fuck, it's the best feeling in the world. Bonus feature, there's no cleanup, making it perfect for moments like this, but I knew Jace wasn't done with me as more lube was poured into my ass.

“What do you have to say for yourself, pup?” Jace pressed as he kneaded my ass.

Taking a second to lick my lips as my mouth had suddenly gone dry, I looked over my shoulder at him. “Thank you for letting me come, Sir.”

“Now it's time to return the favor, but I'm not the only one you're going to make come,” Jace shared, walking over Astin and pulling up the front of her dress to reveal her pussy. “You're going to tongue fuck your Mistress as I pound your hole.”

Just when I didn't think this moment could get any better, it did. Crawling forward, I tested out her position before grabbing her legs to pull her forward slightly, giving me a better angle. Astin's eyes were hooded as she widened her legs, giving me plenty of room to work with.

“Be a good puppy and make your Mistress come,” Astin murmured, running her fingers through my hair, only to reach the back of my head and press forward.

Needing no further encouragement, I dove in, flattening my tongue against her soaking-wet pussy and lapping it all up. Jace shoved two fingers in my ass just to make sure there was enough lube before the burn of his cock stretching my ass had

me gripping the legs of the chair. My grunt was muffled by the pussy I was feasting on, which had Astin gripping my hair tighter.

Did my Mistress like that?

I let out a low hum as I thrust my tongue into her, causing Astin's hips to buck. Grinning, I decided to play with this new discovery, timing it to when Jace rammed into me, forcing my face deeper into this perfect pussy. Never had I been so lost in the moment that I completely forgot we were in a fucking public dressing room. Jace reached around and started to stroke my cock, signaling he was close to coming. After having one orgasm, it wouldn't take much for me to shoot off for real the second time around.

Astin rocked against my face as I intensified my work, knowing the countdown was about to time out. A strangled cry that Astin did her best to muffle erupted out of her as she came. I kept my attention on her, prolonging her climax as Jace draped himself over my back. His hips thrust into me with all the force he could muster as he shot his cum deep into my ass. The feel of Jace coming inside me was all the help I needed to follow right behind him, coating his hand in my jizz.

My heart thundered, slamming against my ribs as if it were going to burst out of me, as I laid my head on Astin's thigh, trying to catch my breath. Jace wrapped me up in a hug, kissing the side of my face.

"Holy shit, that was amazing," Astin announced, stroking my hair. "I don't know where you learned to use your tongue

like that, but don't ever doubt your skills.”

Jace let out a huff of laughter, kissing the side of my mouth before sitting up. “When it comes to confidence, that’s something Brax doesn’t struggle with. It’s one of the things I love about him.”

I shifted to look at him as he pulled out. “Hate to break it to you... half that confidence is bullshit, but you make me believe it’s one hundred percent real. When I realized that was the type of effect you had on my life, I should have known then I’d fall in love with you.”

His eyes widening, followed by a sharp intake of breath, told me he heard what I’d just said. “I’m sorry, you should have known what?” Jace pressed, not trusting that I’d really said it.

Kissing Astin’s thigh, I straightened and pulled a cloth hanky out of my pocket to wipe off my cock before standing. Jace deserved a better moment than this, but I couldn’t hold back after keeping silent selfishly, protecting myself from a man who’d never done anything to hurt me. My pants once more in place, I ignored the belt and untucked shirt, reaching out to Jace still kneeling, watching me with concern.

“Please,” I begged, urging him to take my hand.

He took my hand, allowing me to pull him up and stood there silently as I cleaned him up, tucking his cock back in his boxers. Unable to stall any longer, I placed a hand over his heart and met his gaze. “Jace, you know I’m not good at this vulnerable stuff between us, but I’m working at being better.

You deserve better from me because you're the man I love with all my heart."

Jace grabbed my face, slamming his lips to mine, kissing me like he'd never get to do it again. "I love you, Brax," Jace murmured against my lips, pressing another soft kiss to them.

"There's something important missing from this moment," Jace noted, looking past me with a soft smile. "Ah, there's the other half of my heart, trying to make a break for it."

Twelve



What started out as a kinky quick fuck with two of my guys had turned into an intimate moment between Jace and Braxton. Wanting to give them a moment alone, I decided to make a stealthy exit until I heard Jace say something, making me pause.

“Ah... sorry, I just wanted to give you two some privacy,” I explained. “Take all the time you need. I’ll make sure they leave you be.”

“Don’t you dare take one more fucking step, princess,” Jace ordered, frowning at me like I’d done something to upset him. “Come here, now.”

Confused, I closed the curtain and walked over to them. Jace searched my face and must have seen my unease, causing him to gently wrap a hand around my throat. “Astin, did you hear what I told you a moment ago?”

“No, but I didn’t realize you were talking to me,” I explained.

He nodded absently, his thumb stroking my neck. “That makes more sense,” he said under his breath. “I’m sorry I snapped. I thought you were ignoring me, brushing off what I said.”

“What did you say?” I questioned since I got the feeling it was important.

Pulling me to him, Jace kissed me slowly, savoring the moment between us. “It’s okay. Obviously, this wasn’t the right time, and I can be patient. However, I want to make sure you understand that no matter what happens between Brax and me, you are part of this relationship. Picture us as a three-legged stool... if you don’t have all three supports, then the stool is useless. The moment the three of us agreed to be in a relationship, we became a package deal. There is no us without you, simple as that.”

“What?” I blurted. “Jace, we’ve talked about this. I didn’t want the fact you are both with me to change what you have together.”

“You did make that clear,” Jace agreed. “However, what you’re not understanding is that our previous relationship of the two of us was missing something. It was missing you.”

“Hey, guys, dinner reservations are in fifteen minutes,” Liu called. “Do I need to call and move it or will you be done in the next ten minutes?”

I started to answer, but Braxton stopped me with a finger pressed to my lips so he could respond. “We’ll be out in five. Thanks for the heads-up.”

Liu didn’t say anything more, leaving us to finish whatever they guessed we might be doing.

“I know this isn’t what you want to hear, but Jace is right,” Braxton said. “You came into this with the best intentions, ensuring you did what was right for all of us. Please don’t misunderstand what Jace is trying to say just because it’s not turning out the way you planned. Things between Jace and I never would have progressed to this point if it weren’t for you. Astin, you force me to face what I’m really thinking and feeling, then express all of it in words, helping me understand what I want. God, Jace has been trying to get me to do that for years, but I didn’t know how. There’s no way I could tell someone else how I felt if I couldn’t even do that for myself.”

Braxton hit it on the mark. I was terrified that if something went wrong and I lost one or either of them, they’d blame me for losing both their lovers. If what Braxton was saying was true, then did this further the truth that some people truly needed more than one partner to have a successful relationship?

“My Queen,” Braxton whispered, tucking hair behind my ear. “There’s another reason you belong right where you are with us forever.”

“Why is that,” I asked, trapped in his rich brown eyes.

“Because we love you,” Braxton stated. “Yes, I said we, as in both Jace and I. There would never be the possibility of walking away from you, Astin. Doing so would leave us half the men we are when we’re with you, and I like the man I’ve become more than who I once was.”

My gaze bounced between them, unsure how to handle one of them confessing for the other.

Jace rubbed the back of his neck, glaring at Braxton. “That was a sneaky move, Brax. I would have told her myself.”

“You chickened out after thinking she rejected your confession when she just didn’t hear it,” Braxton pointed out.

I held up my hands, stopping them both. “Don’t say anything more, please.”

Combing my fingers through my hair, I took a second before saying, “I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear a confession from either one of you today. In saying that, if the occasion should arise again, then I hope it’s a far more romantic moment and everyone speaks for themselves. This is not me rejecting what was said or the emotions behind it, but *this* is not the moment I want to reflect on years later.”

“You’re right,” Jace admitted. “I panicked, thinking you felt so much like an outsider that you needed to leave when that’s the furthest thing from the truth.”

“And I should apologize for speaking on Jace’s behalf when something so important should come directly from him,”

Braxton added, taking my hand. “We just don’t want ever to risk losing you because you feel forgotten or unwelcome.”

I stepped forward, kissing them both before unhooking the curtain. “You’re both forgiven, and I promise if I ever feel like I don’t belong, I’ll be sure to speak up so neither of you have to worry. Now get dressed. I’ve worked up quite the appetite thanks to you.”

When I headed up the hall to the main shopping area, I found the guys looking like they were posing for a *GQ* magazine, blocking the entrance to the dressing rooms. Ryker spotted me first and moved out of the way.

“Where’s everything you bought?” I asked, noticing none of them had garment bags with them.

“They’re going to drop them off at the house for us,” Liu shared. “Gemma pulled the store owner aside and filled him in on who we were.”

Hound chuckled. “Poor guy. I thought Ernesto was going to faint when she told him. Although once he recovered from learning you were the Raffa Family underboss, our man, Ernesto, begged to take all our measurements so he can keep them on file. Seems he’s trying to be our exclusive suit dealer, even promised he could make any pattern I wanted on them.”

“Wow,” I commented, looking around the shop to find the man.

“We had him take a walk,” Luca said, stepping up behind me, running his hands down my arms. “Even though you three

did a damn fine job keeping the volume down, there are just some things none of us are willing to share.”

I shivered at the possessive tone in his voice, which made my pussy clench. “Good to know,” I murmured.

My stomach rumbling ended the moment between Luca and me, making him laugh. Wrapping an arm around my waist, he guided me toward the door. “Come on, baby girl, let’s get you to the restaurant. The other two are just gonna have to catch up.”

Thankfully, the restaurant was only a few blocks away, so we made it in time for the reservation. When I entered the elegant main dining room, I paused, a smile breaking out on my face as I spotted a familiar face. I can only picture what it must have looked like to everyone else in the restaurant for me to fling my arms around a stony face, hulking giant of a man, dressed in an all-black suit.

“Wreck-It Ralph,” I exclaimed, hugging the boulder of a man who responded to my affection by patting the top of my head. “How did you find us here?” I asked, stepping back.

“Lady Astin, I’m your lead bodyguard. It’s my job to know where you are,” Boykov answered.

“So it was Ryker,” I said, reading between the lines. “Unless you got the contact information for Gemma and Beatrice, which is totally possible.”

Boykov just continued to stare at me, unwilling to out his source. This was what made the two of us work together so

well. I didn't intimidate him in the slightest. If he felt it was safer for me to remain in the dark, then that's exactly where I'd be.

"Fine, Ralph, keep your secrets," I grumbled, giving up.

"Thank you. I will. If you're done interrogating me, I believe they are ready to seat you," Boykov pointed out, gesturing to a woman clutching menu books to her chest.

Switching into Nepreeian, I apologized. "Forgive me for being so rude. I was excited to see my friend and forgot my manners."

"No, no, it is an honor to have you at our restaurant, Madam Raffa," the woman assured me. "If you will follow me, we've set aside a section on the patio to give you some privacy."

So much for keeping a low profile. I wonder who told her? Or had the owner of the suit shop blabbed it to the whole town on his walk?

The patio was elegant but not overly fancy with trellises covered in ivy and string lights strung up between them. Seating was a mix of traditional restaurant tables and chairs along with patio furniture, couches, and armchairs. A wonderful breeze moved through the air, spreading the fragrance of all the flowers hung in planters on the railing.

"Here you are, Madam Raffa. Your server will be over shortly as well as our sommelier, should you have any questions," the hostess informed, stopping near a corner

section with two couches and armchairs surrounding a low square table.

“Thank you, this is perfect,” I said with a smile.

Never one to be rude for no reason, I didn't tend to worry about my interactions with people. However, now that it was safe to say everyone knew who I was, my first impression on this town was important. Braxton and Jace joined us just after we sat down, taking two of the chairs. I noticed something peeking out of Jace's pocket and grinned, knowing it was my underwear.

“What's got you looking like the cat who caught a mouse?” Liu whispered in my ear.

Not wanting to spill the secret, I smiled. “Let's call it an inside joke. It means something to me, but no one else would really get it.”

“I know I pride myself on not keeping secrets from you, but even I understand some moments are meant to be kept between two people,” Liu reasoned.

Cocking my head, I frowned. “What brought that up?”

“Nothing, I just felt like it needed to be said,” Liu assured me. “What I mean to say is there's a difference between being asked to keep something from someone that might cause harm by divulging the information and a person trusting you with information about themselves they don't want others to know. I'm not looking to live a life of radical honesty with you where there are no secrets of any kind between us. My goal is that

you trust me to tell you the whole truth about any situation I find myself in.”

“I’m still not following...” I admitted.

Liu took my hand in both of his, holding it gently. “My mother and father do nothing but lie to each other to get ahead in life. As a female politician, Mother had to work twice as hard to get the respect she has today, but that respect is built on a mountain of lies. My parents will never divorce, their marriage being about power and money. Yet I think there could have been love if my father could ever trust a word leaving my mother’s mouth. Seeing what lies for personal gain could do to a relationship, I vowed I’d never be like them. I want to have a life with someone where there’s mutual trust, but I know I can’t expect you to be as honest with me as I am with you. That’s not how it works in the mafia world, and I accept that reality. All that to say, if you need to keep something from me, I don’t want you ever thinking I’ll be mad about you not giving me the same level of honesty.”

I rested my other hand on his and gave it a reassuring squeeze. “It means everything to me that I never have to question if you’re being honest. That is a treasured gift in this life I live, and I will do everything I can to reciprocate that. As you said, some things I might have to keep to myself if it pertains personally to one of the guys or in order to protect you. Keeping the balance between relationships and responsibility is a tricky one, to be sure. Yet with mutual trust, it makes my job of pulling it off easier.”

Liu kissed me then pulled me to lean against him with his arm wrapped around my shoulder. “You are an amazing woman, Astin, and what we plan to do here in Nepreea is just the beginning of your story. I can’t wait to see what else life has in store for you.”

Melting into his hold, I took in the sight of all my guys sitting here with me, wishing I could take a mental picture of this moment. “It better have more moments like this,” I whispered to myself.

Thirteen



The following morning, I woke up feeling much better about pretty much everything in general. We'd spent the night drinking wine, eating delicious food, and just spending time with each other as a family. While the guys had all known each other before I entered the picture, they didn't have a reason to bond. These seven men were so vastly different from each other and without something to link them together, they'd have no reason to spend time together. Yet something told me they needed each other as much as I needed them. Everyone needs people they trust to watch their back or talk to, knowing they will understand their life. It was a beautiful moment I plan to treasure always, but we weren't here for a family vacation—there was work to be done.

Arriving in the dining room, I spotted Frediano reading a newspaper seated to the right of the head of the table. It gave me pause, but I needed to accept the reality that this particular change in status was happening even if I didn't choose it.

“Good morning,” I greeted Frediano.

He smiled and folded up the paper. “Good morning, Astin. Did you have a nice evening?”

Just as I was about to sit, Beatrice hurried forward and pulled out the chair for me.

“Ah, Bea...” I started then stopped. “Do you mind if I call you Bea?”

“No, Mistress Raffa, you may call me Bea if you like,” she answered, blushing slightly. “That’s what most of my friends and family call me. Hardly anyone uses my full name.”

“I’ll call you Bea if you switch back to calling me Lady Astin,” I countered. “You’ll find I’m not big on formality for formalities’ sake, such as pulling out my chair. I admire you for wanting to show respect to the head of the Family, but you and Gemma are my bodyguards first and foremost.”

Beatrice dropped her head. “Forgive me for overstepping, Lady Astin.”

Reaching out, I lifted her chin to look me in the eyes. “Bea, don’t drop your chin to anyone, not even me. Stand tall and proud. You’re a personal bodyguard to the Don of the Raffa Family.” Dropping my hand, I looked over my shoulder where Gemma stood by the dining room entrance. “Gemma, could you come here, please?”

Once she was standing next to Beatrice, both still in their simple gray dress that marked them as staff. I understood what

Frediano was trying to accomplish doing this, but it wasn't working for me.

“Ladies, from now on, I want you to dress in all black. I'm going to have a few suits made for you. Until then, wear something you feel you can do your job in which isn't acting like a maid. From this second on, your only job is to keep me safe and alive, understood?” I asked.

“Yes, Lady Astin,” they answered.

“Ralph, could you step in here?” I called, not bothering to question if he was close by or not. Sure enough, he stepped in from the courtyard as if appearing out of thin air. “Ladies, this is Boykov, and he is in charge of my bodyguards. He is who you go to first if there is trouble, you have questions, or anything else related to doing your job. If you can't reach him, Master Ryker is your next call as the head of security. On the rare chance you can't reach either of them, Master Jace would be next on the list to contact. Any questions on that?” I inquired.

“No, Lady Astin.”

“Excellent. Now if you could change out of those dresses, we have a girls' outing this afternoon,” I instructed, dismissing them.

Sinking into my seat, I noticed a coffee waiting there for me, steam rising off it so I knew it was fresh. I took a sip, humming at how good it tasted before I remembered I never answered Frediano's question.

“Thank you for the suggestion of going out. It was exactly what was needed,” I shared. “We even found a tailor who all the guys like named Ernesto. Have you worked with him before?”

Frediano shook his head. “No, I can’t say I have, but once I found my tailor, I didn’t even consider using someone else. However, Massimo passed away two years ago, so I haven’t had anything new made since. If your grandmother knew how many suits I had hanging in my closet, she’d tell me I wouldn’t need a new one for the next ten years.” He chuckled, sipping his coffee.

As he talked, I noticed a subtle change in my grandfather, almost as if he had a weight lifted off his shoulders. While I’d never describe Frediano Raffa as a relaxed, go-with-the-flow kind of guy, there wasn’t the same tension in the air around him.

Our conversation was paused as the guys joined us, taking their seats and passing around all the food that had just been set out.

“So, what are the plans for today?” Frediano asked.

“I have a friend who flew in yesterday to surprise me. I believe she’s picking me up for lunch this afternoon,” I shared, not having planned much past that. “What I would like to work on before that happens is gathering the Family together to announce the change in leadership. We need to deal with any internal issues before I even think about where to start with taking down the top two families.”

“Consider it done,” he stated. “When do you want this meeting to happen? Tonight, tomorrow, in a week?”

“Tonight, if we can. Otherwise, I’ll settle for tomorrow morning,” I decided. “The longer we wait, the bigger the risk of it getting out, and the Family gossips never tell the whole story.”

“Are you planning on doing this the same way you did taking over for your father, with an oath ceremony?” Liu asked.

I considered his question as I chewed my bacon. “People back home needed to know I was serious and willing to do whatever it took to maintain my place. They weren’t prepared for a woman to take over, but if Gramps is telling the truth, the Raffa Family is well aware of what the future holds for them.”

“Tell me, Astin, what would be the point of lying about that?” Frediano asked as he nonchalantly slathered his toast in butter and jam.

“Gramps, if I could tell you that, then I never would have been fucked over by two people I loved and considered family. The drive for power makes people do or say anything to get what they want,” I reasoned.

Frediano paused, looking up to meet my gaze. “Those men deserved the fate they met for what they did... don’t ever question that. You’re also correct about power. It’s addictive to those who have it and for those who want it, so what good would telling you I plan to hand things over to you do to build my power?”

“Simple, you lure me in, telling me I get more power being your heir and that I was trained to take over since the beginning. Before that can happen, though, I need to take out the Accardi and Leoni Families who are trying to kill me. Once that is done, the world is my oyster, and I will be queen of it all,” I proclaimed, then stabbed my fork into a strawberry. “Only when all is said and done, you betray me, taking everything I have for yourself, creating a new criminal world order that you, my dearest grandfather, control. I don’t know, that sounds like a pretty good plan to me, don’t you think?”

The room fell silent as everyone waited to hear Frediano’s response to my little story. His shoulders began to shake until the laughter he was holding back burst out. Utterly confused, I watched the man double over because he was laughing so hard. When the old man finally managed to pull himself together, wiping the tears from his eyes, Frediano beamed at me.

“You, my girl, just proved everything your father and I did to keep you safe and train you right was worth it,” Frediano announced.

“I’m sorry... have you lost your mind, Gramps?” I demanded.

“Far from it,” he assured me, patting my hand. “What you did right there was lay out a plan so perfect that no one would see it coming. *That*, my dear girl, is exactly what it’s going to take to destroy those motherfuckers. You, Astin Caprioni-Raffa, are a natural at thinking like a leader of one of the five

families. A mind so devious and sharp that you can take the smallest details then use them in the right way to crumble an empire.”

“Sooo...” Braxton cut it. “What you’re saying is you didn’t lie about preparing your people for Astin to take over because you’d never be smart enough to plan it?”

Frediano shot a disapproving look at Braxton. “That isn’t how I would put it, but in a manner of speaking, yes. If I’m not capable enough to take out my enemies with all the connections I have, how could I possibly control running a criminal empire? No, things like that are for the young people, not the old men who have lived a life already. Although, I can offer wisdom and experience to help avoid falling into their traps.”

“Deal, you leave the main fight to me, and I’ll trust you to keep your ear to the ground and eyes on the horizon to keep us out of trouble, Gramps,” I decided. “Oh, and also a list of all the properties you own and known locations where Accardi and Leoni members live or hang out.”

“You’ll have it all by tonight. I’ll even ask Armond to see if he knows of any hangouts or property I might not be aware of,” Frediano added. “Astin, you’re not thinking of attacking them head-on, are you?”

“No, but as you said, it’s in the little details that you find the magic bullet to kill the beast,” I explained, popping the strawberry into my mouth. “I don’t care who you are, no one can keep secrets when they’re drunk or high.”

My answer seemed to appease my grandfather enough to let the matter drop and allow us to eat in peace. When we finished, I asked Anselma to gather all the staff on the estate in one place so I could address them. They would need to prepare for the family meeting and most likely already knew what happened. Gramps and I hadn't been too subtle when talking about it in the house.

“Yes, Mistress Raffa, I will have them gather in the staff dining room if that's all right with you?” Anselma questioned.

“Sounds perfect to me. Just send someone to let me know when they're here, and I'll come down,” I instructed.

She smiled and patted my hand before gathering my dishes and heading back to the kitchen.

“Astin, do you have time for me to show you something before your staff meeting?” Frediano asked as we stood from the table. “It won't take long, but I have a feeling it's going to be useful.”

“Sure, I was wondering what I was going to do while I waited,” I shared.

“The rest of you should come too,” Frediano added, leading us out of the dining room.

I followed along as he led us into the right half of the house, past the kitchen, and down a flight of stone stairs into a wine cellar. Jace let out an impressed whistle at seeing the rows of wine racks filled with various bottles. Some looked like they

might have been here since the monks left while others seemed brand new.

“You might say wine has always been a hobby of mine. When I find a brand or type I enjoy, then I make sure to stock up,” Frediano mentioned, pausing to smile at his collection. “That’s not what I wanted to show you, though.”

Pulling out an old iron key, he unlocked a wooden door, pushed it open, and flipped on lights showing another flight of stairs. I glanced at Ryker beside me, wondering if he was feeling as suspicious as I was about following the old man down the creepy steps.

“There’s eight of us to his one. I think we’ll be able to handle whatever happens,” Ryker reassured me. “Would it make you feel better to hold my hand, Tin-Tin?”

Scowling, I batted away the offered hand, causing him to smirk, but he accomplished his goal in getting me to relax. “Asshole,” I muttered, placing a hand on the railing and descended the ancient crumbling steps.

Reaching the bottom, I realized Frediano had led us into the catacombs he’d mentioned before. We were in a central connecting point with three tunnels leading in various directions.

“The center tunnel will take you out to the rented plots of farmland, and to the left is access to the main road with a shed that holds a getaway car should it be needed,” Frediano said as he entered the right-hand tunnel, leading us down it a short way. “This is what I wanted to show you.”

I didn't spot it right away with the tunnel being so dim, but there stood a vault door painted to match the tunnel's stone, camouflaging it well. Frediano pulled open a small metal flap revealing a keypad which he typed in what I guessed to be a fifteen-digit code. The keypad turned green, and he leaned forward allowing for the retinal scan to read his eye. Only then did the thunking sound of the door opening begin. Twisting the wheel, Frediano disengaged the final four rods locking the door in place and pulled it open.

“Welcome to the Raffa historical vault,” he announced, stepping aside to let me see in. “Within this room is all the information we have since the Raffa Family began in the criminal industry five generations ago. I've also taken the liberty to collect all I could about the past three generations of the Caprioni name as well, figuring you would like to have it.”

Stunned, I entered the vault that would make any museum proud. The massive space seemed to go on and on, stuffed full of documents, paintings, artifacts, maps, and so much more. I walked over to a wall of drawers numbered and labeled with names and dates. Pulling one of them open, I found journals, various sheets of paper, and personal information such as birth certificates.

“Holy shit, this is incredible,” I said in awe, pulling out a journal and flipping through the pages to see it was a log of business transactions. “How in the world did this come to be?”

“One of your great uncles married a historian who had taken it upon herself to learn all she could about the Raffa Family.

He was supposed to kill her to prevent our secrets from being discovered, but they fell in love. So instead of her working behind our backs, we put her to work for us. Learning from our mistakes is what propelled us into becoming the third of the five families,” Frediano answered. “Since this was created, it’s become a rite of passage for the heir of the Raffa Family to study the information here and ensure their predecessors’ history is added to the vault.”

I replaced the journal and closed the door to face my grandfather. “So when you die, it’s my job to add whatever I can about you into the vault?”

“Yes, but I have what’s important and must be protected written in my will so you won’t have to worry about missing something,” he assured me.

“Wait,” I cut in, my brain stuck on what he’d just said. “You have a written will that lists what important information you need me to collect? Please tell me you did it in code or something.”

Frediano gave me a look like I was being intentionally dense. “Astin, surely you don’t think I’m that much of a fool. There are two wills, one is drafted by lawyers to ensure all legal steps are taken to keep the government from looking into it. The second is something I’ve personally put together that deals with the less-than-legal side of the Raffa business. Within that will is where you’ll find what to include in the vault, along with many other important things in case you didn’t take over before I died.”

“This should reassure you, Asta. It’s another level of proof that he hasn’t been lying about his intentions to have you inherit the Raffa Estate,” Atticus pointed out.

He made a good point, and there was going to come a time when I was simply going to have to accept my grandfather wasn’t the villain I’d always thought he was.

“Here, let me show you something,” Frediano suggested, changing the subject and leading me over to the back wall.

Turning the crank on one of the moving file cabinets allowed me to see the one behind it. Instantly, I knew what he wanted to show me as a large frame hung from a rack with a picture of my parents and Casimira on their wedding day. There was another of my mom holding me after I was born, beaming at the camera. My gaze came to rest on a photograph of me as a toddler in a garden with my mom planting aster flowers. I looked so proud brandishing my shovel, and the adoring look on my mother’s face was almost too much.

“This whole cabinet contains everything I have of your mother. Notes she sent me, pictures of her life, things her mother and I kept from her as a baby... it’s all here. I even have some of her sketchbooks from college,” Frediano detailed. “Your father even sent me things to keep safe for you since he couldn’t bear to have reminders of Natalina in the house.”

I quickly wiped away the tear that dared to slip out before turning away from the images. “Thank you for showing this to me, but I’m not sure I’m ready to dive into this just yet.”

“Of course, I only wanted you to know it was here for you whenever you choose,” Frediano said, moving the cabinet back into place, hiding the happy moments from view.

“Lady Astin,” Boykov called from outside the vault. “I’ve been alerted that all the staff is here and ready for you.”

Taking a deep breath, I shook out my hands, pulling my emotions back from overwhelming me. “Thanks, Ralph. I’ll be right there.”

Fourteen



The staff dining area was in an offshoot of the kitchen with two long tables with enough seating for about twenty people. None of the staff were sitting. Instead, they stood in a single line along the wall. Men had their hats off holding them in their hands while the women fussed with their clothes, trying to brush off any dirt or stains from work. When I entered the room, everyone stood at attention.

“Hello, everyone. Thank you for gathering so quickly. I know you all have lots of work to attend to,” I greeted in Nepreeian. “I’m sure you already know who I am, but I’m still going to introduce myself properly. My name is Astin Caprioni, Don of the Caprioni Family, granddaughter of Frediano Raffa, and newly appointed Don of the Raffa Family.”

The reactions to this news were a mixed bag—some clearly knew whereas others were hearing this for the first time. There

was a flurry of chatter between the women until Anselma hissed at them to be quiet, which they did instantly.

“I’m not going to address the topic of the change in leadership in this meeting,” I warned, cutting off any questions before they began. “The reason I asked to speak with you all is because a family meeting has been called for tonight if possible. Otherwise, it will happen first thing in the morning. Tell me how many people can we house on this property?”

“Are you calling in just blood-related family or all those connected to the Raffa Family?” one of the men asked.

When asking Frediano to make this happen, I hadn’t really specified. However, I had a feeling he’d only bring in those where the change in leadership would affect them the most.

“Blood-related,” I answered.

“That’s roughly four hundred people if kids are included,” he shared. “This estate can handle about half that, but if you let the local inns know, we can cover all four hundred.”

“Would they have that many rooms free with no notice?” I questioned.

“You own the inns,” Anselma informed me. “If you need the room, the rooms will be made available.”

“Can I place you in charge of making that happen?” I asked her.

She smiled and nodded. “Leave it to me. I will ensure everything is prepared for overnight guests. Also, Fabiana, our

cook, will need to pull in some help from town to manage feeding such a large crowd.”

“Get the help you need. I know this property is maintained with a barebones crew since it isn’t used on a regular basis. Keep in mind we need to keep as low a profile as possible. If anyone asks, we’re simply having a party,” I instructed, then dropped my diplomatic mask to reveal a glimpse of the Raffa madness. “Know this... I am a rational and fair leader, but if you betray me or this Family, you will wish the devil himself rose from hell to save you from the fate you’ll meet at my hands. Do we understand each other?”

“Yes, Madam Raffa,” they answered as one.

“Excellent, Anselma. I leave things in your capable hands. I’ll be out this afternoon, but Master Raffa will be here if you have any questions,” I shared. “Before I leave, does anyone have anything to say?”

A middle-aged woman dressed in jeans and a T-shirt with work boots covered in dirt raised a hand. “I-I do, Madam Raffa.”

“Go ahead,” I urged with a smile.

“Is it true that you’re here to save us?” she asked.

Frowning slightly, I shook my head. “I’m not sure what you mean?”

“It’s not safe here anymore in Nepreea. People are getting snatched off the streets, men are getting shot in neutral territory just for admitting they work for the Raffa Family,”

she elaborated, her hands balling into fists. “I lost my husband a year ago, shot in a bar with no warning. Two years before that, my daughter was stolen from me on her way back from buying groceries. I have one child left that I now keep at home with me. He’s only thirteen and doesn’t understand why he can’t go to school or play with his friends, but I can’t risk losing him.”

She paused as her voice cracked and sniffled before meeting my gaze head-on. “Forgive me for being blunt, Madam Raffa, but we are being hunted, and it’s only getting worse. So at the risk of being punished for stepping out of line, I’ll ask again... are you here to help save us?”

Hearing this woman’s plea and being faced with the reality of what Frediano had been trying to tell me before, I realized there was only one answer to give her. “I don’t know if I can put an end to all of this, but what I can promise you is I will demolish the Accardi Family as well as the Leoni Family for the crimes they’ve committed against me and those I have vowed to protect.”

“Thank you,” she whispered, her lip quivering as she tried to hold back her emotions. “Whatever you need, just say the word, and if I can help, I will.”

One of the other men wrapped an arm around the woman’s shoulders, comforting her. “As my sister said, any of us loyal to the Raffa Family are ready and willing to fight back. Our hands have been tied up to this point, but we want our pound of flesh from those bastards.”

I raised my hands, staving off the others from adding in their feelings on the subject. “Please know that I have heard you and understand your feelings on this matter. Right now, I need everyone, and I mean everyone across all of Nepreea who are loyal to the Raffa name, to act like nothing has changed. The most important part of this fight is going to be those bastards underestimating me as they do all women in power. This fight won’t be won in an epic battle of village people with pitchforks and guns. That’s exactly what they are waiting for, but I plan to pull the rug out from under them before they realize it’s coming.”

Looking at each of them for a moment, I decided to take a calculated risk, knowing it could be a game changer if it worked. “If you truly want to help me, then spread the word through all your networks. I want to know all the dirty details of the men who have power in the top two families. Who’s sleeping with whom, their drug of choice, if they have a love nest, secret children, debt to an outsider, anything big or small that I can learn will tell me where to strike first. Do you think that will be enough to hold people back from acting rashly?”

“Yes, Madam Raffa, I think we can easily convince them to behave after we explain you have a plan but need our help to make it happen. There won’t be many who will risk fucking up the chance to see those families burn in hell,” the man who’d first spoken assured me. I got the sense he was a respected man among the staff so I believed his assessment.

“What is your name?” I asked.

“Zani, Zani Briffa,” he answered.

“Mr. Briffa, if I tasked you with working alongside one of my lieutenants to create a secure way of communicating the information people learn back to me, would you be willing?” I inquired. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but I feel as though people would trust me more easily if you were included in the process.”

He shifted from side to side as if I’d made him uncomfortable. “May I speak honestly without you taking offense?”

Shrugging, I gestured for him to carry on. “Go ahead, I don’t offend easily.”

“Master Raffa has been Don of this family pretty much my whole life. He’s been one of the better leaders from what I understand, but in the past decade, Master Raffa hasn’t lifted a finger to stop the attacks on those who give their loyalty to the Raffa Family. We knew about you and that you were the heir to the Raffa line, but that was all we knew. So those who felt neglected and unheard turned to others who would hear them out. Since I’m a second cousin to you, Madam Raffa, I have grounds to put a claim on running the Family. To be clear, that is the last thing I want, but I wasn’t going to stand by either,” Zani admitted. “I believe you are the person who needs to lead this Family. With that being said, it would be an honor to work alongside you and your men to bring back the respect to the Raffa name.”

Okay, that had not been what I'd expected to come out of asking him to help. Holy shit, did Gramps know there'd almost been a coup within the family? Nope, no, no, there is only enough room for one crisis at a time between the two of us.

Reaching out a hand to Zani, I smiled as he took it. "It's nice to meet you, cousin, and I look forward to working with you to bring those bastards down."

After talking with the staff, I brought Zani to the sitting room the guys were hanging out in with far more comfortable furniture. Files scattered over the coffee table made me curious about what they were reading. Picking one up, I flipped it open to see a listing for a house in another city.

"Frediano gave us all the information on the Raffa properties since most of them were downstairs," Luca shared. "Figured while you were busy, we could get started on this. He included the rental properties as well so we're sorting through what's occupied and what places we can use. Some of it is just land that's been inherited over the years."

I grinned as I dropped the file back on the table. "Could it be that you guys are getting bored?"

"Since we have to keep a low profile, it helps to have something to work on," Ryker pointed out. "Who's your friend?"

"Guys, this is my second cousin, Zani. I've asked him to help me with some information gathering," I shared. "Hound, I need you and Zani to come up with a secure way for any Raffa loyal to send us information."

Hound dropped his feet where they were sitting on the couch's armrest and sat up. "I'm gonna need a little more detail than that. Are you wanting it to be a mobile platform or computer access?"

Deferring to Zani, I waited for him to answer. "Is it possible to have both? Most people have a cell phone, but not every area has great service, so a computer would be more reliable."

"It's possible but makes it a little more complicated," Hound said, chewing on one of his lip rings. "I suppose if I set up an encrypted chat room for them to access, that could be done on either device. What is the goal of this communication?"

"Those loyal to the Raffa Family are having a hard time sitting on the sidelines, so I figured if they could be our eyes and ears, we could cover more ground. This needs to be a place where they can share the information they learn but not have it discovered or traced back to the people giving the info," I explained.

Braxton let out a laugh, clapping his hands together. "Damn, that is fucking brilliant. God, your brain is so damn sexy. I love how you come up with these ideas. Are you going to include the Zuccaro people too?"

"Ah..." I started. "You know, I hadn't thought that far just yet, but it makes sense to gather all the information we can."

"Luna, can I suggest something?" Hound asked.

My brows shot up, surprised he was bothering to ask instead of just voicing his opinion. "Sure."

“Let me build whatever it is that will work best and test it on people we know are loyal to the cause. Once we know it’s as secure as I can make it, then we bring more people into the mix,” Hound suggested. “I’m not saying our allies can’t be trusted, but I think it’s smarter to limit the chance of discovery.”

“He makes a good point,” Zani agreed. “I know these people. Many of them have come to me with various concerns that I’ve brought to Master Raffa. Even within our own group, there are some I wouldn’t trust to share this with simply because they will take it too far. We need to keep the fact we’re collecting information on those families close to the chest, ensuring people act normally, and some wouldn’t be able to do that.”

Nodding in agreement, Hound grabbed a file, flipped it over, and started to scribble notes. “We’ll need to send out specifically generated codes that allow a single person to share information. This way, we can track exactly who’s sharing what and where they’re located. I can link it to a cell number and IP address to their computer, making it impossible to log in on another device.”

I knew we’d lost the man for the rest of the day, but there wasn’t anyone else I would trust to make this happen. “I think it’s safe to say he’s all over this project,” I commented to Zani. “Do you live on the property?”

“Actually, I live on the second floor with my wife, Sienna,” he shared. “We were appointed to watch over this property

since this location holds so much value to the Raffa Family. I'm just a man who prefers to be hands-on in his work, so I became the handyman of the place, if you will."

"Oh," I answered, completely caught off guard. "Why in the world haven't you been joining us for breakfast or even seen you in the halls?"

Zani ran a hand through his shaggy brown hair. "Master Raffa ordered that only house staff could be in the house while you settled in. So we've been staying in one of the rental houses on the property."

"Well, enough of that. You and your wife live here full-time, and I'm the guest," I reasoned. "Who else did he kick out of their homes?"

"Just us," Zani assured me. "All the others live in staff housing."

"Thank fuck." I sighed. "Does your wife work on the property too?"

"No, she is a local hair stylist in town. I came here as a single man who needed a haircut for my new role of estate caretaker and met the love of my life," Zani shared, chuckling. "Talk about a small-town romance."

That had to be one of the most wholesome love stories I'd ever heard. "I look forward to meeting her tonight. Well, I won't keep you from whatever work you need to get done, but at least it will be easy for you and Hound to connect on this project."

Zani grinned and shook my hand again. “I’ll admit you’re even more impressive than the rumors make you out to be, Lady Astin. Makes me glad I trusted Master Raffa to make the right choice for the Family. It would have been a huge mistake for me to take control when you are clearly the better option.”

Unsure how to respond to that, I just smiled and nodded, watching him leave the room. Atticus stepped up beside me and urged me to sit on the couch behind me. Once seated, he offered me a glass of water and settled next to me.

“Remember when you asked how you could manage running two families? Well, I believe you just found yourself a contender for being a steward,” Atticus informed me.

Sipping the water, I leaned back, sinking into the couch. “You know I really should be prepared for shit like this by now. Seriously, how many surprises can one household have?”

“I don’t think you actually want to know the answer to that,” Jace muttered. “In my experience, once you find a few skeletons in the closet, you stop looking for more.”

Hound looked up from his notes, frowning. “Interesting, that would make me dig deeper so I would know exactly who I’m dealing with. Speaking of, what’s Zani’s last name? I’m guessing it might not be Raffa, being a second cousin.”

“Briffa,” I replied. “Zani Briffa.”

“Huh, interesting it’s so close to Raffa,” Hound commented, writing the name down. “Wonder if it originated because of a bastard child since they can’t take their father’s name.”

We all just stared at him for a moment until he looked up. “What? I like the *History Channel*, so sue me.”

That hit me just the right way, and I couldn’t stifle my laughter. “Oh my God, that wasn’t at all what I thought you’d say.”

“Hey, you start watching documentaries on some of these royal families and tell me they don’t make your life seem boring in comparison,” Hound said defensively. “Okay, well maybe not you, Luna, there are far too many similarities to those back in the day.”

“Man, just think if they made her life into a movie?” Braxton added. “It would be one hell of a thriller.”

We all started to laugh when Braxton started listing who he wanted to play him in this made-up movie. I didn’t notice Boykov made an appearance. “Lady Astin, I believe Miss Foxxx has arrived to collect you.”

Glancing at my watch, I hadn’t realized so much time had passed. “She’s right on time,” I remarked. “So here’s the pressing question... are you going to join us or hand the job off to someone else?”

He leveled a look at me that gave me all the information I needed to know—he was definitely *not* coming along. “Thad and Gemma will be going with you. It is my opinion that neither of the ladies are ready to be on their own protecting you. They need to work on some areas before I can feel confident in their skills.”

“Whatever you say, Ralph, you’re the one who knows what it takes to deal with me,” I teased, reaching out a hand to him. “Just don’t get upset when you hear how much fun Ivy and I had today without you.”

Boykov pulled me to my feet and smirked. “That will just have to be a sacrifice I bear.”

“Look who’s got jokes today.” I laughed. “I’ll meet Ivy outside. I know Gramps won’t want her to come inside.”

He nodded and left the room as silently as he arrived. Turning to my guys, I kissed each of them, knowing I’d get shit if I didn’t. “Try not to have too much fun without me,” I warned.

“Babe, that’s what we should be saying to you,” Jace countered.

Ryker grabbed my hand, drawing my attention. “Promise me you won’t let her talk you into doing anything too crazy without us there.”

“Guys, she wants to go for lunch. Just how much trouble do you think we’re gonna get in?” I asked.

“Moonflower, tell me that wasn’t a serious question,” Hound challenged, crossing his arms. “If you look in the dictionary next to a trouble magnet, your picture would be right there. I love the fuck out of you, but damn, something always seems to happen around you.”

Rolling my eyes, I blew them all a kiss. “Love you guys... see ya later. Call me if shit hits the fan.”

“She just walks away from us so easily. How heartless,”
Braxton commented loud enough for me to hear.

I just gave them a wave as I headed for the front door.



“Astin,” Frediano called.

I spotted him stepping out of another room farther down the hall. “Good, I caught you before you left. Here, I wanted to make sure you had these before you went out.”

Curious, I waited for him to reach me, handing over a black metal credit card, a keyfob, and a cell phone. “What’s all this?”

“The cell phone has all the numbers you could possibly need if you get into trouble, and it’s encrypted so it can’t be traced. It also has a Nepreeian number so you don’t have to worry about service here. The keyfob will generate a code to let you into any of the Raffa properties should you ever need to use one at a moment’s notice. I feel like I don’t need to explain the credit card, but the important thing to note is there is no limit,” Frediano shared. “Everything is yours now, Astin.”

Frowning, I looked from the card back to him. “Everything? What about you? Don’t you need money to live off of?”

“Oh, I’ll be living off my pension for the remainder of my life that was put into a separate account with only my name on it,” Frediano answered. “Don’t you worry about me, my dear girl, I have plenty to live off of. Your grandmother came from a wealthy family, and she got a sizable inheritance that I placed in the same account after her passing. With your father’s wealth and mine now yours, there isn’t anything you can’t do or buy. Just be wise in how you show that off. Wealth brings out the worst in people around you.”

I wasn’t sure I agreed with that sentiment, but I guessed he was probably thinking about Renato. “I’ll keep that in mind,” I assured him and kissed his cheek. “Thank you for these.”

“Enjoy your afternoon with your friend, and I’ll see you back here tonight for the family meeting,” Frediano said, squeezing my arm affectionately.

Turning to the door, I was unsure what to do with these items, realizing I didn’t have my purse. I hesitated deciding if I needed to go back to my room when I spotted Gemma holding out the purse in question.

“Thank you, Gemma. I’m a bit all over the place today,” I admitted, tucking the items in my purse.

Gemma gave me a ghost of a smile. “I know you told us not to act like your maids, but I figured as an effort to be friends, this was a good step.”

“Friends?” I parroted back.

“Yes, seeing how close you and Master Boykov are has given me a new perspective on how to be an effective bodyguard. Your friendship with him has earned him enough respect from you that he can push back on matters when it comes to your safety, and you listen,” Gemma reasoned.

When she explained it like that, I realized she was right, but I also knew Gemma didn’t have the discernment Boykov did. “Just keep in mind, Gemma, the only time he pushes back is when it’s deserved. Otherwise, he follows orders.”

“I merely wish to work on building trust between us, Lady Astin. When we first met, I didn’t conduct myself well,” Gemma explained.

That was an understatement, but I let the matter drop. I’d already made it clear something like that wouldn’t happen again. “The first step is to be yourself, Gemma. I don’t trust people who are fake with me,” I warned, slipped the purse over my shoulder, and headed out to the driveway.

The sight of a shiny rose-gold Lamborghini had me grinning at the woman behind the wheel, looking like a silver-screen beauty in her scarf and sunglasses.

“I think I might be slightly underdressed to even sit in that car,” I noted as I approached.

Ivy pulled down her sunglasses so I could see her expression. “Don’t play with me, darling. You know damn well that form-fitting power suit looks sexy as hell on you.

Now get your ass in the car... we have things to do before your big meeting.”

“Is there anything you don’t know?” I demanded, yanking open the passenger door. “Seriously, how are we ever going to have things to talk about when you know everything already?”

Ignoring my attitude, she handed me another scarf with a black and gold pattern that matched my outfit. “Trust me, we have plenty to talk about. Also, I only know this much about people I care about, so consider it a form of flattery.”

With a snort, I tucked my hair under the scarf as she started the engine. It wasn’t until I put my seat belt on that she dropped the clutch, and in a flurry of gravel, we roared out of the driveway. Having no idea where we were going, I had no choice but to enjoy the ride as we flew down the road. With the wind whipping around us, there was no possibility of talking, but I enjoyed the chance to take in the scenery. I glanced in the rearview mirror and spotted Thad in a Maserati sedan, managing to keep up with us.

After about an hour, we arrived at the same small airport we landed at two days ago. Without hesitation, she pulled into a hangar and shut off the car.

“Ivy, where exactly are we having lunch?” I questioned.

“Oh, didn’t I mention we need to pick up a friend along the way?” she asked, getting out of the car.

Deciding not to bother with the door, I pulled myself up and vaulted over the side. “Ivy, what the fuck is going on?” I

snapped. “My trust with anyone only goes so far when I feel like I’m being manipulated, and we promised not to do that to each other.”

Ivy pulled off her scarf, letting her rose-gold hair fall in lush waves down her back. She was a stunning woman with the perfect figure accentuated with the high-waisted knee-length pencil skirt and loose, white silk button-down shirt.

Removing her glasses, Ivy pinned me with her crystal-blue gaze. “Astin, there are things that I need to explain, information that puts my life in danger just stepping foot back in this country. Please, trust me for just a little longer. Once we’re in the air, I will answer all your questions.”

I hadn’t known this woman long, but one thing I’d figured out quickly was she didn’t scare easily. Right now, Ivy was definitely afraid, and she was pleading for me to trust her. Letting out a breath, I nodded and walked up the steps of my jet, taking a seat at the table that was set for lunch. Thad and Gemma were right behind me taking their seats in the back of the cabin to give us privacy. Ivy settled across from me, shaking out her napkin like she didn’t just beg me to get on the damn jet.

“I hope you enjoy seafood. I had one of the best restaurants in the area provide us with hors d’oeuvres to tide us over until our final guest joins us,” Ivy shared, opening a bottle of chilled white wine and filling our glasses.

We sipped our wine silently until the plane was safely off the ground and the appetizers were placed on the table.

Immediately, I went for the crab puffs, and she smiled.

“Ryker mentioned you enjoyed those,” she murmured.

Taking another swig of wine, I set the glass down and leveled her with a look. “Tell me what’s going on, Ivy, and don’t you fucking dare sugarcoat it.”

“You’re right, it’s time I came clean about the real reason I first approached you.” Ivy sighed, setting aside her wine. “Foxxx is clearly not my last name... it was once Barone. My family was deeply connected to illegal mining of gems and minerals. I’m sure it doesn’t sound all that impressive, but there is a huge demand for such things in countries with incredibly strict laws controlling who can or can’t mine. That’s beside the point... all that matters is we had enough standing and power to be a threat to the five families.”

My stomach dropped as I guessed where this story was headed. I recalled the venom in her words during our first meeting when she talked about how any competition would be wiped out before they became an issue.

“I suppose I should say we became a threat to the Accardi Family, and their lackeys jumped on board. What’s really fucked up is we were always invited to all the parties, galas, and events of the who’s who in the criminal world. My family ran in the same circles and even befriended a few of those bastards who stabbed them in the back.” Ivy spat, her hands curling into fists so tight her knuckles turned white.

“That night is forever etched in my mind. It was a week after my sixteenth birthday, and we were celebrating it late because

my father had been out of the country and just returned. They'd just finished singing "Happy Birthday" when the first explosion went off. Everything became a blur with loud noises, flashes of light, and the sight of my father's blood splattered all over my cake. I remember my mother shoving me to the floor, draping her body over mine, whispering how much she loved me. When everything fell silent, I continued to just lay there, terrified they hadn't truly gone. Realizing my mother was far too still, and I couldn't hear her breathing anymore, I wriggled out from under her dead body and screamed until I went hoarse." Ivy's voice cracked slightly as she relived the memories. "It was probably the worst thing I could have done. However, you have to understand I'd been so carefully sheltered from death and violence, it broke me to see people I loved laying there slaughtered."

Having lost my father in a similar fashion, I knew exactly what she was describing, and it broke my heart. Reaching out, I took her right hand, noticing the blood from her nails digging in, and forced it open so I could press a napkin to her palm. Not saying a word, I just held her hand tightly between mine, trying to ground her mind in the here and now.

"My screams drew the attention of the men they left behind to deal with any stragglers or witnesses. They gagged me to stop the screaming then bound my hands and feet, tossing me in the back of the SUV they'd arrived in. I fought as hard as I could, having no skills, but it was no use against five brutes. One of them pistol-whipped me after my knee caught one of the others, giving him a bloody nose. When I woke up, I was

in a cage with ten other women who looked far worse off than I did... black eyes, split lips, torn clothes. One even had a dislocated arm because she wouldn't stop fighting them as they raped her. This sounds hideous to say, but I'd been fortunate to be taken by men who knew a virgin would make them more money." Ivy laughed bitterly, grabbing her wine and tossing it back.

Everything in me wanted to tell her to stop. I didn't need my friend to live through the darkness of her past to explain herself to me. If I had the chance to help someone take down the demons of my past, I would have done the same damn thing in her shoes. What mattered to me was that the friendship developing between us was authentic, and I knew in my soul it was.

"Ivy—" I started, but she shook her head.

"No, Astin, you deserve to know the truth of what I've gotten you into," Ivy argued. "I told you that Domenico and I had a past. The bastard owns me. Well, technically, his grandfather bought me, and I ended up with Domenico until I made my escape seven years ago. Since I left, my singular goal was to become someone they feared and could never control again. The Accardi Family stole everything. The Leoni Family's men run the trafficking ring while the Accardi fund it, and the De Santis Family keeps them all from getting caught."

"Hoolyyyy shit," I said, leaning back against my seat.

Ivy smirked as she poured herself more wine. “Oh, that’s not even the best part. I have a massive bounty on my head for killing one too many of their higher-ups and freeing girls they hadn’t sold yet. Seems you really do ruffle some feathers by leaving bloody bodies with little love notes behind telling them, *you’ve been Foxxed*. I haven’t stepped foot in Nepreea for the past four years because things were getting too hot for me.”

My jaw dropped at this bit of information. “What the fuck are you doing here then?”

“Seriously, darling, did you think I’d let you have all the fun?” Ivy tutted, adding wine to my glass. “I deserve my pound of flesh, and trust me, I’m going to get it. Besides, once all those bastards are dead and buried, no one will be pressing the issue to find me.”

This woman had more balls than anyone I’d ever met, and it was awe-inspiring.

“That is one fucked-up story, girlfriend,” I muttered, munching on a piece of shrimp. “So, as your friend, can I ask what the status of things are between you and Domenico?”

Ivy flicked her hair out of her face as she looked out the window at the puffy clouds. “That is a rather complicated answer. Part of me hates him for claiming me as his. However, Dom is also the reason I got away and could stay hidden for so long. I’m good at my job now, but I wasn’t always. If Dom and Cedro hadn’t cleaned up my mistakes along the way, I

would've been caught long before I had the chance to become who I am now.”

“Cedro?” I asked.

“Dom’s best friend and half-brother,” Ivy shared. “Those two have been inseparable for as long as I’ve known them. I suppose that’s what happens when you have to watch your parents die in front of you.”

“Huh, is it weird that we all have that in common?” I questioned. “It’s not like I want to get T-shirts made or anything, but it seems to be a common theme in this fucked-up world we live in.”

That made Ivy laugh, which had been my hope. I knew how easily the darkness from the past could take over, but my guys had shown me it was easier to fight back with a little help.

“Well, there’s going to be one in our little band of rebels who doesn’t fit into that category. She’s been blessed with loving parents even if her father does have a mistress. Although I’m not sure that counts against him since he’s never hidden the mistress from the family. As it happens, the woman is his wife’s full-time care nurse,” Ivy reasoned, tapping a finger to her chin.

It was driving me crazy that Ivy wouldn’t tell me who the hell she was talking about. “Seriously, Ivy, what are you getting me into? Remember, I have seven men who will make my life miserable if they think I knowingly put myself in danger.”

Grinning, Ivy folded her hands and rested her chin on them, fluttering her lashes. “Darling, are you getting soft on me?”

“What? I am not,” I answered defensively. “You have no idea how irritating it is to be smothered by well-intentioned people, no matter how sexy they are.”

“You poor thing, it must be simply awful to have people who love you that much,” Ivy teased, then glanced out the window. “Don’t worry your pretty head, it looks like we’re almost there. I’m not withholding information to be a brat, I just want you to make your own impressions.”

“The way you talk about her makes it sound like you’re pretty good friends,” I commented.

Ivy’s smile grew. “Jealousy is quite the flattering look on you, darling. Are you worried I might have another best friend making you less important?”

I wanted to argue, but in a way, I think she might be right. “It’s not that I’m jealous, but I’ve only had one best friend who left me high and dry for years. Now I’m dating the asshole, so you could say my skills at having a friend aren’t well-rounded.”

“You have nothing to worry about when it comes to our friendship,” Ivy assured me. “I won’t leave you high and dry or date you, so I think we’re safe.”

Flipping her off just like I would one of the guys, she started to cackle. “Oh, I can’t wait for the two of you to meet. It will either end in a bloodbath or a vow of eternal sisterhood.”

Before I could even press the matter, the flight attendants came to collect our dishes, informing us we'd be landing shortly. I peered out the window, but the cloud cover was too dense for me to see anything. When we finally dropped under the layer of clouds, I was greeted with a mountainous region below. It didn't look like we were anywhere close to an airport, let alone civilization.

Then I spotted what looked like a compound of some sort with an airstrip marked by blinking lights to guide the pilot. "Is this where we're supposed to be?" I asked, turning back to Ivy.

"It is indeed, but we won't be staying for long," she informed me. "Oh, I should warn you, our new friend has a personal bodyguard who rarely leaves her side. I just don't want you to be caught off guard if he makes an appearance or demands to join us on the plane."

"Anything else I should know?" I muttered.

"He's mute, had his tongue cut out years ago by some bastard who thought it would keep him from telling secrets," Ivy added.

This day just keeps getting weirder and weirder.

The landing was rough due to how short the runway was, causing the pilot to slow down much faster than normal. There was no way a full-size passenger plane could ever land here, clueing me in that this was a private airstrip. When the plane came to a full stop and the engines were cut, a swarm of men in military uniforms I didn't recognize surrounded us.

“Ivy...”

“Don’t worry, they know we’re coming. This is for our protection with this being a prison and all,” she said, waving off my worry as the door was unlocked and the steps brought over for us to disembark.

“A what?” I demanded, shooting out of my seat. “Why the fuck are we at a prison?”

Ivy slipped on a jacket she pulled out of a duffle I hadn’t seen her bring on. “Astin, I’m aware you’re used to being the one who’s five steps ahead of everyone, and being in the dark right now is making you lash out. We are here to pick up my friend as I’ve explained. This isn’t a trick. I’m not pulling one over on you, nor do I have any intention of leading you into a trap. All of this will make sense the second you meet her, I promise.”

I looked over at Thad who didn’t seem convinced by Ivy’s words, but he wasn’t telling me not to trust her. Letting out a sigh, I took the sleek black wool coat Ivy offered me as the chill breeze from outside swept through the plane.

“Please don’t make me kill you, Ivy. It would really make me sad to have to do that,” I warned.

She took both my hands in hers and pinned me with her gaze. “There are only four people in the world, including you, who know my real last name and how I lost my family. With that information, you could destroy me and collect the bounty on my head with a snap of your fingers. All I’m asking is for you to trust me enough to collect the final piece you need to

win this fight against the founding families. If you can't manage to do that, then just remember, the enemy of my enemy is my friend."

With that, Ivy exited the plane, shoulders back and head held high like she owned this fucking plane. I shook my head, smiling to myself. "Damn, they were right. I am a fucking magnet for trouble. Might as well come back with one hell of a story to tell them."

Adjusting my jacket and combing my hand through my hair, I slipped my purse over my shoulder and followed after my friend. "Gemma, stay here and make sure no one fucks with my jet," I ordered.

"Yes, Mistress Raffa," she answered loud enough for those outside the plane to hear.

Clever, very clever of her to slip that last name in so effortlessly. Gemma might be cut out to be my bodyguard after all.

Thad was right behind me, probably thinking this was a horrible idea, but to his credit, he didn't argue or try to talk me out of it. Not that I would have listened, which he probably knew. We hadn't gotten off on the right foot, and I was still adjusting to the idea of not having Boykov with me at all times.

"We need to have you remove all weapons before you can enter the prison," a soldier announced in a language that was definitely not Nepreeian but Triannen.

Now things were starting to make a little more sense. Trian was known as a harsh country with brutal winters, tough people, and a strict government that tolerated no criminal activity. So much so that anyone caught was given a lifetime sentence and placed in a remote prison—this prison, if I’m not mistaken.

What the hell had Ivy gotten us into?

“I’m sorry, sir, but neither my friend or I will be doing that,” Ivy informed the soldier. “Your warden knows why we are here. In fact, he begged me to come deal with your little problem. Unless you want me to get back on that plane and leave you to deal with *The Wolf* yourself.”

“If you get killed by your own weapons, it’s not on us,” he muttered before turning on his heel and marching off toward a cinderblock building.

“Cheerful one, that guy,” I said under my breath so only Ivy could hear me.

She smirked and hooked her arm through mine, bumping my shoulder affectionately. “Come on, let’s get this over with before you change your mind and get mad at me again.”

Sixteen



We entered through the door the guards opened for us, which landed us in a small cinder block room with a wall of thick metal bars blocking our progression. Only once the door behind us was closed and locked did they roll back the gate, allowing us to walk down a dimly lit hallway.

“Not him.” The head guard said, stopping Thad from following us. “The agreement was two women in, three women out.”

Thad was not pleased with this turn of events. “Like hell, you’re going to keep me from accompanying her.”

The head guard turned to Ivy. “Stick to the agreement or leave. There is no other option.”

I could tell Ivy took issue with the threat, but I cut her off. “He can wait here though, right? Do you have a video feed he can watch to keep track of us?”

“Yes, I will agree to that, but he can’t enter the prison,” the head guard countered.

“Deal,” I agreed, holding out a hand to shake on it.

Thad leaned in to whisper, “Your men and Boykov have been informed of your location, and all hell will break loose if you don’t come out of there in fifteen minutes.”

“Thad,” I chided. “I thought we were working together to build a trusting relationship? Why would you go and tattle on me like that?”

“Because my job is to care about your life more than you do,” Thad countered.

My mouth popped open at his bluntness. “Wooow.”

“You must go now or lose your chance,” the guard yelled.

I gave Thad a look to let him know we’d discuss this later. Ralph and I had an understanding that allowed him to talk like that to me—Thad did not. Spinning on my heel, I followed Ivy through the gate, trying not to flinch when I heard it clang shut. This tunnel had me thinking of all the horror movies I’d seen and yelling at people for being such idiots. Now, here I was willingly heading into the bowels of hell at the request of my best friend.

God, why do I have a death wish?

At the end of the hall was a large steel door that took two men to open, revealing stairs heading down into the mountain. “Oh goodie, not only are we in a prison filled with all kinds of criminals, we get to be trapped underground.”

“Darling, you and I are going to be the scariest people down there,” Ivy reasoned. “Most of these people were tossed in here because of minor infractions like stealing, not paying taxes, or smoking pot. Trian views all crime equally, which is absurd, but the number of people who’ve committed a major crime is small.”

“I suppose that’s reassuring,” I muttered as we descended.

Surprisingly, we only went down one short flight of steps before heading down another hallway. One guard stood at the gate separating us from the main prison common area. He didn’t say anything, unlocked the gate, and held it open for us to pass through before locking it up tight. I half expected the prison to be a cave and the prisoners to live like mole people, but I couldn’t have been further from the truth.

The place felt as sterile as a hospital with white walls, cold fluorescent lighting, and gray laminate flooring. Guards patrolled the area, but there were no prisoners to be seen. A buzzer sounded, followed by metal doors opening, revealing the cells and prisoners starting to exit, forming a single file line.

“What’s going on?” I whispered.

“Lunch,” Ivy explained. “I figured it would be easier to collect her in the dining hall instead of figuring out what cell she was camping out in.”

“They don’t have that information in the database?” I questioned, watching the prisoners make their way through the food line before sitting at the tables provided.

Ivy tugged me to the right, hugging the outside wall as she scanned the crowd. “They would if she was supposed to fucking be here.”

“That makes no sense.” I hissed.

She just patted my hand and kept us moving. I could feel the eyes of the prisoners seated at the tables watching us, but no one moved or tried to approach us. A scream sliced through the silence, and a large man dropped to the floor, clutching where his hand should have been attached to his arm.

“I fucking told you not to put your grubby fingers near my shit,” a woman snapped, hurling the man’s hand so it smacked him in the face. “You had to go and ruin biscuit day, didn’t you? Goddamn thief. I warned you what would happen if you had the balls to double-cross me, Agron.”

Ivy leaned in and whispered, “That’s her.”

Of course it was.

Our attention was pulled from her as a team of medics rushed in to collect the man and his hand. I wondered if they would be able to save it or if it was not important to them since he was a criminal. None of the guards seemed inclined to do anything about the incident, but I was beginning to understand the warden wouldn’t have a problem with us breaking her out of here.

All the inmates wore gray jumpsuits, but she had the top half off and tied around her waist, leaving her in a cropped white tank top. Just about every inch of skin I could see was covered

in tattoos. Her face was hidden by her thick indigo and violet-colored hair until she raked her bloody hand through it to get it out of her way. I could only see her profile, but it was one that the queens of old would be envious of, with a regal nose and strong jaw clenched in irritation.

Ivy waited for our hot-tempered con to get her food and sit alone at a table before approaching. It took true talent to look as elegant as Ivy did sitting at a metal picnic table wearing a pencil skirt.

“Hello, sweets,” Ivy greeted, beaming at the woman. “It’s been a while.”

It wasn’t until I joined them that the wild woman paused to meet my gaze. I was trapped in her honey-brown gaze that had flecks of a deeper bronze color mixed in. Every person has the innate ability to sense when there’s danger lurking around them, but this was the first time a person had ever brought that feeling out in me. I swear the hair on the back of my neck stood on end as if I were staring down a feral wolf out in the wilderness.

Darkness surged within me, furious that we would ever allow ourselves to fear anyone. Curious what would happen, I closed my eyes, allowing the two parts of myself to become one before opening them again. This time, when our gazes locked, I felt my shoulders square up as my chin rose just slightly higher so I looked down my nose at her. A smile tugged at her lips. It wasn’t the reaction I’d been expecting, but somehow, it relaxed me into smiling back at her.

“You’re a Raffa, all right. No one else has that kind of crazy hiding inside them,” she said, shoving her tray to the side. “If you’re here with Poison Ivy, my money’s on you being the secret heir Frediano talks about. Sorry I missed the meeting the other day, but I have a rat to deal with before I can leave here.”

Realization slammed into place as I finally connected the dots. “You’re Armond’s daughter.”

“The one and only,” she confirmed, holding out a hand to me. “Call me Von.”

“Astin,” I offered, gripping her hand firmly, a sign of respect rather than a challenge of dominance.

“So what brings you two down here to the ass crack of the world?” Von inquired.

“Like you don’t already know the answer, sweets,” Ivy countered. “You’ve been playing cat and mouse games instead of just putting an end to this whole situation. That man you’ve been supposedly looking for just lost his hand. Tell me... was your plan to simply chop him up into little bits over time, or did you have another goal in mind?”

Von laced her fingers together and rested her chin on them, sighing. “That rat bastard stole a shipment from me. When he caught wind I knew about it, he came up with this foolish plan to get thrown in jail here, assuming I couldn’t get to him. Turns out he was very wrong about that.”

My brows shot up, impressed at the lengths this woman would go to make a point. “You’re here to make an example out of him to keep anyone else from thinking they can do the same thing.”

“Ding, ding, ding, we have a winner,” Von cheered. “I’ve been here a week because that fucking thief had friends here offering to protect the little weasel. So I had to take care of those guys first, along with some others who thought they were the top dogs around here. Today was part one of his punishment. I planned to take the other hand in a few days when he was released from the med ward. Hard to steal shit without your hands, wouldn’t you say?”

“Hearing you say things like that shouldn’t make me like you, but damn, girl.” I laughed.

Von flashed me a toothy grin, revealing that she’d had her canine teeth sharpened to soft points with tooth gems glinting in the light. Where most people kept the crazy under wraps, Von wore it like a badge of honor. Why the hell this idiot thought it was a good idea to fuck with this woman only proves that he deserved the fate of natural selection.

“While I love seeing you two bonding, do you think we can do that somewhere else? I made reservations for us, and we need to have Astin back in time for a Family meeting,” Ivy pointed out.

Von sighed and shoved up from the table. “Give me a sec to finish Argon’s punishment, then we can leave.”

“Delightful. Did you want me to pack up these biscuits?” Ivy asked, gesturing to the pile of them on the tray.

“Nah, every day is biscuit day. It’s all they fucking serve here,” Von admitted. “I just needed a reason to jump the idiot and keep my cover for the cameras. Like I taught you, Poison, the fewer people who know your face, the easier it is to sneak up on the rest. Sit tight, I won’t need more than five minutes.”

I watched Von as she walked away pulling her hair up in a ponytail, revealing the head of a snarling wolf tattooed on her back. From what I could tell, it was part of a piece that covered her entire back. It reminded me that Ivy had referred to her as *The Wolf*, a fitting name if there ever was one for the woman.

“Are they just going to let her waltz right in and chop off his other hand?” I asked. “Speaking of, what did she even use to remove the first one?”

Ivy glanced at me then turned the tray for me to see the other side. The edge of the metal tray had been filed down and sharpened into a honed, polished blade with blood still dripping onto the table.

“Huh... that’s resourceful,” I commented, testing the edge and hissing as it nicked the tip of my finger.

“Von is who Cedro sent me to the night he helped smuggle me out of the De Santis Estate,” Ivy said, pulling out a compact and powdering her nose like we weren’t sitting in an underground prison.

“I don’t know what he offered her to get me out of Nepreea, but Von doesn’t do anything out of the kindness of her heart...” She snapped the compact close and turned her gaze to me. “Or at least that’s what Von wants people to believe. However, she took one look at me and pulled me under her wing. It’s kind of funny when you think about the fact she was only eighteen and two years younger than me. But when it came to surviving in the underbelly of the criminal world, she was the master, and I was the student.”

“How long did it take you to create the Ivy I know now?” I questioned, knowing how large the learning curve Ivy had to overcome.

“A year,” she admitted. “Although I would have happily stayed and worked with Von. The second I told her my plan to stay, my ass was out on the streets faster than I could blink, then informed that The Wolf doesn’t deal in charity. God, that made me so fucking angry to think Von saw me as charity, but it lit the fire under my ass I needed to make a name for myself.”

Turning so I could rest my back and elbows against the table, I stared up at the ceiling. “Anger and spite, a lethal combination if I’ve ever heard of one.”

“Understatement of the century,” Ivy muttered. “Ah, looks like she’s ready to go.”

Leaning farther back to see past Ivy, I spotted Von approaching us, blood splattering her torso. “Good thing I have a shower on the plane.”

“There are extra clothes I brought for her in the duffle,” Ivy shared as she stood and glanced at her watch. “Oh good, with the time change heading back to Nepreea, we’ll make our reservation.”

“It’s a miracle none of us are committed with how fucked we are in the head.” I chuckled.

As if to prove my point, Von held up a pair of severed hands tied together by the thumbs. “Doc said they wouldn’t waste the prison’s limited resources to reattach them, so I figured why not put them to good use. This way, I have a visual example for those who don’t seem to understand words.”

“Since that’s most men, I’m sure they’ll appreciate the clear warning,” Ivy reasoned.

We all laughed at how true that was as we made our way to the exit. Part of me was skeptical that they’d really let us walk right out with Von in tow, but that’s exactly what happened. Not being a person who enjoyed being underground, I took a deep breath of the fresh, cold air the moment we exited the prison. Before I could register what was happening, Thad grabbed my arm, yanking me behind him as he trained his gun on a man standing before us.

He stood there motionless, only wearing leather pants and an open leather jacket, not at all bothered by the biting cold in the air. Tattoos and scars covered his chest, neck, and face, giving him a frightening appearance. This is the type of person I pictured finding down in that prison. The only thing that moved were his eyes, which were so dark they seemed black.

It was almost as if he was searching for something he believed I should have.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted Ivy and Von exiting the prison. In a vain effort to protect my friends, I tried to warn them, picturing my father's death all over again. "*Run,*" I screamed.

It was too late. The beast of a man moved like lightning, aiming straight for Von. I pulled my gun and aimed, but Ivy blocked my view, arms spread out, eyes wide with fear. "*No, Astin, stop. He's not a threat.*"

I could feel my pulse pounding in my head as my adrenaline surged through my body. It took a second for me to connect the words she was speaking to meaning. Ivy slowly stepped forward and pushed my arm down, lowering the gun.

"It's okay, darling. Take a deep breath," she soothed, resting her hands on my shoulders. "I'm so sorry. I should have warned you before we stepped outside that Bear would probably be waiting."

"Who the *fuck* is Bear?" I demanded.

Instead of answering me, Ivy stepped to the side, revealing Von perched on the man's shoulder while he rubbed his face against her bloody stomach like a fucking pet happy to see its owner. Bear was the mute bodyguard Ivy warned me about on the plane, and I'd almost shot him.

"Trust me, your reaction to him is pretty typical, but if you'd killed him, then nothing would have protected you from Von's

wrath. I have never seen two people more bonded than those two. In fact, I'm not sure either of them would be able to live without the other," Ivy explained. "Bear is a good man once you can see past his appearance. Although, make no mistake, his loyalty lies with Von, so if she says you're out, then it won't matter how Bear feels about you."

"Holy fuck, I need a drink," I sighed, dropping my head to rest on Ivy's shoulder.

"I'm sure once we get on the plane, we can make that happen," Ivy reasoned.

Grunting my agreement, I holstered my gun and patted Thad's shoulder. "Nice moves, Thaddeus. I'm almost inclined to forgive you for being a snitch."

There was no response as he ushered me onto the plane, gun still in hand, not quite as willing to trust Ivy's word that Bear wasn't a threat. Dropping into one of the armchairs, I flagged one of the flight attendants over. "Double whiskey on the rocks, please."

Ivy boarded next with Von and Bear right behind her. Gemma went for her gun, and Thad stiffened where he stood beside me, so I decided introductions were in order. "Thad, Gemma, meet Von, Armond's daughter, and her bodyguard, Bear. They are the reason we stopped before heading to our next destination. Gemma, would you please show Von where the shower is?"

It wasn't that I wanted Gemma to act as a maid, but I didn't trust Thad to put our alliance with Von ahead of something he

considered to be a threat to me. If what Ivy said about Von and Bear was even a fraction as serious as she made it sound, one wrong move could bring down everything we were working toward. Which was why I decided it was better to be safe than sorry, especially while trapped in an airplane together.

Seventeen



None of us seemed to be able to focus on the work we'd started, knowing that Astin was out with Ivy. I had more of a connection with the woman, but everyone knows a business connection doesn't tell you who the person really is. Not that I believed Ivy would do anything to harm Astin or put her in danger, but we didn't even have the reassurance to know Boykov was with our girl to keep her out of trouble.

I stared blankly at the photograph of a penthouse apartment in Dolsa, the capital city of Nepreea. From what I could tell, most of the five families had homes in this city, which made sense. Anything related to the Nepreeian government happened there since that's where the Council of Ministers conducted business. If you wanted to keep tabs on the legislation and laws being tossed around, then you had a presence in Dolsa.

“Knock, knock... mind if I interrupt?”

Snapping out of my daze, I looked up to see Armond and two other men who were identical copies of each other. They shared Armond's dark brown hair and square jawline, leading me to conclude they were his sons. One of the twins had his pin-straight hair down, falling just past his jaw, while the other had it back in a low, haphazard bun. Where Armond was stocky with muscle and a bit of a gut, his sons were lean and ripped.

Braxton spluttered, shooting up from where he'd been lying on the couch with an open file draped over his face, which was now scattered all over the floor.

"Huh? What? Oh, Armond, what brings you by?" Braxton asked, trying to play off the fact he'd been sleeping.

The twins grinned, trying not to laugh as they set two full boxes of more papers and files on the coffee table. One of the twins with hazel eyes, which had more green than brown in them, picked up the folder and handed it back to Braxton. "You dropped this."

"Thanks, man," Braxton said with a chagrined look. "That will teach me for sleeping on the job, huh? Lucky for me it was you guys and not our boss, or I'd be in trouble."

I had to hand it to Brax—he knew when it was best to laugh off a situation he wasn't going to recover from. Looking around the room, I noticed it was just the two of us in there, and I had no recollection of the others leaving. I guess I'd zoned out for longer than I thought to have missed something so obvious.

“Frediano reached out and said you guys wanted information on properties we own and if we knew about any used by the Arccardi or Leoni Families,” Armond explained. “He might have also suggested we come by for lunch since it would just be us men folk.”

“Lunch...” I muttered, looking at my watch. It had been two hours since Astin left with Ivy.

“The others are already in the dining room. We offered to grab you since we needed to drop off these boxes,” the second twin said, then reached out a hand. “I’m Lazzaro, by the way.”

Grasping his hand, I assumed he would just shake it, but instead, he pulled me to my feet, causing me to stumble. “Nice to meet you, Lazzaro,” I responded once I’d caught my balance. “I’m Liu Gallo, lieutenant of the Caprioni Family.”

The other twin shoved his brother out of the way and offered me his hand. “Metteo, firstborn and underboss of the Zuccaro Family.”

“Don’t even start that bullshit, Teo. You’re firstborn by all of three minutes, and we both hold the underboss position,” Lazzaro cut in, bumping his chest against his brother’s.

Armond grabbed them both by the back of the neck and yanked them apart. “*Enough*, you knock that bullshit off right now. Just because these men are friends of the Family doesn’t mean you can act like idiots. For fuck’s sake, you’d never know you two are thirty-one goddamn years old.”

Both men hung their heads and mumbled their apologies.

“Yeah, I’m gonna need you two to act like that in front of Astin at least once,” Braxton requested. “Then she can’t say I’m the only grown adult who acts like a child from time to time.”

Laughing, I slapped him on the back and gripped his shoulder. “Sorry, Brax, I’m not sure that’s gonna help your case.”

He shrugged and offered his hand to the twins. “Braxton, lieutenant in charge of all things fun.”

Once we’d gotten introductions out of the way, we headed for the dining room, where the other five members of our crew were seated at the table with Frediano.

“Have a nice nap there, Brax?” Jace teased, tugging his lover down for a quick kiss.

Braxton flopped into the seat next to Jace, scowling. “You could have woken me up instead of letting me drool all over the files.”

“He tried,” Hound interjected. “I believe your response was ‘fuck off.’ ”

“How the hell did I miss all this happening?” I questioned, pulling back a chair next to Atticus, who turned to look at me rather confused. “What?”

“Liu, I told you we were heading to lunch. In fact, you responded saying that sounded good,” Atticus shared. “Do you really not remember saying that?”

Groaning, I rubbed my forehead, knowing exactly what happened. “Did I look you in the eye and say that or was I still reading?”

“I can’t recall if you looked up or not,” Atticus admitted, adjusting his glasses nervously.

“No, he didn’t look up from the file,” Ryker announced. “Which means he didn’t actually hear you talking to him, Atticus. He responded on autopilot. Interestingly enough, Astin does that a lot when she gets lost in her thoughts.”

“Interesting,” Atticus murmured. “So how do I ensure that I’m being heard? My assumption is having a verbal response would be the confirmation I needed. However, if what you’re saying is true, I’ll need another mode of proof.”

There was a snort from one of the twins that caught our attention.

“Sorry,” Metteo offered, trying to stifle his laughter. “But I have to ask, is he for real?”

The comfortable air in the room vanished as Hound shot to his feet, knocking the chair to the floor as Luca freed a knife, slamming it to the table. Metteo’s eyes went wide as he realized he’d majorly fucked up. Armond just sighed, rubbing his temple, but clearly wasn’t going to intervene.

“Tell me, *boy*, what exactly are you implying with that question?” Hound asked through gritted teeth.

All seven of us were skilled fighters, and I wouldn’t wish anyone to go up against the likes of us, pissed off or not. That

being said, the deadliest of us would be Luca and Hound, with one keeping their crazy a little more controlled than the other. Luca was able to use more discretion in his choices. However, Hound lacked the ability to rein himself in when it came to Astin or things that were important to our queen. Unfortunately, Metteo was going to learn the hard way none of us would tolerate disrespect directed at any of us, especially Atticus.

“I... ah... well...” Metteo babbled.

Atticus took his knife and taped it against his glass, waiting until he had everyone’s attention. “Hound, while I appreciate you coming to my defense, I’m going to ask you to take your seat. I would like to address his question.”

Just when I was beginning to think there wasn’t anything in this world that could surprise me anymore, hearing Atticus choosing to stand up for himself in a confrontational manner was unprecedented. Hound studied Atticus for a moment, picked up his chair, and sat without saying another word.

“Please forgive them for reacting so strongly to your rude and insensitive question,” Atticus said, sitting tall.

Lazzaro choked on his water, caught off guard at the way Atticus just called his brother out. I could see his hands balled into fists on his lap, but I couldn’t tell if it was from anger or how uncomfortable it was for Atticus to assert himself to strangers.

“As you have noticed, my actions and responses are slightly off from what is widely considered as ‘*normal*,’ ” Atticus

commented, even going so far as to use finger quotes when saying the word normal. “Due to how my brain is wired, it’s gifted me with a vast IQ, but as with all strengths, there are weaknesses. Mine are as follows... the inability to read body language or pick up subtle hints that aren’t verbalized and struggling to understand certain emotions or responses people expect when experiencing those emotions. Physical touch is something I don’t welcome from many... it feels like sandpaper on my skin. Sarcasm is a concept I don’t understand nor do I pick up on it, although I’m getting better at recognizing the tone that comes with it. Astin is fond of using this type of communication to make a point.”

The truth of that comment had me ducking my head and grinning. Our girl loved a good clap back, and she was a master at them.

“Now that you have a better understanding of who I am as a person, I will answer your question. Yes, I’m *for real*, and I hardly waste the energy to ask a question I don’t wish to know the answer to. So, Master Zuccaro, how would you suggest I ensure the person I’m speaking to has heard me?” Atticus inquired, giving that man a verbal burn that would sting for weeks to come.

Lazzaro covered his mouth and leaned closer to Metteo, but it wasn’t enough to keep his words from being heard by all of us. “Fucking mic drop, bro, you gonna pick it up?”

“Shut the hell up, Laz,” Metteo snapped and glared at his brother. Lazzaro raised his hands in surrender, backing off the

situation.

Satisfied, Metteo turned his attention back to Atticus. “First, I would like to offer an apology for being a dick when you didn’t deserve it. We are allies, and eventually, all of us will consider each other friends. I hope my carelessness doesn’t prevent that from happening.”

Impressed by his response, my gaze flicked to Atticus, curious as to how he was receiving it, but his face was unreadable.

“Is that your true feelings, or are you just saying what your father expects you to in an effort to fix the mistake you made?” Atticus challenged.

Metteo ran a hand through his hair, clearly uncomfortable with his intentions being questioned. “Can it be both? Look, I’ll admit it, I’m an ass who speaks first and considers the consequences later. I know we need you and your boss to set things right, but damn, having you bust my balls like this is oddly a turn-on and makes me want to keep starting shit.”

“The fuck?” Ryker blurted, causing Frediano and Armond to laugh.

“What?” Metteo said defensively. “He wasn’t going to accept anything but the truth, so I was honest. Come on, you can’t tell me listening to him verbally spank me like that wasn’t hot.”

“While I understand it’s supposed to be flattering for you to see me as sexually desirable, I must make it clear that I have

zero interest in anyone but Astin Caprioni,” Atticus stated. “Please keep any further thoughts about me in a sexual nature to yourself. I say that for your safety. Astin would not take kindly to it, and as you said, friendship is our goal.”

Lazzaro leaned forward to look at his father. “Are we talking Von-level crazy?”

“Son, Astin is the viper you don’t notice until after she’s killed you with her venomous bite,” Armond explained.

The twins exchanged a look before facing us again, a glimmer of fear in their expressions. Personally, I felt better knowing they understood she was something they should be afraid of. Fear brings respect, and in time, it would change to friendship if they were worthy of it. So far, Astin seemed to take a liking to Armond which was a good sign for the others.

“Now that we’ve all had a chance to get to know each other...” Frediano commented, signaling one of the staff waiting near the kitchen door, “... I think it’s time we break bread, drink some wine, and solidify this alliance between men folk.”

There was a lull in the conversation as wine was poured and soup was placed before us with fresh, flaky bread that had my mouth watering. Everyone dug in, making grunts of pleasure at the taste of the hearty soup. It was so good, I was going to ask for the recipe so I could make it back home.

“Armond, I believe you mentioned that your daughter was busy tracking down a snitch?” Frediano asked, breaking the silence.

“If you call spending a week in the Trian prison being busy, then yes,” Armond grumbled.

Lazzaro shook his head, jabbing his bread into his bowl. “I can’t fucking believe she would choose to be thrown in there. Everyone is given a life sentence. What if she can’t get out like she planned?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about that,” Boykov interjected as he walked up to the table. “According to Thad, Lady Astin and Miss Ivy are in there right now. He didn’t know what they were doing there, but my guess is they’re picking up Miss Zuccaro.”

Ryker stabbed his knife into the table, slowly stood, and reached out for Boykov’s phone. “Give it to me.”

“You know when I said she’s a trouble magnet, I didn’t really expect her to put it to the test,” Jace groaned.

“I just want to point out this is what happens when I can’t keep an eye on her,” Hound said, crossing his arms. “Why this country is so against having CCTV everywhere is beyond me.”

Ryker raised the phone to his ear, pacing as he tried to contain his need to cuss Astin out for pulling this stunt. “Thad, why the fuck is the leader of the Raffa and Caprioni Families in the Trian prison?”

Whatever the response was, it didn’t help matters as Ryker’s face turned an impressive shade of red.

“But you can see her? What is she doing right now?” Ryker demanded, turning sharply on his heel. “Hound, can you break into the prison’s security cameras? They wouldn’t let Thad go with them. He’s tracking her movements on the video feed, but I want eyes on her *now*.”

Hound shoved back his chair and jogged out of the room to grab his laptop.

Ryker shifted his attention to Armond. “Why exactly was your daughter in this prison?”

“Von discovered one of her runners double-crossed her and stole the weapons he was supposed to transport back to one of her warehouses,” Armond explained. “From what I understood, she was going to leave once she found her mark.”

“So is it safe to say if she cut off a man’s hand, she’s found her guy?” he pressed.

“Oh yeah,” Metteo answered with a chuckle. “Question is, how long did she plan to wait to take the other one?”

Luca leaned forward. “Why wait to take the other?”

Metteo shrugged. “Von likes to play with her victims.”

“Hmm...” Luca hummed. “I see the logic in taking both hands. Can’t be a thief without them and leave them with extremely limited options for work. Rather brilliant the more I think about it.”

“Beauty, brains, and brutality, that’s my little girl,” Armond boasted.

We all turned as Hound returned to the room, his laptop open with his fingers flying over the keys. “I found the prison and the transmission for their video feed, but they aren’t going to make this easy.”

“What do you mean they let her walk away, Thad?” Ryker snapped. “Don’t they have audio or something?”

“Ryker, I can tell you right now they don’t,” Hound answered. “We’re lucky they have video that’s not in a closed loop with the prison being underground. Shit’s hard to transmit through rock that thick.”

Frediano sat back calmly sipping his wine, watching the rest of us, unconcerned. “Gentleman, surely this isn’t the first time Astin has done something like this? For Christ’s sake, she was a thief herself for years and managed to stay out of jail.”

“What do you know about that?” Hound demanded, pausing in his work.

The older man didn’t respond, just took another sip of his drink, clearly disapproving of our need to protect Astin.

“I’m in...” Hound cheered only to have his face fall, “... and now they’re leaving. All that work for nothing.”

“Nothing, my ass,” Ryker muttered, looking over Hound’s shoulder. “I want to watch her walk out of that prison and onto the jet. Only then will I be able to keep from shooting Thad the second I see him.”

“Whoa, Ryker, you can’t kill Thad for following orders,” Jace reasoned. “I’m betting he was ordered to stay behind,

right?”

“Doesn’t matter. He never should have let her do something so stupid.” He snarled.

“Son, you realize acting like that is only going to drive her away from you,” Armond commented. “The tighter you try to keep a hold on someone, the more they attempt to get away from you. Look, I understand wanting to keep the woman you love safe, but Astin Caprioni isn’t just any woman. I know I’ve only just met her, but I’m telling you if you want to keep her from doing things like this, don’t jump down her throat or even mention you know what happened today when you see her next.”

Ryker scoffed, looking up from the screen to meet Armond’s gaze. “How’s that working out for your daughter?”

Armond’s face darkened. “Watch your mouth when you speak about my family. You’re not the only one who is overprotective of the people they love.”

Up until now, the Don of the Zuccaro Family had been rather easygoing which surprised me, but it was now abundantly clear it was because he considered us friends.

“I’m telling you this because I’ve experienced the fallout of holding too tightly to someone firsthand. It’s my fault Von turned into the wild animal she is now,” Armond explained. “Watching Von learn alongside her brothers made me proud until I realized what a mistake it had been to give her so much freedom and training. So I tried to correct my choice and reeled her back in, setting strict rules and monitoring her

interactions. Guess what? All it did was bite me in the ass when she ran away from home at fourteen. The next time I saw her, Von was eighteen and in charge of the biggest weapons smuggling business in the Western Hemisphere. I lost four years of my baby girl's life when I didn't have to. What made it worse was the daughter who came back to me had lost any trace of innocence and mercy."

Pausing, Armond grabbed his wine and guzzled what was left in the glass before continuing, "They call her The Wolf due to how feral she's become. That and lengths she'll go to track down her prey, even an underground prison, to exact her revenge. So yeah, I know what I'm fucking talking about. The real question is, are you man enough to take advice from an old man and learn from it?"

We all waited for Ryker to answer, but the answer never came as Hound shouted, "*No.*"

"What's going on?" Braxton demanded since the rest of us couldn't see the computer screen.

Hound just clutched his heart, eyes locked on the screen forcing Luca to grab the laptop and see what was going on. "Armond, does your daughter have a friend or lover who looks like one scary sonofabitch?"

"Oh, that's Bear," Lazzaro shared. "I guess you could call him her bodyguard, but that's like saying Cerberus is just a dog."

Metteo nodded as he finished the bite he'd just eaten. "That crazy motherfucker is obsessed with our sister. You guys think

you're overprotective, just wait... you ain't seen nothing yet. I have no idea how she managed to keep him from following her into the jail because he *hates* when she's out of his sight."

"So this means they're out of the prison, correct?" Atticus questioned.

"Yeah, but damn near gave me a heart attack," Hound muttered. "It looked like that fuckhead was going to attack them, but he just made a beeline to Von. Astin almost shot him too, but Ivy stepped in to block the shot."

"Thank fuck," Armond sighed, dropping his head into his hands. "If Astin managed to kill Bear, there would be no saving her from Von. Everything would have gone to hell."

His comment had me worried. If Armond believed his daughter would be that much of a threat, why in the hell would anyone want her included in this fight?

"I'm sorry if this sounds harsh, but what good are you to us as an ally if your daughter's bodyguard dying would have you turning against us?" I challenged.

"Von might bear the last name Zuccaro, but she has nothing to do with our Family business. When she became The Wolf, an arms smuggler, Von was cut off from inheriting anything tied to the criminal nature of the family business. Conflict of interest, if you will," Armond said, breaking down the situation. "However, she is my daughter and an ally you need if you want to win this fight. There isn't anything related to weapons she can't find or procure, but Von won't work with just anyone. You have to pass the test."

“What test?” Jace pressed.

The three Zuccaro men just shrugged.

“That makes no sense,” Jace muttered. “How do new clients know what Von’s looking for in her business dealings if she doesn’t tell them?”

“If I knew the answer to that, there would be fewer dead bodies in the streets.” Armond sighed.

“The jet just took off,” Hound announced, then looked at Ryker. “Do you want me to tell the pilot to bring them back here or trust she’ll be back in time?”

“Are they going somewhere else?” Ryker asked. Hound just nodded and clicked on something for Ryker to read.

I understood Ryker’s need to protect someone he loved. Yet the more I think about it, there is a big difference between him and the rest of us. We saw Astin as queen of the Caprioni Family first and foremost, but Ryker saw his childhood best friend and first love. Unfortunately, there was nothing any of us could do to help him get past that other than encourage him to trust she’d come back to us.

“Leave her be,” Ryker decided, closing the laptop. “We know she’s safe, and that’s what matters. If she brings it up later, then we’ll discuss our feelings on the situation. But Armond’s right, forcing Astin to come back now will only piss her off, and she doesn’t need that from us.”

“Well said,” Frediano agreed. “How about we go shoot something to take the edge off?”

His suggestion was a welcome one after that rollercoaster ride of a lunch. Nothing helps ease tensions than shooting some shit.

Eighteen



Our lunch reservations were for a restaurant inside a swanky hotel in Dolsa. When we arrived, they didn't even bat a lash seeing three high-class women with a man like Bear. He had dressed up for the occasion and was now wearing a shirt under his leather jacket, but I don't think it offset his rugged exterior. We were led into a private room with a stunning view of the city from the thirty-second floor of the hotel.

“Will you need us to add more place settings to your table?” the host asked.

Ivy smiled as he pulled out her seat for her. “That won't be necessary, but we will be adding on whatever they'd like to eat to go at the end of the meal.”

“Very good. I will ensure your server is made aware,” he said with a slight bow, moving to assist with Von's chair.

Bear snarled at the man and used a single hand to shove him away and slammed into the wall. I gasped at the suddenness and clear overreaction. Gemma hurried over and helped the host back to his feet, checking him over.

“It’s fine, I’m fine,” the host mumbled, brushing Gemma off and straightening his suit. “Deepest apologies if I overstepped.”

“I’m sorry about that,” Von offered as Bear scooped her chair in and placed the cloth napkin in her lap. “My bodyguard can take his job a little too seriously at times. He doesn’t like anyone, especially men, getting too close to me.”

The host numbly nodded his head and left the room, leaving Thad to assist me in getting seated.

“Bear, we’ve talked about this,” Von hissed. “When we come to fancy places, it’s normal for them to pull out or push in a chair. He’s just doing his job.”

I watched as Bear responded using sign language, his hands moving so fast I wasn’t sure how anyone could catch what he was saying.

“Bullshit. He was looking at me funny. You’re just upset with me and taking it out on the little guy,” Von shot back. “I’m sorry, but it had to just be me in that place. For fuck’s sake, you have a warrant out for your arrest in Trian, and they never would have let you go. This only worked because they couldn’t hold me.”

He started to say more, but Von signed something back to him, and he stopped. Looking none too pleased, he stepped back to lean against the wall behind Von's chair, arms crossed and muscles straining the seams of his leather jacket.

“So what's good here? I'm dying for a decent meal after eating biscuits for a fucking week,” Von commented.

“I put us down for the set menu, so they'll just be bringing out courses once we decide on drinks,” Ivy explained. “Don't worry, sweets. I made sure the food would be real food and not something only rich people eat.”

Von smiled and blew Ivy a kiss. “Thanks, Poison. You are the best.”

Now that Von had showered, changed, and done her hair and makeup, you'd never know she'd just chopped a man's hands off in prison. Even the way she conducted herself, seamlessly fitting into the elite crowd, would have you second-guessing yourself about this mysterious woman.

“Now, I'm sure you're wondering why I went to all this effort to make sure the two of you got to meet and spend time together,” Ivy started, looking between us. “One reason is selfish, and the other is practical. Both of you are important to me, and I'd love for us all to be close friends. Women like us struggle to find like-minded equals in either gender, but girlfriends who won't resent you or try to stab you in the back are nearly impossible to find. However, I don't see that being an issue for us, and I know for me, personally, I could really use a friend who gets it.”

It wasn't until I heard Ivy spell it out like she did that I couldn't agree more with that sentiment. "What was it you told me the first time we hung out?" I asked, tapping my chin. "Ah, yes... who doesn't need a female friend to bitch about things with? Let me tell you, dating seven men and now finding myself in charge of two criminal empires, I'm going to have things to bitch about."

"Seven men?" Von asked, leaning forward, eyes wide. "You have your own harem? That is so badass. Tell me, do they all know about each other? Are they okay with it?"

This was something I realized I was going to need to get used to. People were always going to have questions and be curious about how it all works. What I found interesting about Von's reaction was the excitement in her expression. It was almost as if I'd just opened the door to a whole new world of possibilities she didn't know existed.

"They are all my lieutenants. Well, not all of them started out that way, but that's another topic," I explained. "My guys were the ones who talked me into being with them at the same time. Some handle it better than others, but all of them love me, and I love them, so when issues pop up, we work through them. Two of my guys are also seeing each other, which adds another layer of complexity into the mix. Overall, I've never been happier, and they claim to be equally as happy."

"Huh." Von huffed, and I could see the wheels turning in her brain.

“When we get the chance, I’ll introduce you to them, but if you want someone’s brain to pick, that would be Jace,” I offered. “He’s been doing all the heavy lifting when it comes to researching this lifestyle.”

Von flashed me a toothy smile. “Thanks.” Then she turned to Ivy. “So does this mean you might consider something similar between you, Dom, and Ced? Unless you’re still playing the I-don’t-have-feelings-for-them game.”

Ivy flicked her hair over her shoulder, the only sign she was irritated with Von’s question. “Why would I go back to them? It’s not a relationship when one of them believes he owns you.”

“Ha,” Von scoffed. “If anyone owns anyone, it’s you who owns their asses. Dom is willing to do whatever it takes for you to forgive him, and Ced worships the ground you walk on. Besides, it’s been eight years they’ve been protecting your ass when they could have dragged you back. It’s time to take off the jaded shades you’re wearing and see things for how they really are.”

I’m pretty sure Ivy was regretting her choice to have female friends but was saved as the waitstaff brought in the first course and took our drink orders. We ate our soup and waited for the drinks before we started our conversation again. You can never be too careful, and assuming that someone is always listening keeps you alive longer.

Thankfully, they didn’t keep us waiting long for our drinks. I took a good swig of my gin and tonic, feeling refreshed at the

crisp flavor of the elderberry tonic and floral gin. Feeling the need to save my friend, I directed the conversation away from Ivy's love life.

"You mentioned a second reason for wanting us to meet," I reminded her.

I caught the fleeting expression of thanks as Ivy took the offered segway. "Yes, I did... a more practical and lucrative benefit for you both."

"Well, you have my attention," Von said before popping the last bit of her dipping bread in her mouth. That woman's bowl was wiped clean, not a trace of the soup left.

"Von, I'm sure you've heard the rumors of the Leoni Family going after Astin and her late father, Colmazio Caprioni?" Ivy inquired.

"I have," Von answered before focusing on me. "I'm sorry you lost your father like that. It must have been awful to have him die in your arms."

Part of me knew I shouldn't be surprised to hear she knew details that weren't common knowledge, especially since she and Ivy were friends. Yet it still caught me off guard when people brought up such intimate, heartbreaking moments for me.

"It was devastating," I whispered, stirring my drink with the tiny black straw they placed in it. "The only things keeping me sane are my guys and plotting revenge." My gaze flicked up to meet Von's. "I came to Nepreea for one reason... to destroy

the two families that have stolen my parents from me and make it known that anyone who dares to go up against me will burn in hell.”

Von sucked in a breath, her eyes dilating like I’d just done something to turn her on. “Oh, fuck me. I love it when people talk dirty like that. There is nothing sexier than a person driven by revenge and spite.”

“Thank you...” I ventured, not really sure what to make of that. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but I feel like I should state for the record that while I find women attractive as hell, I don’t swing that way.”

“Funny, I remember telling you the same thing when we met,” Ivy commented.

We all laughed because who in their right mind would ever turn Ivy down if she offered? I had never met a woman with more sex appeal and confidence oozing off her. It was seductive no matter who you are or what you’re into.

“Ladies, we are well off-topic,” I pointed out. “I’m fairly certain Ivy wanted us to get together and hit it off so you would consider it when I asked you to join my side in this fight.”

Von sat back and began spinning the meditation ring on her thumb. As if the waitstaff knew this was the best time to bring the next course—it was a juicy hunk of steak with seared tomatoes and what smelled like thyme. Off to the side was a dollop of whipped potatoes that had my mouth watering at the sight of the melted butter drizzling over it.

“This is what I’m talking about,” Von exclaimed, digging in the moment the waiter’s hand left the plate. “There is nothing better in this world than a well-cooked steak.”

Observing how excited Von was about her meal, I decided to let her eat in peace without pressing for an answer.

“Tell me, Ivy, what’s your plan?” I inquired, cutting up my meat. “I know you told me you want your pound of flesh, but it’s risky for you to be in Nepreea.”

“It’s only risky if I get caught,” she countered. “Astin, you’re not going to get far without me and Von helping you with this fight. I don’t mean to be harsh, but the power these two families have runs deep. They’ve been running things for generations, and as brilliant as you are, there’s just no way to discover who they have in their pockets in the time you have to pull this off.”

Frowning, I set down my silverware, needing to focus all my attention on what Ivy was saying. “What timeline are you talking about? I haven’t even decided what direction to take this fight in.”

“The moment Domenico takes over the De Santis Family and announces they are your allies, the clock starts ticking,” Ivy explained. “There is only so much that power can give you when you’re on the losing side of sheer numbers. Right now, they are happy to take their time and toy with you like a cat playing with a mouse. However, if that mouse bites them, playtime is over, and the hunt is on for real.”

While I'm sure I'd realized that myself, hearing her break it down moved that concern up my list of things to worry about. Since landing in Nepreea, I'd been hit left and right with issues I needed to deal with or adjust to, causing me to lose track of important realities. Dom said he wanted a week to get things in order, which meant I now had five days before we pissed off the hornet's nest.

“You're right. I don't have much time if Dom plans to stick to his schedule,” I agreed. “Seems to me that he and I need to have a detailed chat about what his plans are to step into his new role.”

“Time out,” Von cut in. “You, Astin Caprioni-Raffa, have an agreement to become allies with the pompous brat, Domenico De Santis?”

I smirked at Von's description of the man because it fit him so perfectly. “As a matter of fact, I do. Ivy helped to set up a meeting while he was in Springmont for a major fundraiser his newly acquired company was putting on.”

“Let me see if I have this right... you appear out of nowhere after fifteen years of being hidden away. Then your father is killed shortly after making you the new leader of the Caprioni Family. A few weeks go by, Ivy makes contact, you decimate the rats creeping in on your business, make an alliance with Dom to add to your alliance with our family, and now here you are leader of the Raffas as well?” Von listed, ticking off a finger for every major event. “Woman, do you realize you've

managed to become the queen bitch of the underworld in only a few fucking months?”

Laughter burst out of me at her description of the past few months of my life. “If only that were true, then I wouldn’t need to have this fight,” I managed to get out, using my napkin to dab at the tears from laughing so hard.

“That’s where you’re wrong, Queenie,” Von challenged, pointing her knife at me. “These crusty crime lords wouldn’t bother to go after you and your family if they didn’t see you as a threat. No one survives as long as you have, and that, my friend, is what *really* scares them. Poison is right, though. You don’t have much time, and you need us like holy water for a vampire. Who better to help kill those mummified relics than two monsters they helped to create?” she asked, flipping her blade absently.

I paused my drink almost to my lips before I set it back down. “So you’re in?”

Von caught her dinner knife and stabbed it through a packet of butter into the wooden table. “What are friends for if not to help cause a little chaos?”

Reaching down, I pulled free the knife I had strapped to my calf, hidden under my pants. I then stood and shrugged out of my jacket, which Gemma quickly took from me, revealing my bare arms. “If we are going to do this, then we are going to do this right,” I stated.

Both women watched me as I took the tip of the knife and dragged it up my forearm, creating a three-inch-long wound

that started to bleed. “This blood symbolizes the creation of a new alliance between the three of us... the birth of a new family to replace the ones who will be lost in our reckoning. A family that is led by women to prove once and for all that we are a force to be feared.”

Von stood and freed her knife from the table, slicing her arm without hesitation. “Those who betray this family, may they burn in hell.” Von grabbed my arm, surprising me as she pressed our wounds together, making me hiss as she finished the vow. “We are one until death.”

Stunned, I blinked, not expecting Von to pledge absolute loyalty to this idea I created on the spot. Surely, her loyalty would be to her father, brothers, and her family name. Ivy extended her bleeding arm as well. I met her gaze, only seeing calm determination reflecting back at me as I gripped her arm.

“We are one until death,” Ivy vowed, which I repeated before she did the same with Von.

A hand pressed a cloth to my arm, pulling me out of my daze to see Thad beside me. “Keep pressure on it so it stops the bleeding,” he murmured, urging me to take my seat.

Gemma was assisting Ivy, who was trying to brush her off, but the girl stood firm as she assisted the woman who saved her life. It made me curious if Ivy recognized her or not, then again, it had been some years ago. Glancing at Von, I did a double-take, only for my jaw to drop at the sight of Bear licking Von’s arm clean.

“Bear, stop. It’s not that big of a deal,” Von grumbled, then caught me looking. “Don’t ask. Trust me, his logic will only creep you out. Hell, it creeps me out sometimes, and I trust this man with my life.” Finally, she snatched up a spare napkin and wrapped it around her arm blocking Bear’s access to the wound.

“Does he know how filthy the human mouth is?” Ivy asked. “Seriously, we’re going to need to flush that out and make sure it’s as clean as we can get it, or an infection could set in.”

Von used her other hand to rub her temple. “Bear believes that blood is the source of life and should never be wasted. He knows I don’t agree and won’t reconsume my own blood, so he does instead.”

Ivy and I exchanged a look but didn’t comment. People were free to believe in whatever they wanted so long as it wasn’t forced on others. If Bear truly accepted this ideology as truth, then who was I to say he’s wrong? Furthermore, he respected Von’s choice not to act on his beliefs, but I struggled with Bear physically forcing Von to allow him to consume her blood.

“I told you guys you didn’t want to know,” Von muttered.

She attempted to shove Bear away from her as she secured the napkin, making me snicker. Von was like a mouse trying to shove an elephant—it just wasn’t going to happen. Bear took the hint and backed off, but the slight furrow between his brows told me he wasn’t happy Von was hurt.

Clearing his throat, Thad drew our attention. “Ladies, I know your lunch isn’t over, but under the current situation, I think it

might be best if we left. Each of you needs to be bandaged properly, and it might be best to take this conversation to a more private setting.”

Thaddeus had a point—the girl talk was over, and the subjects I wanted to discuss shouldn’t be heard by just anyone.

“I have to agree,” I shared. “Plus, there is a rather important Family meeting I can’t be late for. You’re both welcome to come back to the estate so we can have this conversation with everyone involved.”

Ivy finished off the last of her wine and stood. “Then we best be off. Everything is already paid for, so we can head out immediately.”

Seeing Von was also going to stand, Bear pulled back her chair, hovering like a worried parent.

“Stop that,” Von snapped. “For fuck’s sake, you’re acting like this is the first time I’ve gotten hurt. Jesus, I did this to myself. I know how not to nick a fucking vein.”

She started to leave but paused and pointed to the table. “Aren’t you forgetting something?”

Bear frowned and sighed, clearly not following her train of thought.

“You owe that man you tossed into the wall an apology or a nice fat tip... you choose,” Von ordered.

Instantly, the man’s hands were flying, and it was clear he didn’t feel the need to do either of those things.

“No,” Von barked out. “One or the other, Bear.”

Snarling, Bear pulled out his wallet and dropped a wad of bills on the table but took a fork and stabbed it through the stack of money securing it to the tabletop.

“Now, was that so hard?” Von asked, not at all commenting on the fact it would take at least two people to pry that fork free.

Thad took the lead, and we left the hotel heading back to the plane.

I was so worn out that I fell asleep on the jet’s couch almost instantly, getting in a good forty-five-minute catnap before we landed.

Nineteen



Fingers traced along my neck as a gentle kiss was pressed to my forehead. “Baby girl, you need to wake up for me.”

My eyes flicked open, and I realized I was an SUV with Luca hovering over me. I smiled up at him. “Hi.”

“Hey, baby girl,” he answered, taking my hands and pulling me up into a sitting position. “Ivy said you conked out as soon as you got on the plane.”

Stepping out of the SUV, I noticed we were back at the estate. “Wow, I must have passed out hard. I don’t even remember walking off the plane.”

“That’s because you didn’t, Queenie,” Von said, hopping out. “We tried to wake you but no success, so your man, Tad, carried you to the car.”

“Tad...” I questioned, my sleepy brain not connecting the dots. “Oh, *Thad*.”

“Um... babe, what the hell happened to your arm?” Jace asked as he gently took my hand.

Gone was the napkin, and in its place was a neatly wrapped bandage. “Oh, it’s nothing.”

“Yeah, just a little girl bonding,” Von offered, waving her bandaged arm. “I’m Von, by the way, Astin’s newest BFF.”

The SUV shook as Bear exited the vehicle, causing Luca to pull me against his chest.

“Guys, it’s okay,” I assured. “This is Bear and Von’s bodyguard. Just a heads-up, he’s mute and uses sign language to communicate. Oh, and best not to make any aggressive comments or movements toward Von... he’s a little overprotective.”

Jace and Luca regarded the man a moment before Jace smiled, offering Bear his hand. “Name’s Jace... welcome to the shit show, my man. Just don’t mess with our woman, and we’ll return the favor, but choose to fuck around and find out... we’ll just see how good of a bodyguard you are.”

Bear grinned at Jace as they shook hands, agreeing to the terms. Luca reached past me and offered his greeting as well. “Luca, and a friend of Astin’s is always welcome.”

I winked at Von, knowing she’d been a little worried about how Bear and my guys would interact. The person I was worried about was Hound, and not in the way you’d expect. I had no doubt the two of them would be friends. My fear was

the trouble the two of them would get into. That, and possible bad habits Bear could rub off on my loveable stalker.

“Let’s head inside. Frediano has a rough headcount of who will be here tonight,” Jace suggested. “Oh, and Hound thinks he has the bare bones of a program that will fit what you’re looking for. He’s been working on it most of the afternoon.”

Jace led the way to the sitting room they’d claimed as their own, with files and various papers scattered over any flat surface. Hound was sitting at a table hunched over his laptop while the others were spread out around the room. I noticed two new faces among the group along with Armond and Frediano.

The two men jumped to their feet and raced over to Von, scooping her up in a twin group hug. Bear didn’t seem at all concerned, so I continued on and planted myself on Ryker’s lap. He’d taken up residence in one of the armchairs with various personnel files around him. They weren’t names I recognized, but then again, I didn’t know as much about the Raffa Family business.

“Hey, handsome,” I greeted. “You miss me?”

“Tin-Tin, you know I did,” he said, dropping the file he’d been reading to wrap his arms around me. “I hate it when I can’t be with you, but admitting that makes me sound like a needy sap.”

God, why did it make me deliriously happy to hear him say things like that? I was a strong, independent woman who

didn't need a man to make me happy, but damn, these men made me weak.

"I'm okay with a little sappiness coming from you," I murmured, kissing his lips. "You know, I have to admit this was not what I was expecting from you when I got back."

He frowned in confusion. "Why is that?"

"Because I know you know what happened today," I answered. "You don't need to pretend like you don't or that you're not mad. Thad told me he was going to fill you in."

Ryker grabbed my hips, holding me steady as he sat up straighter. "First of all, I'm not mad." I raised a skeptical brow at that. "I'm serious. Look, was I upset that Ivy took you to a prison in another country that was underground? Yes. The reason I was mad, if you will, is because I wasn't there to protect you. It kills me whenever something happens and I'm not there by your side. Astin, you are everything to me, and nothing else matters so long as you are safe and happy. So no, I'm not mad at *you* or Ivy for what happened today."

"*Liar!*" Braxton coughed loudly into his hand.

"Fuck off," Ryker snapped, flipping Braxton off. "Don't be a dick when I'm trying to do the right thing here."

"Sooo... you were mad?" I concluded.

Ryker rubbed his forehead clearly frustrated. "No, I was fucking pissed, and everyone had to talk me off the ledge from dragging your ass home."

That sounded more like a reaction I'd expect from the Ryker I knew and loved. "So why not just be honest with me when I asked you?"

"Because I'm trying really fucking hard not to be the guy you expect to blow up at you when you make a choice I disagree with. You're the head of two prominent mafia families, a trained killer, and the smartest fucking person I know. Who am I to question the choices you make?" Ryker asked, tossing up his hands in defeat. "I wasn't there on the plane to know why you were going there or who you were picking up. All I knew is you were somewhere I couldn't get to, and it terrified me."

The passion behind Ryker's words had me loving him more than I already did. Cupping his face, I kissed him, wanting him to know I understood where he was coming from. "I love you too," I whispered.

He hugged me tightly, burying his face in my neck as he held me. I combed my fingers through his hair, offering as much comfort as I could, proving to him I was here and safe. "I'm sorry. I should have reached out to you and filled you in on what was going on. If it's any consolation to you, Ivy kept me in the dark until the last minute."

"I thought it would be more fun to leave it a surprise," Ivy offered in her defense. "It seems I need to keep in mind that when it comes to Astin, you lot are a package deal."

"Yes, I believe that would be a prudent move on your part," Atticus agreed. "Consider how you handled things in your

attempt to surprise Astin about coming to Nepreea. Just having Liu in the loop on your plan made things much smoother. Although, in hindsight, that secret was ruined when she called you about Domenico. Perhaps secrets and surprises aren't the best method when dealing with situations that include Astin."

"Hmm, you make a valid observation," Ivy agreed, tapping her chin. "While surprises are fun in most cases, I'm not sure that applies to people in the mafia."

"Hey, I fucking love surprises," Von interjected.

"Vonnie, you're not in the mafia," one of the twins remarked.

Von shrugged. "So? That furthers my reasoning of why I love surprises."

Twisting to see Von better, I cut in, "Hold on, what do you mean you're not part of the mafia? Von, you're a Zuccaro."

"You want to answer that one, *Babbo*?" Von asked, directing her question to Armond.

Armond nodded, shifting his gaze to me. "I mentioned this to your men while we had lunch together, so I'll give you the condensed answer. My sons, Lazzaro and Matteo..." he shared, gesturing to the twins, "... are my heirs to the Zuccaro Family business and anything related to the mafia or criminal side of things. Von chose to go a different direction as you all know, becoming one of the most skilled weapons smugglers in the business. It is a conflict of interest to have her tied to anything regarding the criminal dealings of the Zuccaro

Family. She, of course, is still in my will and will be provided for with whatever assets I have not connected to criminal activities. I realize it's rather convoluted, but it helps us both in our dealings with others."

I had to take a moment to break that down in my head to see why it would benefit them. Once I looked at it from an outside perspective, I understood. "I see, so by being her own person, no longer tied to the mafia side of things, people don't view her as your puppet and private weapons cash. Likewise, Von isn't tied to respect the agreements and contracts made by the Zuccaro Family, allowing her the freedom to trade and deal with whoever she wants."

"Exactly," Armond said with a clap of his hand. "You truly are as sharp as your grandfather makes you out to be."

"Thanks, Armond." I grinned. "So what have you guys been doing while us ladies were staging a jailbreak?"

"Nothing too exciting... looking over properties, had lunch, went skeet shooting, and just started to sort through what Armond brought over," Braxton shared. "He had some leads on properties our nemeses might use."

"It's not much, but I figured I would share what I know along with anything else connected to those two bastards," Armond added.

Bear joined us, sitting in a clear spot on the floor only to have Von promptly flop herself onto his lap like he was a human bean bag chair. Ivy sedately took an open spot on the couch next to Atticus while the twins resumed their places.

Leaning back, I peered at Hound wearing headphones and bobbing to whatever music he was listening to. It made me curious if he even realized I was back.

Slipping off Ryker's lap, I wandered over, keeping out of sight as I stalked my prey. When I finally got close enough, I reached around and covered his eyes, waiting for whatever dramatic reaction came next.

Only nothing happened.

Hound simply leaned his head back as he brushed his hands up my arms, pulling them away from his face. "Moonflower, I love that you think you can sneak up on me. I knew the second you landed back at the airport and the moment the car pulled up to the house."

"Stalker," I sassed as I started to pull away from him.

He gripped my wrist and twirled me as he stood, locking me against him with my arm. "Not so fast there, Luna. You wanted my attention, didn't you?" he pointed out, nuzzling my neck until he nipped at my sensitive skin behind my ear. "Well, now you have it."

"I just wanted to have you join in on the conversation and meet some new friends of mine," I explained. "But if you need to keep working on the program, I understand."

"If my lady needs me, then everything else can wait," Hound assured me with an open-mouth kiss on my neck before whispering in my ear, "I really wanted to meet Von's bodyguard... seems like he'd be a cool dude."

Shaking my head as my fears had come true, I led Hound over to Von and Bear. “I figure the easiest way is to introduce everyone at once. Von, these are my lieutenants and lovers, Ryker, Braxton, Liu, Atticus, and Hound. You already met Luca and Jace outside. Guys, this is Von, Armond’s daughter, weapons smuggler, and my blood-oath sister. Last but not least, Bear, protector and right-hand man to Von.”

Von grinned, showing off her bejeweled smile and gave a two-finger salute as her greeting. Bear gave a half wave with a cordial grunt. For not knowing the man all that long, I took that as a positive sign he gave any acknowledgment to the group.

“Oh, you should probably mention Teddy Bear here doesn’t talk much,” Von whispered loudly.

Bear scowled and poked Von in the side, making her flail like she’d been shocked. Only the burst of laughter gave away the fact she was just ticklish. “Fuck you, Bear, you know I hate that shit.”

In response, Bear gave her a pointed look that I interpreted as, *now you know how it feels*. What I couldn’t figure out was the irritation from the nickname or bringing up the fact he couldn’t speak.

“Um... as Von mentioned, Bear prefers to communicate through sign language,” I offered, praying it was the nickname that was the problem.

In a surprising twist, Liu smiled, waved, and proceeded to sign something rather confidently to Bear. A deep, rumbling

laugh emanated from Bear as he responded to Liu. It would seem I had been worried about them all getting along for no reason. Clearly, things were off to a good start, and that was all I could hope for these days.

“Astin,” Frediano spoke up, drawing my attention. “I’m sorry, but did you say something about Von being your blood-oath sister?”

“I did. In fact, Ivy is one as well,” I shared.

Hound gripped my arm gently and pulled it up for him to see. “So that’s what this is from. Sneaky Ivy picked a restaurant that didn’t have surveillance in the private rooms, so I couldn’t see what was going on.”

“Precisely why I did it.” Ivy sniffed. “There are times in a woman’s day that men simply can’t intrude on.”

Choosing not to fall for Ivy’s bait, Hound didn’t respond, instead pressing a tender kiss to the bandage like it would magically make it all better.

“So the three of you entered into a blood pact?” Frediano pressed, his brows furrowed. “For what purpose?”

I knew this was something most people wouldn’t understand, but they didn’t have to. What we did was for us, and that is all that mattered. “Now, each of us knows there are two other people in our lives we can trust to have our backs, no matter what. I have the guys who I trust with my life, and that is beyond rare to experience in this world. However, their goals and mine are not the same... they can’t be. They’re not

women. With this blood oath between the three of us, I know we can bring about a change. I told you before I can't be the one to lead the new generation once I destroy the old, so I found people I believe can make that happen. For years, Ivy has been disrupting the trafficking ring as a one-man act. Now she'll not only have my backing but Von's as well to assist her in collapsing this network."

Ivy's eyes grew wide as I laid out the plan I'd been secretly plotting since hearing her story. It made logical sense. She was a spy who already knew the players and the system. With our help and extra manpower, Ivy could pull off bigger hits, freeing more innocent victims.

"My goal is to come and go between the two families I now control, leaving a person I trust to maintain things while I'm gone. I have someone in mind, but I'd like to see how things play out before divulging who that is. However, Nepreea is Von's home and stomping grounds. With her eyes and ears all over this country, I'll have someone I trust to make sure whoever I put in place is doing as I've instructed. Likewise, if Von wants to expand into Mansara, I'm happy to provide any and all of my connections with customs. She could even use the docks we control in Springmont if that accomplishes the goal," I explained, winking at Von, who bounced with excitement.

Taking a breath, I shrugged, splaying out my hands. "You asked to what purpose am I doing this? Simple answer... to prove to everyone we fucking can."

“Wooo,” Von cheered, leaping to her feet. “Hell yeah, this is what I’ve been fucking waiting for.”

Bear let out a low, rumbling growl before yanking Von back onto his lap like she was a misbehaving child. It was fascinating to watch the chemistry between them like watching two wild animals such as a bear and wolf, who shouldn’t be friends yet somehow made perfect sense. The other thing that was glaringly obvious to me is how Von seemed to have no clue how deep the devotion Bear had for her was. Then again, they always say those closest to the situation are the last to know.

“I stand corrected... this obviously wasn’t a wild impulse between the three of you as I assumed,” Frediano acquiesced.

“You know what they say about assuming,” Von added with a cheeky smile.

My grandfather flicked his gaze to the woman as if he were going to put her in her place. I cleared my throat, casually crossed my arms, and glared at him. Thankfully, he picked up on my warning and let out a heavy sigh before taking a sip of his liquor.

“Gramps, I believe Jace mentioned you had an update about the family meeting?” I asked, shifting the topic to safer territory.

Hound kissed my cheek before taking a seat, but I remained standing. After my nap, I felt rejuvenated and wanted the freedom to move around as we talked. I found that after being

forced to keep weight off my leg for three weeks, I valued the ability to stand far more now.

Frediano set down his now-empty glass and picked up a group of papers, offering it to me. “This is a list of every blood-related member of the Raffa Family. Eighty-five percent of them will be here tonight roughly by ten o’clock. The other fifteen percent are unable to travel due to age or illness, but I don’t think it matters since they wouldn’t be able to help to us in this fight. Thankfully, the majority of the family resides in Nepreea so I’ve organized our three planes to shuttle the largest groups here to speed up the process. Would you be willing to add the use of the jet you were using today?”

I listened as I scanned the list of people, picking up on many I knew by name and reputation. “Yes, that’s fine... whatever needs to be done to speed things along. How is Anselma managing the lodging preparations and finding help for the kitchen?”

“That is all sorted and moving along just fine,” he assured me. “Is it still your intention to make the announcement tonight?”

“Absolutely,” I stated. “As of right now, we have five days to build a plan before Domenico is ready to take over the De Santis Family. Once that happens, we will need to shift quickly into the phase before our enemy can move against us. Tomorrow, I plan to reach out to Domenico and hash out what exactly he needs from me. Knowing that will tell me if I need

to push him to delay just a little while longer for us to get the information we need.”

“Darling, if information is what you need on these men, I am happy to help provide all I’ve gathered over the years,” Ivy offered. “I know locations, accounts, puppets, and many weaknesses. Unfortunately, I didn’t have the backing or the name to put most of it to good use.”

Armond and Frediano seemed to finally see past the pretty face and long legs, catching a glimpse of the deadly spy in their midst. The twins were less subtle about their appreciation for Ivy as they shifted in their seats, trying to adjust themselves.

“Splendid. I’ll have you work with Jace and Luca to review all you have and pull what bits are still relevant and what we can use. Hound is working on building a secure way for all those tied to the Raffa Family to share information they know about the Accardi and Leoni Families. Things like local hangouts, mistresses, and people believed to be in their pocket,” I explained. “Ivy, I know your information is good and you have sources, but in this situation, there is no such thing as too much data. Our goal is to find the perfect place to hit these bastards and collapse their empires in one fell swoop. Then we go in to clean house once the protective walls they built have crumbled.”

Everyone nodded and murmured their agreement to my overall sketch of a plan. It wasn’t much, but we had to start

somewhere, and the clock to make it all happen was ticking away faster than I would like.

Twenty



With one final look in the full-length mirror, I smoothed my hands down the blood-red bodycon dress I'd changed into. My hair was up in a sleek, high ponytail, ensuring that everyone could see my face clearly. I paired the dress with a pair of red stilettos with gold heels that winked in the light.

The name Raffa means violence, and when the Raffa gets violent, blood is always spilled, which is probably why the family color was red with hints of gold to represent our triumph in the criminal world. Tonight, I was claiming my place in this family and its torrid history, so I felt it was fitting to wear red.

A knock sounded on my bedroom door. I waited for one of my men to enter, but when the second knock came, I turned to open the door, finding my grandfather. "Oh, sorry, I assumed you were one of the guys. Come in."

Frediano was in a sharp navy blue suit with a red tie and pocket square, making a dashing combination. “I’m sorry to intrude while you’re getting ready, but I wanted to give you something.”

Shifting the thin square velvet box from under his arm, I watched as Frediano opened it, revealing an exquisite necklace. It was clearly a piece that had been crafted decades ago but was timeless. The gold links were made in a filigree pattern, giving it so much detail but didn’t take away from the large teardrop ruby that hung in the middle.

“This piece has been handed down from mother to daughter for generations. I wish with all my heart that your mother could have been the one to present you with this rite of passage, but fate has left it to me,” Frediano explained. “May I put it on for you?”

“Y-yes, please,” I stammered, turning my back to him.

The metal was cool on my skin, but the weight of it felt right, almost as if I was getting a hug from my mother. Frediano gently grasped my shoulders and turned me to face the mirror. There couldn’t have been a more perfect piece of jewelry to finish off my look for the evening. I sniffed softly, trying to fight back the tears that stung at my eyes as I reached up to touch the gem.

“Traditionally, this would be given to you on your wedding day, but I felt this was the right moment for you to have it,” Frediano murmured. “You have so much of your mother in you, Astin. Never forget that as much of you is Caprioni,

you're equal parts Raffa too. Take pride in the lineage you have and honor them both as you go through life by being the best leader you can be.”

Spinning on my heel, I threw my arms around him, hugging my grandfather as tightly as I dared. “Thank you...” I whispered, “... for everything.”

“My dearest granddaughter, it is my honor and privilege to be by your side through this.” He pulled me back and used his thumb to wipe away the tear that slipped out. “We might not always see eye to eye, but never doubt my love for you.”

Stepping back, Frediano cleared his throat and turned away from me to collect his emotions. Taking a cloth handkerchief from his pants pocket, he surreptitiously wiped at his face. It would seem I wasn't the only one getting emotional over this interaction. I returned my gaze to the mirror, moving closer to get a better look at the necklace that hung just below the base of my throat. With my dress being slightly off the shoulder, it was the perfect length.

Another knock came, but this time when the door opened, Liu popped his head in. “Ready, *omae*?”

One more quick glance, and I was set. “Yup, let's get this over with.”

Frediano offered me his arm, and I took it, knowing it was wise to show a united front. He might have given up leading the Family, but he was still an elder of the Raffa line. We walked out the front door and across the circle driveway to a stone building that had once been the chapel for the monastery.

It was the one building that had been preserved closest to its original state with stained-glass windows, arched pathways, and wooden pews. As we walked up the main aisle, I wondered when was the last time so many people had filled this place.

Once up the few steps to the raised section of the chapel, Frediano paused to kiss both my cheeks before allowing me to face the Family. “Chin up, my girl, and be the queen we raised.”

I smiled affectionately at my grandfather as he took his place to my right. Quickly, I double-checked to ensure all my men were there, but I shouldn’t have doubted them. There they were spread in an arc behind me, watching my back, all dressed in new suits, looking sexy as hell. Good thing those men were all mine—now I just needed to ensure the rest of the family knew it.

Shoulders back, head held high with my hands relaxed at my side, I faced the people claiming the title of Family. It was a wash of red, gold, and black in various shades as they wore the Family colors proudly.

Taking a deep breath, I greeted them. “Thank you all for coming on such short notice. I’m sure you’re wondering who I am and why this meeting was called. My name is Astin Caprioni-Raffa, and I’m the new head of this Family.”

Gasps filled the room, quickly followed by the low rumble of people whispering to each other. I gave them a moment to digest what I said before continuing. When the surprise

seemed to wear off, I raised my arms, drawing their attention back to me, or that's what I'd expected to happen. People were still twisted in their seats talking to others, completely ignoring I was even standing there.

Calmly, I pivoted on my heel and walked over to Luca. "May I have your gun, please?"

"Of course, my queen," he answered with a smirk as he placed the weapon in my hand. "Give them hell, baby girl."

With a wink, I returned to my place and found the first person who was ignoring me. The man was sitting on one leg so he could face the person in the pew behind him. I aimed for the part of his leg that poked out into the aisle and pulled the trigger. The sound of the shot was amplified thanks to the perfect acoustics of the chapel, ensuring everyone heard it. My victim screamed, falling to the stone floor, setting off others, as blood began to pool from the bullet hole in his calf.

"Listen up," I barked out.

Instantly, everyone froze, their attention riveted in my direction. "Everyone, sit your ass down and keep your mouths shut. I didn't call this meeting for a social hour."

No one hesitated to do as directed this time. Even the man I'd shot pulled himself off the floor to take his seat, grimacing in pain. Letting out an irritated sigh, I caught Thad's eye. "Take him to see the doctor. He can have one of the others fill him in on what was discussed."

Now that I had everyone's attention, I decided to start again with a different approach. "Have you people forgotten what it means to be a Raffa? I stand here and announce I'm the new head of the Family, and you dare turn your back on me? We wear the color red to symbolize the madness that runs in our veins and the blood we've spilled. Are we no longer the family known for the unhinged violence that makes people fear our name?" I walked down the steps as I spoke, staring people down as I passed.

Some were able to hold my gaze, while most crumbled under the intensity. When I reached the end, I started back up the aisle doing the same thing to people on the other side. "What I see in this room are weak, soft people who would rather use the Raffa name to make their lives easier but doing nothing to deserve that right. You want to know why your wives, daughters, and even your sons are being snatched right off the streets?" I asked, reaching the front of the room where I faced them again.

"That wasn't a rhetorical question," I pointed out when the room remained silent.

"Because they don't fear us," a woman called out.

When no one else had anything to add, I rested my free hand on my hip. "Are you all silent because you agree?"

A flurry of yeses and other agreements sounded from the crowd, showing me that I had my work cut out for me.

"So what have you done about it?" I pressed but didn't wait for the answer as I yelled, "*Absolutely... fucking... nothing.*"

Back up the steps I went, wanting to make sure everyone could see me. “When did you lose your pride in the name you bear? We are the *third* strongest Family out of the five who founded our way of life in Nepreea. The only reason we’ve held onto that is all thanks to Frediano Raffa, who’s run this family for almost sixty years. He was wise enough to plan for the future when he picked me to be his heir. For years, I was trained like all Raffa men who’d come before me so when the time came, nothing would break me.”

Darkness surged forward, lending me the cool calm that came just before you knew someone was going to die by your hand. The rage, frustration, and disgust for these people who pissed away a legacy that was now mine, I wouldn’t tolerate for a minute longer.

“They pushed me to the brink of insanity, where I looked into the pits of hell and came back with a demon of my own. Darkness is what I call her, for she lives in the shadows of my soul. She only comes out when death runs rampant and blood must be spilled, removing all hindrances in my way...” I paused, letting my words die off as I held them trapped in rapt attention. “I am what it means to be a Raffa, to lead this Family, and reclaim the respect the name deserves.”

“How will you do that?” a voice called out.

Smirking, I knew it was Von setting up the perfect moment for me to drop the biggest bomb of the night. “We are going to destroy the top two families and snuff them out of existence.”

Panic began to churn in the room, but no one dared to turn away from me and risk being shot. At least I know they can learn. Tossing the gun back to Luca, I freed the blade from my heel, the main reason I chose these shoes for tonight. I wasn't sure if I was going to demand this from people tonight, but it was clear to me how complacent these so-called family members were.

“If you've heard anything about me before tonight, then you know I'm more than willing to cull the herd to save the best. So my question to you is...” I paused for dramatic effect, “... do any of you deserve to hold the Raffa name?”

Von and Ivy walked down the aisle to the front, each with a stack of paper St. Jude talismans. Bear was right behind them carrying a small table with a lit candle in a large metal bowl. He placed the table before the steps and took his normal place behind Von. As if they were coming up to take communion, they filed out of the pews and stood before the table. Walking down, I halted on the opposite side of the table and held out my hand. The man before me placed the image of the saint on the table and extended his wrist over it. With a quick swipe of my blade, blood spilled onto the paper.

“Do you give your oath of loyalty to me and the Raffa name?” I asked.

The man held my gaze while he picked up the saint and lit the corner of it on fire. “As burns this saint, so will burn my soul if my oath is not true. Life, loyalty, and honor to the Raffa Family.”

“Family ’til death,” I said, finishing the oath.

It was slow-going since I had to be the one to spill the blood, which meant cleaning the knife between each person. Honestly, I was just happy I didn’t have to spill any blood for this ceremony since my hand and arm were recovering from the other two oaths I’d gone through. What I found so disheartening is I didn’t feel the passion in their words. I had no idea if what they were saying meant anything to them or if it was just a way to keep me from killing them. Time would tell because, oath or not, if they didn’t contribute to the Family, it was the same as stealing in my eyes, and those who steal from me don’t live long after.

Then I was met with a face I did know and smiled at Zani. “Zani, do you give your oath of loyalty to me as head of the Raffa Family?”

I purposely changed the wording, knowing he was the person the Family had championed to take my place by force. He returned my smile, and instead of offering me his wrist, he pulled back the collar of his shirt and bared his neck. Since he was the second to last person, everyone could see what he was doing. With this action, he was offering me his life in penance for allowing anyone to believe he would steal my rightful place.

“I’ve broken my oath of loyalty and honor to the Family,” Zani announced, loud enough for everyone to hear. “I offer my life in atonement for this sin.”

“Your life is mine, Zani Briffa, but I choose not to take it from you today,” I decided, but with the flick of my wrist, I nicked his throat, allowing blood to fall on the saint. “While I still allow you to keep living, do you give your oath of loyalty to me, Astin Caprioni-Raffa, as head of this Family?”

Without bothering to stop the blood that seeped from the cut, he lit his talisman and held it aloft for everyone to see. “As burns this saint, so will burn my soul if my oath is not true. Life, loyalty, and honor to our leader, Astin, and the Raffa name.”

Well, what do you know? Maybe I picked the right guy after all.

The last person stepped up, a woman I guessed to be Sienna, Zani’s wife, offered her arm, tears streaming down her face. “Thank you for sparing my husband,” she managed to say, her whole body heaving as she tried to stay strong in front of everyone.

“Your husband is a good man who was just trying to do his best for the Family. Zani did the honorable thing and told me himself what transpired within the ranks of the Raffa Family. They chose him, he didn’t go looking for the chance to take over the Family,” I explained, grasping her hand gently to stop the shaking. “Wipe your tears, Sienna. They are only seen as weakness in our world, and trust me when I say weakness is something none of us women can afford to show.”

Sienna flinched as I cut her, but she did as I instructed, brushing away her tears before offering me her oath. Zani

wrapped his arm around his wife's shoulders and guided her back to their seat, completing the oath ceremony. It was far less bloody than what I'd experienced the last time, but I suppose that's to be expected from a Family with such a long history.

Taking my place once more on the raised platform, I looked out over the faces who vowed their lives and loyalty to me and this Family. "Understand this, if nothing else, we are at war, and I am the general leading us into battle. If you do not pull your weight, man your posts, or provide some sort of value to this fight, then you will be considered dead weight, and we can't afford to carry you along with us. In simple terms, get your shit together and your ass in gear, or you'll find yourself burning in hell."

Observing the reaction to my reality check, I noted those who seemed to rebel against the ultimatum. However, the ones I was worried about were those who turned green at the thought of having to apply themselves. People like them were the ones who wanted the easy ride through life and would happily betray us if given a better offer involving less work for them. Who knows, there might be more blood spilled before the night is over.

"As is tradition on these happy occasions, we will now share a meal with one another, forging the bonds of family to become even stronger. Our staff has been slaving all day to provide everyone with a delicious dinner, so join me in the dining hall behind this building. Staff will be waiting outside

to guide you in the right direction,” I said, dismissing everyone.

It might seem odd to force the tradition at eleven o’clock in the evening, but I planned to use that time to observe people. Hound had set up the chapel and the dining hall with cameras so we could go over everything with a fine-tooth comb, but I liked to feel the energy of a room. It gave you information you’d never find on a video recording.

I felt one of my guys step up behind me and, without a second thought, I leaned back allowing their body to support mine. My leg had healed, but when forced to stand like this on a hard, unforgiving surface, it made my thigh ache. While all of my men were sweet and supportive in their own way, only two of them would think to offer me a way to ease the pressure on my leg while not looking weak.

“*Omae*,” Liu whispered, his warm breath brushing along my neck, making me shiver with delight. “You were magnificent, a true commanding queen, resplendent in red. Simply took my breath away.”

Damn, that mouth of his.

“Have you been taking lessons from Jace?” I asked, spinning to face him as I wrapped my arms around his neck. “Or is it that you’ve been holding out on showing this side of yourself?”

Liu smiled, his features calm and relaxed as he gazed down at me with adoration. “I suppose you could say it’s a recent discovery. No one has ever enticed this side of my nature to

express itself before. Everything about you makes me want to be stronger, confident, and worthy to be a man you claim as a lover.”

“Do you doubt that I find you worthy?” I questioned.

Liu and I had a bit of a rocky start when I found out he’d been adopted by my father. Despite that fact, his love for my father is what created a bond between us that grew into something so much more. Unlike the others who had been handpicked to be by my side, Liu chose me all on his own. That’s not to say the others wouldn’t have naturally, but things might not have ended up as they are now.

I also knew that Liu had a controlling and manipulative mother who only used Liu as a pawn in her climb to power. It was one of the reasons my father adopted him. I’d be lying if, in the back of my mind, I didn’t fear that I was too dominant and Liu would one day walk away from me because of it. Which is why hearing him say he wanted to be worthy of me had panic rising up in my throat.

“No, *omae*, you never make me feel that way,” Liu assured me, stroking his knuckles along my cheek. “The voice I fight against is my own. While I’ve come a long way from that boy your father chose to rescue, there are still parts of me that haven’t recovered. Who knows, I might never overcome some of the emotional scars my mother left me with. However, being with you makes me want to try and fight for myself to be whole.”

I pulled him to me, closing the distance so I could show him just how worthy I thought he was. Not giving a fuck who might still be in the room or what anyone might think, I opened up to him, deepening the kiss. Our bodies pressed together as Liu's hand gripped my ass, holding me tight. A moan slipped out as Liu rocked his hard cock against me.

“Fuck, I want you so bad,” Liu growled out.

Smirking at him, I let my fingernails scrape down the back of his neck. “What's stopping you?”

“They warned me you weren't afraid to get down and dirty in public places.” He chuckled. “The thing is, I might want to bend you over a pew, kick your legs wide, and listen to your moans echoing off the walls as I fuck you. However, that would be over far too quickly, and I want to make you come over and over again so I can memorize every sound you make lost in pleasure.”

If that kiss hadn't already turned me on, the words coming out of his mouth would have set me ablaze in an instant. Correction, they had. There was no doubt in my mind that if he slipped his hand under my dress and checked, my pussy would be dripping in anticipation.

“Th-that sounds good to me. L-let's. Yeah, we should go do that,” I said, stumbling over my words since my brain was playing the images he'd described on repeat.

Liu shook his head, making me instantly pout, which had him grinning like a fool. “Astin, you missed the last Family

dinner to have sex. I'm not going to reinforce that behavior this time around."

The way Liu expertly shifted from sexy boyfriend to my no-nonsense lieutenant was impressive. It also had me biting my lip to keep from laughing at the ridiculousness of what he'd just said. How many people get scolded for choosing to have sex over participating in a work dinner?

"Sooo, if I go make an appearance and talk to a few people, then can we have hours of sex?" I asked, batting my lashes at him.

Liu let out a sigh as if I was purposely being difficult. "One hour... you have to remain at the dinner for one hour, engaging with people other than those you already know. Oh..." he paused, pulling something out of his pocket, "... you have to wear this the whole time."

Twenty-One



My jaw dropped when I saw the metal butt plug in his hand. It wasn't massive or anything. In fact, it was fairly small, but the fact *he* was the one asking me to do this was so out of character.

Or was it?

I picked up the plug and noticed something written on the flared end. The words *Good Girl* were scrawled across it in pretty cursive lettering. "Oh. My. God," I stated emphatically.

"Guess I do get to bend you over a pew," Liu commented as he slid his arm around my waist, guiding me toward the first row.

This time, I did look around, but no one was in the chapel with us. We'd been given privacy for Liu's plan. "You told them, didn't you," I said, the reality dawning on me.

Brushing my ponytail aside, Liu kissed my neck as he took the plug from my hand. "Yes, I most certainly did. I felt they

should know what I was asking you to do, so if there were any reason you needed help or something happened, they would know the situation, not to mention I needed the opportunity to put this in you if you agreed.”

“Holy shit, you have no idea how horny it makes me to know when I walk into that dining room, all of you will know I’m walking around with a plug in my ass,” I admitted, feeling my skin flush and my heart rate pick up in reaction to how turned on I was.

Liu placed his hand between my shoulder blades and pressed, urging me to bend over. “I’m glad you like the idea, but I still have to get it in you first.”

Bending at the waist with my knees pressed up against the seat of the pew, I gripped the back of it, arching my back to offer up my ass. “Don’t worry, I’ll be a good girl... well, I’ll try at least.”

I felt his warm hands start at my calves, brushing up my legs until he slid them under the skirt of my dress just above the knee. Slowly, he worked the rest of the fabric up until my ass was fully uncovered. This dress was so tight I’d opted not to wear anything underneath, so I was completely exposed. Soft kisses were pressed to the round of my ass as Liu’s hands kneaded the rest of it. Teasing me, he let his thumbs get close to my pussy but never near enough to ease the needy ache thrumming through my clit.

Gripping either cheek firmly, he spread me wide, exposing what was hidden between them. “Look at that perfect ass you

have. I know it's going to look even prettier with this plug in it. Maybe next time I should use one that has a gem in it. Then I can watch it sparkle as I fuck your pussy.”

A loud moan burst out of me as I felt his tongue glide over that tight, sensitive entrance. I was so turned on by his words, everything felt hypersensitive. Soon, I was so lost in the sensation of him eating my ass out I forgot he didn't plan on taking it all the way. He was just trying to get me loose enough to fit the plug in.

I bucked when the top of the plug ran over my pussy. “You're so wet for me, I would hate to waste it,” Liu reasoned.

He was using the plug to collect my pussy lube before he started to nudge it into my ass, using his other hand to press his thumb into my lower back, massaging there to keep me from tensing up. “Relax, *omae*, I'm just testing the receptiveness.”

Sensing I needed more moisture, he used two fingers to scoop from my pussy and smeared it on my ass. Then he surprised me by thrusting the plug in and out of my pussy a few times, coating it before returning the attention above. When he applied firm, steady pressure against the tight-ringed entrance, I let out a whimper as my head rested on my hands. Taking deep breaths, I urged my body to relax and take the damn plug I was craving to be filled with. The feeling of my ass giving way to the plug was euphoric. I know some women hate anal and never find enjoyment in it, but *fuck*, I loved it.

“That’s my good girl,” Liu crooned as the plug slipped into place, kissing the skin just above the plug. “Perfect, simply perfect. Now I just need to cover you back up so we can join the others.”

Slowly, I righted myself, getting used to the feeling of the plug in my ass. It wasn’t uncomfortable per se, but not something I was used to feeling. Feeling it was a constant reminder of what was to come as well as knowing *all* my men knew I was wearing it. A shiver went down my spine as Liu adjusted my dress to cover up our little secret.

He took my hand and kissed the back of it as he pinned me with his dark brown eyes. “Ready, my love?”

I managed to nod and give an affirmative hum as Liu tucked my arm around his, leading us out of the chapel. We passed Ralph on the way out of the chapel, making me feel a little guilty for him having to hear what just happened. That is until I saw him pull earplugs out and slip them into his pants pocket—smart man.

The sound of people talking and laughing made it easy to know what direction to head, even though I’d been in there earlier to discuss the layout. Two rows of tables lined up from end to end with chairs on either side down the length of the hall provided the perfect amount of seating. I couldn’t imagine having to do this at another location. Seating roughly three hundred and fifty people was no small feat, but then again, a monastery could have that many monks and other people

living on the property at one time, once more proving how clever the Raffa was who bought this place.

As we entered, the room fell silent but for the sound of chairs being pushed back as everyone stood. I had to fight the urge to look for Frediano to give me some sense of what was happening. Liu and I walked down to the far end, where there were two tables that bridged the gap between the two rows.

Frediano was there standing off to the right, leaving the middle seat open along with seven seats to the left where the Don's wife normally sat. Someone had purposefully set things up for all my men to be on full display, marking them as my significant others. Frediano smiled and gave a slight tilt to his head, urging me to take my place. Thank God Liu didn't let me run off for a romp in the sheets when this was clearly an important part of the evening.

Once seated, the guys took their place to my left, and the moment all of them were settled, everyone else resumed their seats. Food was placed before me, already portioned out with signs that someone had tasted the meal before it was served. Having a food taster was something I didn't embrace well. The logic behind the action made sense, but I fucking hated that another person had to put their life at risk just so I remained safe. Ralph tried to tell me it was like having another bodyguard. I didn't agree—he had the chance to protect himself and fight back. The person who was eating off my plate had no idea if they'd live past the first bite. However, I knew the Leoni was known for taking out their enemies with such tactics, so I kept my mouth shut and dug into the meal.

When I was about halfway through my dinner, there was a nudge against my leg. Glancing over at Liu, he raised a questioning brow as he subtly tapped his watch. Letting out a heavy sigh, I wiped my mouth, grabbed my glass of wine, and stood. The whole room froze as everyone snapped to attention.

“Please remain seated,” I called out, gesturing as well just in case they couldn’t hear me. “Relax, enjoy the food and company. I’m sure some of you haven’t seen each other in a while. Since my introduction into the family is rather late, I would love to spend some time getting to know you all over the weekend. I’ve ensured if you are staying at any of the hotels, you have the rooms for the next three days. Those staying elsewhere, the same goes for you, but know you are welcome to stay as long as you like. A family is only as strong as its connection to each other, which is why I plan to try and spend a little time getting to know you all. If you need to leave sooner than later, I’ll be making my way around the room, so feel free to flag me down.”

This hadn’t been my plan for the evening or the weekend, knowing I didn’t have a lot of time to get plans in action. Yet, as soon as the words came out of my mouth, I knew it was the right call. While Frediano had kept the Raffa Family business running, he’d lost the connection to the people he demanded loyalty from. Fear will only get you so far when it comes to choosing between loyalty or their life.

Ralph, my ever-present shadow, followed behind me as I approached the outside row of guests. I was surprised when

Atticus fell in step beside me, knowing how much he disliked small talk.

“Atty, as much as I love having your company, I just need to make sure you know you have nothing to prove to me or anyone else here,” I murmured.

He smiled and adjusted his glasses before twining our hands together. “Thank you for saying that, but I have something to prove to myself.”

Before I could ask him what he meant, a woman who dragged a man behind her stepped in our path, causing us to stop abruptly or run into them. “Madam Raffa, I just wanted to introduce myself...” She simpered, pouting her overly-filled lips at me. The man beside her cleared his throat loudly, spurring a reaction out of her. “Oh, and my husband.”

“I believe it is customary for you to share your name when conducting an introduction,” Atticus pointed out.

The woman let out this strange braying sound that I think was supposed to be a laugh. “Oh my God, aren’t you a witty man,” she said, offering her hand to him as if it was a limp noodle. “I’m Fiona.”

Atticus made no attempt to touch the woman. In fact, he took half a step back so he stood just behind me and placed his hand on my outer hip. “I’m Atticus, one of Lady Astin’s paramours.”

“A what?” Fiona’s husband asked, his face scrunched up in confusion.

“It’s a term people in a polyamorous relationship use instead of partner or lover,” I explained.

The man stumbled forward half a step, and I was assaulted with the stench of alcohol. “Polmamorus? What does that mean?”

There was no way he could be this drunk just from the wine served at dinner. I’d given express instructions that no one could have more than two glasses. Plus, this man reeked of whiskey, only furthering the notion he’d been drinking for a while.

“I’m sorry I didn’t catch your name,” I commented, sidestepping the question.

“Oh, ah... it’s Simon,” he answered after having to think about it for a moment.

My brows rose as he pulled a flask from his jacket and unscrewed the lid before tipping it back. Simon scowled as he turned the flask upside down and shook it like that would magically change the fact it was empty. “What the hell... it was full a minute ago.”

“Put that thing away, you moron,” Fiona hissed, smacking him. She turned back to us with an apologetic smile. “I’m so sorry. This is so embarrassing. He’s normally not like this. You see, Simon is a functional alcoholic, but he is terrified of flying. The only way to get him here was to drown him in liquor until he passed out.”

“That must be challenging for you,” I said, unsure what the hell else to say.

How had I missed them during the oath ceremony? There was no way I wouldn't remember this couple with her orange spray tan and duck lips in combination with a man who smelled like a distillery. My gaze dropped to her wrist where I should have found a bandage like everyone else, but there wasn't any, only a few chunky gaudy bracelets that screamed designer knockoffs. Grabbing the hand she hadn't offered to Atticus, I pushed back the bracelets just to be sure. There was nothing but blotchy, fake-tanned skin.

“Fiona,” I started, my grasp on her wrist tightening around the joint, pressing on the sensitive nerves there. “I'm going to ask you a question, and the answer that comes out of your mouth better be the fucking truth.”

Her eyes went wide as the color drained out of her face, making the bad tan job look even worse. As if sensing there was something wrong, Simon lurched forward, trying to grab my hand, but in his drunken state, he tripped on his own feet and started to crash into me. Atticus sidestepped, meeting Simon head-on as his hand shot out to catch the drunken idiot by the throat. This caused Simon to gag loudly which echoed around the room. This was quickly followed by a strangled scream as Atticus shoved Simon away from me, crashing into the people seated at the table behind him. Those at the table were equally surprised by a man getting tossed into them and scattered, drawing even more attention to the situation.

I ignored all that, knowing Ralph and Atty would deal with that situation. Right now, I wanted to know who the fuck this woman really was. Fiona's attention had drifted to what was happening near the table, so I ground my thumb into the bundle of nerves and tendons just above her wristbone, reminding her where to focus. She gasped and tried to curl into the pain, dropping her to her knees before me.

“Tell me why it is, *Fiona*, that you don't have a mark on your wrist?” I asked, keeping the question vague to avoid leading her into the answer.

Gaping at me like a fish out of water, she tried to think of an answer. Just when I thought I might have been mistaken about her being an intruder, I caught movement out of the corner of my eye as she pulled something free from between her thighs. My body reacted before I could even discern what she planned on doing. With a quick twist, I broke her wrist and slammed my elbow into her face, stunning her long enough for me to get behind her, grab her head, and snap the bitch's neck.

I watched as the life drained from her eyes, assuring me she was dead before I let her body drop to the floor. Ralph's arm hooked around my waist as he spun, putting his back to the danger as he stormed out of the dining hall. My brain still hadn't caught up to what just happened until I was set down in our private sitting room on the third floor. The second everything was back online, I was making a beeline for the stairs. Once more, Ralph caught me and marched over to an armchair that he dropped me into.

“Don’t, Astin,” Ralph warned.

The tone of his voice caught my attention, and I looked up at him. Blood seeped from a cut on his cheek, and the left arm of his suit looked like it had been hit with some kind of acid that was eating away at his clothes.

“Ralph,” I screamed as he dropped to his knees.

Without a second thought, I grabbed his suit jacket and tried to pull it off, but his shoulders were so wide I couldn’t manage it from the front. Grabbing the blade from my heel, I slipped over the chair’s armrest since he was blocking the front so I could get behind him. Tears welled in my eyes as I saw his arm wasn’t the only thing that had been hit with the acid. Half of Ralph’s back had been hit with the stuff, and the fabric of his suit was sticking to his skin. My hands started to shake as I grabbed the jacket’s collar, pulling it away from undamaged skin. The blade made quick work slicing through the fabric of the jacket and shirt, allowing me to pull off the half the acid hadn’t touched. When I tried to get the other half off, it started to take some of his skin with it.

“Ralph,” I choked out as he roared in pain.

It was as if everything I’d learned flew out of my brain, and I was frozen. Darkness joined me, wrapping me up in her arms, giving me the detachment I needed to think clearly.

“Pull your shit together, Astin,” Darkness snapped. *“This is a chemical burn. We know how to fix this dammit. Think.”*

Memories of my training came flooding back as I was tortured with acid being slowly dripped on the skin of my inner thighs. The pain of my skin burning and the acrid scent of the chemical had me gagging. A man was pressing me to give him information, but I refused. He promised to make the pain stop if I would only tell him what he wanted to know. This carried on until Frediano stepped into the light.

“Enough, she’s held out longer than anyone else, and we can’t risk the acid doing irreparable damage. Get her in the shower and set a timer for twenty minutes, not a minute less,” Frediano ordered. “If she still says it’s burning, keep the water running until it stops.”

With a gasp, I pulled myself free of the memory Darkness helped me to remember. Kicking off my shoes, I pulled Ralph’s arm over my shoulder. “Come on, big guy... we need to get you in the shower so we keep this from getting worse.”

“No, you have to stay here where it’s safe,” he argued.

“We are just going one room over. We’re not leaving this floor, I promise,” I assured him. “If we don’t get the chemical reaction to stop, that shit will keep eating through your skin. Please, Ralph, you need to let me help you.” My voice cracked as I pleaded with the man. “I refuse to lose anyone else I love, so you’re going to stand up and let me save your ass.”

I’m not sure what part hit home for the man, but I didn’t fucking care because it got him to his feet. Struggling under his weight as he leaned heavily on me, we stumbled into the hall. Thank fuck the bathroom was on the other side of the

wall, but the downside to this plan was how small the damn room was. Oh, and the fact the shower had a tub paired with it. Switching gears, I stood in front of him and draped both arms over my shoulders as I guided him forward into the tub. He was tall enough to kneel and drape over the side of the tub, getting most of his upper body in.

I quickly turned the water on, climbed into the tub, and pulled the handheld showerhead free. “Okay, Wreck-It Ralph, this is going to be ice-fucking-cold, but it’s going to feel amazing on the burns. Deep breaths and we’ll get through this,” I coached, pulling the toggle to switch from the tub faucet to the shower.

Ralph snarled, clenching his fists as the water hit the burns. Slowly, I worked the fabric free, the water helping it to separate from the skin more easily. My lower legs and feet went numb with how cold the water was, and my hand ached from the cold, but none of that mattered as the rest of Ralph’s destroyed suit fell away.

“*Astin!*” Hound bellowed, panic and rage clear in his voice.

“In here,” I yelled over the water.

Seconds later, the bathroom was packed with my guys, each with a crazed look that calmed slightly once they saw me. I’m sure I looked just as feral hunched over Ralph, still dressed and soaking wet. Something in my heart eased seeing their faces until I noticed Atty and Ryker weren’t with them.

“Please tell me everyone’s okay,” I begged, tears spilling down my cheeks. When they didn’t answer, I lost it. “I need

someone to tell me where Ryker and Atty are *right now*,” I screamed.

Ralph started to move as if trying to get up, but I draped myself over the undamaged side holding him still. “Don’t you fucking move, Boykov, or I will knock your ass out. Test me... see if I won’t.”

His hand wrapped around my ankle as he slumped forward, giving in but still trying to offer *me* comfort. Trusting Ralph wasn’t going to try and get up again, I returned my gaze to the men around me. There, front and center, was Atty, his left arm in a sling, a bruise on his cheek, and his glasses cracked, but alive. Ryker was right behind him looking bedraggled but other than that totally fine.

“Oh, thank God you’re all here,” I sobbed, dropping my head to rest on Ralph’s back as I wept.

Someone pulled the shower head from my hand as another set of arms pulled me from the tub. Immediately, I thrashed, my wet feet slipping on the tile floor until I was scooped up bridal style.

“No, you have to keep the water on him,” I cried, panic clawing at my throat.

“Shh, baby girl, Atticus is taking over so we can get you out of these wet clothes,” Luca said, trying to soothe me, but I wouldn’t stop fighting him until he turned around for me to see.

There, just as Luca said, was my Atty sitting on the edge of the tub slowly moving the water over the burns. The whole picture looked pathetic with Atty's left arm in a sling attending to a man slumped over a damn bathtub.

"Twenty minutes or more," I whispered when Atticus's eyes met mine. "No less, or it might not stop the chemical reaction."

"I'll do thirty just to be sure," Atticus decided and began the timer on his watch. "Go, Asta, you're shivering. The last thing we need right now is for you to get sick. I promise we will make sure Boykov is taken care of."

If there was a group of people left in this world I trusted to keep their word, it was the seven men I gave a piece of my heart to. They would rather shoot themselves in the foot than lie to me about something this important.

"Okay," I conceded. "I love you, Atty."

His expression softened at my words. "I love you too, Asta, more than anything in the world."

Twenty-Two



Chaos is the only way to describe what just happened.

One moment, Astin and Atticus were talking to a couple who seemed a little odd but nothing that made me feel the need to worry. Boykov was with her, and Atty-boy was far more capable than people gave him credit for. Jace and I had been talking about the best way to handle the information we'd be getting from Ivy when everything went south.

What caught my attention was the surge of people who dove out of the way of the man who'd been talking with Astin as he crashed into the table. Instantly, I was on my feet with Jace right behind me. It might be nothing, or it could be something, but I'd learned a long time ago to trust my gut. Pulling my gun free, I vaulted over the table, running up the space between the two rows. I spotted Boykov as he slammed his fist into the man's face, sending him flying over the table to flop on the other side.

A shriek only a woman could make was cut off midscream, and I knew what that meant. Whoever that was wasn't alive anymore. The man Boykov punched stood and grabbed something round from his pocket and hurled it at the bodyguard—or that's who I thought he was aiming for. Raising my gun, I shot the man in both knees dropping him to the floor. That was when I looked up and saw Boykov's body shrouding Astin and realized what the man threw.

Acid.

The chemicals were already eating away at the man's clothes, but it was almost as if Boykov didn't realize what was happening. No sign of pain registered on his face as he scooped Astin up and booked it out of the hall. Ryker had set up a protocol with all the bodyguards who'd be watching over our queen. Get her the fuck out of danger and up to the third floor. The security in the house would lock it down, ensuring no one tried to follow them. Knowing Astin would be safe and out of danger allowed me the chance to figure out what the fuck was going on.

“Who are you?” Jace demanded, kneeling next to the man I'd shot.

Our traitor responded by spitting in Jace's face, which earned him a good pistol whip to the cheek.

Jace grabbed the man's jaw and snarled. “Try that again, and I'll do more than break your fucking face. Now tell me who you are or who sent you. If you do, I'll make sure your death is quick. Keep dicking around and drawing this out, and we'll

just see how many holes we can put in you before bleeding out.”

“She is an abomination who must be cleansed from the earth,” the man yelled so everyone in the hall could hear him. “We cannot permit that demon to gain more power... she will be the ruin of us all. Only holy water or fire will save our souls from this evil.”

It was clear to me this man was stark-raving mad, but I couldn't tell if he believed what he was saying or had been brainwashed. Nothing he was saying made sense. Holy water certainly wasn't a chemical like he'd thrown, so who was the puppet master?

“Jace, *move*,” I barked, seeing the man slip his hand into his pants pocket.

I don't know why I assumed it was an explosive or something equally as damaging, but he'd already brought acid to a gunfight, so I wasn't ruling anything out. Jace looked up at me as if he knew he couldn't move out of the way fast enough and mouthed the word *go*. The internal battle waging war between going for safety or saving Jace was ended when Atticus appeared out of nowhere. The same moment I dove under the table, Atty slammed into Jace, sending them rolling away from the man and under the table opposite me. Acting fast, I tossed the table, creating somewhat of a barrier between me and whatever was about to happen.

The whole building shook from the blast, but by some miracle, it was a rather contained explosion. Peeking over the

table, I found what remained of the body, along with cracked, scorched stone where he'd detonated. Confident the worst was over, I stood, looking around the room, taking in the damage. Tables had been blown over and pushed out from the blast, creating a void that was covered in blood and body parts. While people seemed rattled and pretty terrified, it didn't look like many had gotten hurt.

"Luca, thank fuck you're all right," Hound said before grasping me in a quick bro hug. "I saw Jace get knocked out of the way by Atticus, but I lost sight of you. What the fuck is going on?"

"I don't know," I answered, looking around for my gun that I'd dropped. "He was rambling about Astin being a demon and needing to cleanse the world. I should have made Jace double-check he wasn't booby-trapped. The fucker had an acid bomb in his pocket, so why wouldn't he have a real one?"

"Did you say acid?" Liu asked from behind me.

Whirling to face him, I sighed seeing him hold out my gun. "Yeah, I'm pretty sure he was aiming for Astin, but Boykov got there first. Took a direct hit to his left side, but it didn't slow him down one bit. That beast of a man picked up our girl and hauled her ass out of here."

"Guys, I'm gonna need a little help here," Jace called from across the room, waving us over.

Kicking a table out of the way, Hound cleared a path through the bloody blast zone. That was going to be one hell of a cleanup job. Braxton was already there with Atticus's head

resting on his lap. It was pretty obvious to tell what the problem was seeing the way Atticus's left arm hung oddly.

“Pretty sure it's just dislocated, but I've never seen one to know for sure,” Jace said, running a hand through his hair. “This idiot slammed his shoulder into the stone floor when tackling me.”

Kneeling by our undercover badass, I slid my hand under his suit jacket to feel the joint. “Yeah, it's definitely dislocated.” When I met his gaze, I noticed he'd also managed to crack his glasses. “I think you've been watching too many action movies with us, A-Dog. What possessed you to do something so asinine? Both of you could have gotten blown up if you were a second slower.”

“Then I suppose it's a good thing I had impeccable timing,” Atticus responded.

Stunned, it took a second for me to realize Atty had made a joke, and a good one at that. I burst out laughing as did Jace and Braxton who were close enough to have heard him.

“Guess we need to start calling you Jason Bourne if you're gonna be pulling moves like that,” Braxton teased.

Atticus frowned. “No, thank you. I would prefer to keep my name as it is. I rather enjoy having Astin call me Atty.”

Brax and I exchanged a quick look as our beloved genius missed the meaning behind the joke. I caught movement out of the corner of my eye but relaxed when I saw it was Ryker jogging over to join us. That meant all of us were accounted

for and relatively unharmed. Time to wrap this party up and go find our girl because I had a feeling she wasn't going to handle being kept out of the loop very well.

“Okay, Atticus, you have two options,” I stated, sitting back on my heels. “One, you let me set your shoulder back into place, or two, wait for the Family doc to get you fixed up. It doesn't look like there are too many people who need medical attention, so I'm sure he can get you fixed up pretty quick.”

Atticus's brows knit together as he considered his options. “You do it. I don't want to wait for the doctor if you're confident you can fix it.”

“It's simple once you know the steps. I've even put my own shoulder back into place a time or two,” I assured him. “Let's get you sitting up and take off your jacket. I need to be able to move your arm easily.” Braxton helped me get Atticus out of his jacket without causing him too much pain.

Taking a moment to feel around the whole shoulder, I needed to be sure what direction the bone slipped out so I could get it back in. “Can one of you guys find something we can use as a sling once I get this in place?” I asked.

“Of course, I'll be right back,” Liu said before taking off.

“Now close your eyes and take a few deep breaths for me, Atty. It's going to be uncomfortable, but I need you to try and stay as relaxed as possible,” I instructed as I adjusted my grip on his arm. “Brax, place your hand on his shoulder blade and keep him steady.”

In three quick moves, I had everything back where it needed to be, with only a deep grunt of pain from Atticus. “All set. Now you just need some pain meds and keep it in a sling for a day or two. It helps the muscles to heal faster if they’re able to rest.”

With a shaky hand, Atticus adjusted his glasses and wiped the sweat that beaded up on his forehead. “Thank you, that feels immensely better.”

Liu returned with a section of white fabric that looked like it was cut from one of the tablecloths. Together, we got Atty’s arm rigged up and as comfortable as we could make him.

“You guys go ahead, I’m gonna take Atticus over to find the doc and see if he has something a little stronger than ibuprofen,” Ryker offered. “I’m sure Astin isn’t happy about being hauled away from the action.”

“Oh fuck,” I swore under my breath, shoving to my feet. “When you find the doc, bring him with you. Boykov got hit with acid protecting Astin, and I have no idea how bad the damage is. All I know is if that man dies, I’m not sure what Astin will do, but it won’t be good.”

“Go, hurry. We’ll be right behind you,” Ryker urged as he helped Atticus to his feet.

I took off at a sprint, dodging people left and right as I headed for the exit. Hound was right behind me as we crossed the driveway but abruptly stopped when the front door wouldn’t open.

“Open this fucking door right now,” I ordered, pounding on the thick wood.

The metal covering the peephole slid back, allowing security to see it was us. “One moment as we unlock the door, Master Luca,” came a muffled reply.

What took mere minutes felt like an eternity as every worst-case scenario played in my head. The others caught up just as the door was being pulled open. Shoving the door in with my shoulder, I heard a man grunt, but I couldn’t think about that now—I needed to get to my woman. It didn’t matter who you were or how mentally strong you believed yourself to be, there were only so many losses you could handle before completely shattering. Astin had barely begun to heal the cracks in her heart from losing her father, being betrayed by her uncles, and Gunner taking his own life because of lies he’d believed about her. Right now, all it would take to break her for good is to lose one of us or Boykov.

We were Astin’s kryptonite, the loss she would never be able to come back from.

Finally, I made it to the top of the stairs, winded from too many days locked up in jail. It was easy to keep up your muscle strength, but cardio was a little harder in a small concrete box. Hound got to the sitting room first, but all we found were Astin’s shoes and drops of blood.

“*Astin*,” Hound bellowed as the monster that lurked within him was right at the surface.

I'd only seen him like this one other time, long before he knew Astin. Someone who'd been hired by a competitor tried to jump him at a club and take Hound out. Things didn't go as planned for the hired gun, who wound up looking like roadkill and dumped on the competition's doorstep. Out of all the men Astin chose to add to her harem, he was the only one I feared could kill me if we ever had to go toe-to-toe.

"In here."

How we'd missed the sound of running water on the other side of the wall shows just how worried we were. The three who'd been behind us shoved their way into the narrow bathroom. I hopped up on the sink, crouching so I could see what was going on. My chest tightened at the sight of our girl bedraggled, soaked to the bone, with her makeup smeared and a half-naked Boykov in her lap. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she kept the water moving over the massive burns covering the left side of Boykov's body.

"Please tell me everyone's okay," she begged, her voice cracking with desperation.

We heard her words, but seeing her like this had rendered us all mute. Her breathing became more rapid as her hand began to shake. "I need someone to tell me where Ryker and Atty are *right now*," Astin screamed.

Our queen was on the verge of shattering, and we knew words wouldn't be enough. I slipped out of the bathroom and jogged back down the stairs. Just as I was about to round the

corner to the next flight, Atticus and Ryker beat me to it, coming up the stairs.

“You two, get up there right the fuck now. She’s in the bathroom with Boykov, and it’s not good,” I explained quickly, my words kicking them both into high gear.

Back at the bathroom, I yanked Jace back. “Out of the way, guys. She needs to see them for herself.” Braxton and Liu stepped aside, letting the other two forward.

Slipping in behind them, it was clear something happened in the past two minutes as Astin was now practically holding her bodyguard down. “Oh, thank God you’re all here,” she sobbed, dropping her head to Ralph’s back, allowing her tears to take over.

“How cold is that water?” Atticus questioned in a low voice. “Do we know how long she’s been like this? Her feet are turning purple with how cold she is. We need to get her out of there.”

Shifting to sit on the side of the tub, Atticus pulled the shower head from Astin’s hand. Ryker hooked his hand under her arms and hoisted her out of the tub. Immediately, she started thrashing like a fucking crocodile, her wet feet slipping on the tile floor. When she almost crashed into the toilet, I scooped her up, knowing Ryker would have no chance with how tight the space was to get ahold of her.

“No, you have to keep the water on him,” Astin cried out, clawing at my chest. I winced as her nails dug in, sheer panic written all over her face, clearly not thinking straight.

Curling my body around her as much as I could, I rested my head against her, whispering into her ear, “Shh, baby girl, Atticus is taking over so we can get you out of these wet clothes.”

My words had her pausing for a moment, but then she was back trying to get free. Turning, I stepped around Ryker so she could clearly see that Atticus was indeed continuing to flush the wounds. It took her a minute but she stilled once her panic-driven mind saw the truth. Her skin was ice cold, and the water from her clothes was seeping into my own, making me wonder how she’d managed to withstand how cold it was.

“Twenty minutes or more,” Astin murmured. “No less, or it might not stop the chemical reaction.”

“I’ll do thirty just to be sure,” Atticus decided and began the timer on his watch. “Go, Asta, you’re shivering. The last thing we need right now is for you to get sick. I promise we will make sure Boykov is taken care of.”

“Okay,” she said, surrendering Boykov to his care. “I love you, Atty.”

“I love you too, Asta, more than anything in the world,” Atticus admitted, then his gaze met mine, and I nodded, knowing he was telling me to get her out of there.

Reassured by Atticus’s promise, Astin’s body went completely lax in my arms. Only her instinctive effort to keep warm had Astin shaking against my body. We needed to get her warm and fast. Out of all the bathrooms on our floor, her’s

was the largest so that's where I headed. Braxton was way ahead of me and had the water running.

“Make sure it's not too hot... we don't want to shock her,” I warned, setting her down on the padded stool someone had placed near the tub.

Braxton gave me a fuck-off look as he removed her necklace. “It's lukewarm at the moment, but that's why I only filled it halfway so we could add hotter water.”

None of us did well when Astin was in danger or hurt, and the one thing only a few of us could handle was when she cried. Seeing her look so helpless, even for a split second when she thought something had happened to Ryker or Atticus, had me shaken. I didn't expect Astin to be heartless or void of emotions like I was—that would take away so many of the things I loved about her. It was simply the fact she hardly shows that side of herself, and when her control cracks like it just had, we knew how serious the situation had to be.

Slowly, Braxton peeled her wet dress off until we got to her hips. I slid my arms under hers and hoisted Astin up when she didn't even try to stand on her own. “I've got you, baby girl. We'll get you warm in no time.”

Once her dress was off, I set her back on the stool so I could strip out of my clothes, but Liu's voice stopped me.

“Guys, let me sit with her,” Liu requested, standing there in only his boxers. “Please, let me do this.”

I finished pulling off my shirt since it was soaked through but stepped back from Astin. “Take care of her,” I said, gripping his shoulder in encouragement. “I’m gonna check on Atticus and Boykov, make sure they’re doing all right. Braxton, you stay here, just in case she needs something.”

With one more look at Astin’s blank expression, shivering as she sat there, I left the bathroom. The others were waiting in her bedroom, needing to stay close but not wanting to crowd her until she was more grounded. Staying true to my word, I headed down the hall to where Atticus was still helping Boykov. The giant man was now sitting in the tub, his back to Atticus.

“You good?” I asked, leaning in the doorway.

Atticus looked up. “Ten more minutes left. Do you think it was wrong of me to make the water slightly warmer? I was concerned he would develop issues if he became hypothermic.”

“I’m sure it’s fine. I would have done the same thing. While the cold water probably feels better on the raw skin, I’m not sure it makes it more effective,” I reasoned. “Did anyone send for the doc?”

“Yes, Gemma went to fetch him,” he answered. “How is she?”

Running a hand over my face, I tried to wipe away the image of her sitting there on that stool. “She’s cold and still a bit in shock. I’m sure, it will all be fine once our girl is warmed up,

has some answers, and knows who to hold responsible for this.”

Atticus shifted his gaze back to Boykov’s back. “It won’t be fine for whoever is behind this. She won’t stop until they’re all dead.”

I’d heard all about what happened when Astin found out Braxton and Atticus had been attacked at that shady strip club. Our queen blew the fucking building up with a man inside hung by his balls. Whoever was behind this attack had their days numbered. One thing Astin would never tolerate was her people getting hurt, especially after she made a crystal-fucking-clear warning for all to see. There would be no second chances or mercy given to those who dared to ignore the writing on the wall.

Twenty-Three



Warmth was the first thing I seemed to register since leaving Ralph with Atty. It was almost like I slipped into this void, a place where nothing could touch me. There were no feelings, no thoughts or sensations, just blank space. The instant my brain latched onto the change in temperature, it used that link and pulled me back to the present.

Blinking a few times to clear my vision, I found myself in a tub, cradled against someone's warm body. I could hear the steady beat of his heart under my ear, confirming that what I was experiencing was real. My brain decided it was the right moment to stop blocking things from me. I groaned in pain, curling my legs up to my chest as my frigid skin throbbed, protesting the warmth of the water.

"Easy, *omae*, it will pass," Liu soothed, brushing a hand over my head as he whispered into my hair, "You got a little too cold, and now we're warming you back up."

My legs tingled and itched painfully as the circulation returned. It was close to the feeling when your arm fell asleep and started to reawaken, but ten times worse. Liu wrapped his arms around me as he continued to talk me through the worst of it. When the muscles in my legs eventually stopped cramping up, I went limp in Liu's hold. I saw movement out of the corner of my eye, which had me lifting my head to see Braxton turning on the water.

"I'm just gonna warm this up a little more now that you've adjusted," he explained. "Let me know if it's too much, and I'll turn it off."

Right now, the water covered my legs, but with Liu's warm body behind me, it kept my top half from getting too cold. As the tub filled, I let out a sigh, relishing the heat as it chased the last of the chill from my body. "That's much better, thank you," I murmured.

"Of course, anything for you, Mistress," Braxton said as he brushed a hand over me. "Your skin feels normal again. It was like a block of ice before."

When the tub was full of steaming hot water, Brax shut off the faucet and stood. "I'm going to run down and get you some hot tea. Is there anything else I can grab? Are you hungry?"

"No," I answered, shaking my head. "Tea would be wonderful, though."

"I know some of the others are in your bedroom so if you need anything, just yell," Braxton shared as he leaned in to

quickly kiss my lips. “I love you, My Queen.”

He didn’t even wait for me to respond before leaving, and I couldn’t tell if it was simply because he didn’t need me to answer or if he was worried I’d think it still wasn’t the right timing. “I love you too,” I replied, needing someone to hear me say it back to him.

Liu nuzzled my neck, offering me his comfort without saying a word, just holding me in his arms. After a few minutes passed, he finally broke the silence. “*Omae*, tell me what’s going on inside that head of yours.”

I let out a huff of laughter, tilting my head back to rest on his shoulder. “Everything and nothing at all,” I admitted.

“Tell me what happened tonight,” Liu pressed.

“I addressed the Family, completed the oath ceremony, was teased by you, and forced to go to dinner where all hell broke loose,” I listed, trying to keep myself detached from the events, fearing it might send me down a spiral again.

Shifting, Liu sat up, grabbing a washcloth and the bar of soap. “Yes, all those things happened, but I want to know your side of the story. You and Atticus left the head table with Boykov to mingle. That couple... did you approach them, or did they come to you?”

“She approached us,” I recalled, Fiona’s face appearing before me as she stepped into our path.

“Did she give you a name?” Liu urged as he lifted my arm and ran the soapy cloth over my skin.

Nodding, I closed my eyes, focusing on his touch to keep me grounded in the here and now. “She said her name was Fiona and her husband’s name was Simon. They were strange, but not in the sense I was worried about them being a danger. Everything about them screamed brown-noser or teacher’s pet. I could tell she really wanted me to like her but did all the wrong things to make that happen.”

Liu didn’t say anything, just gave an acknowledging hum as he moved to my other arm.

“Fiona seemed to be the boss of their relationship, but that might be because Simon was drunk. She made up some story about him hating to fly so they got him wasted, which is why he was still plastered,” I continued.

“Why do you believe it was made up?” Liu asked.

Frowning, I replayed the whole interaction. “He acted like every drunk man you see on TV or in movies. Everything seemed overplayed, and his speech would be slurred one minute and not the next. Simon also smelled like he’d managed to pour more of his liquor on him than in his mouth.”

“When did things shift?”

Sitting up, I turned to face him. “Something else happened,” I stated. “That’s why Atty has his arm in a sling.”

“Yes, but I want to hear your story first, then I’ll share mine,” Liu countered, bringing his legs together so I could straddle them now that we were face to face. “So tell me, what gave them away?”

“Neither of them had cuts on their arms from the oath ceremony. Also the fact Simon wreaked, no way I would have forgotten that,” I explained. “When I pressed Fiona about it, Simon tried to grab me, but Atticus blocked him. Atty sent the man flying into the table causing everyone to scatter. That’s when Fiona tried to make a move.”

Staring down at my hands under the water’s surface, I remembered the feel of grabbing Fiona’s head and the sound of her neck snapping as I killed her. Rage sparked to life the more I thought about the whole situation. These people had dared to step foot in my domain, pretended to be people I swore to protect, and attempted to fucking kill me. That spark quickly roared to life as fury coursed through my veins now that I fully understood the boldness of their disrespect.

Fingers gently gripped my chin, urging me to lift my gaze until I met Liu’s. “Tell me,” he ordered.

“The bitch tried to attack me, so I broke her fucking neck,” I bit out. “I would have done the same to Simon if I hadn’t been swept out of there by Ralph.” Reaching up, I curled my fingers around Liu’s wrist as he still held my chin. “Tell me he’s dead, Liu, or so help me God, I will get out of this tub and finish off that fucking traitor this second.”

He held my gaze, letting his hand brush along my jaw and down my neck, resting just over my heart. “He is dead, *omae*. They’re both dead and didn’t manage to take anyone else with them.”

I scowled at his choice of words. “Explain.”

“The man, I assume is Simon, not only had an acid bomb that Boykov was hit with but also had a bomb strapped to himself. Luca and Jace were trying to question him, but they didn’t get anything but mad ravings before he blew himself up,” Liu answered.

Gasping, my hands flew up to cover my mouth as I pictured the devastation the bomb could have caused.

“Atticus dislocated his shoulder saving Jace... it’s also how he cracked his glasses,” he added. “But remember what I said, no one else was killed from the blast but Simon. The bomb wasn’t big enough to kill anyone who wasn’t standing right next to Simon. People are rattled, bruised, and scraped, but that’s the extent. Boykov is the one who suffered the worst fate when he blocked the acid from hitting you.”

Flashes of the raw, blistered skin on Ralph’s back and arm played over and over in my mind. I hadn’t known the acid was intended for me, but I’d been saved that fate by a man who’d sworn to protect me. Even in his pain, he’d thought of nothing but getting me somewhere safe.

“I almost lost him, Liu,” I croaked out.

“But you didn’t,” he countered, pulling me to his chest and tucking my head under his chin. “He’s going to be fine... the doctor is with him now. Knowing Luca, I’m sure he made it quite clear that all measures should be taken to get Boykov on the mend.”

My desperation not to lose anyone else warred against the training I’d been put through since an early age.

Sentimentality was a weakness. My reaction to the situation was a prime example of why letting your emotions free and attaching yourself to people was dangerous. If anyone had come after us, I would have been useless and probably wound up dead, hunched over my bodyguard trying to protect him. This is why the Raffa presses their children to the point of breaking. If we are already broken, then what is left to break? Yet my father intentionally worked against that logic when he selected these men to be by my side. They each took my broken pieces and began the process of making me whole again. However, there I sat, feeling more broken than ever, surrounded by people I would give my life for without hesitation.

Was it worth it?

Was the pain and heartache I now endure at the mere thought of losing one of them enough to make me give them up?

Pushing myself up, I looked into Liu's deep brown eyes, reflecting pure trust and love. This was all I needed to determine my answer.

Fuck yes.

Having these men in my life would always be worth every second of pain I had to face.

I let my hands slide up to grasp his face, memorizing every inch of it, burning it into my memory because I never wanted to forget. "Liu," I whispered.

Unsure how to explain what I felt, it took me a moment to find the words. I knew he would wait for me to get my footing—the master of patience, always waiting for me to catch up to where he was.

Pressing my lips to his for just a moment, I pulled back, needing a taste of his reassurance. “I know you’ve questioned how I feel about you. Wondering if our connection was a fluke, or if this is just a fever dream that you’ll wake up from.”

“Ast—” Liu tried to cut in, but I slipped my hand over his mouth, halting his words.

“No, this time you just get to listen,” I stated. “Liu, you were someone I never knew I needed... the man I know I can go to for sound, logical advice who wouldn’t soften the truth for my feelings. Everything you do is with selfless intention, yet you know when to put your foot down and tell me no. Loss and grief over a man we both loved created the bridge we needed to see each other in another light, or maybe that was just me,” I corrected, looking back at the first few interactions we had while my father was still alive.

“Regardless of how that played out, you were the first one to clarify your intentions. My respect and admiration for you grew every time you called me out for treating you like a lover without offering the commitment you absolutely deserved. I *love* you, Liu. When that happened, I couldn’t tell you, but that truth is written on my heart over the piece you hold.”

Taking a moment to catch my breath, my heart is beating a million miles an hour caught up in the rush of these emotions.

“All seven of you are irreplaceable to me, and no one could fill your place, be who I need, or love me the way you do, Liu. So if I ever hear you utter one doubt about your place in my life, I’ll fucking slap you for calling me a liar. Got it?”

The transformation I saw take place as Liu *finally* believed he was mine shook me to the core. It wasn’t something you could see with your eyes, but holy hell, you could feel the shift. Where there was once a hint of timidity or hesitation, it had been replaced by joy and confidence. He pulled away my hand from his mouth as he snaked the other around to grip the back of my neck. There was a split-second pause before he slammed his lips to mine and devoured my mouth.

Moaning, I raked my nails down his chest as I ground my pussy on his hardening cock. Irritation at his boxers blocking me from feeling the silkiness of him against my skin pulled a growl from me. I slid my hands lower, hooked the elastic band of the offensive material, yanked down the front, and freed his dick. My hands wrapped around his shaft eliciting a groan that I swallowed, deepening our kiss further.

As I stroked him, Liu’s hand trailed down my back until he nudged the plug still deep in my ass. Teasing me, he kept playing with it, pushing it farther in, then pulling it out to the point where it *juuust* started to stretch the opening. None of his efforts would get me off but fuck if it didn’t make me horny as hell.

“Wait,” Liu ordered, and grabbed my hands which had been lining him up to fill my pussy. “Don’t give me that look, *omae*.”

I absolutely plan on fucking you tonight, but what you really need right now you won't get in this tub."

"Is that so?" I questioned, sitting back. "Tell me, oh wise one, what is it that I need?"

Liu reached out, letting the tip of his finger circle my nipple which hardened at the cool air as well as the attention. "Do you trust me?"

"Yes," I answered instantly. There was no question in my mind when it came to these men.

"In that case, I'm going to show you instead of tell you," Liu decided. "Braxton, you can come in now?"

My brows shot up as a moment later, Braxton entered with a guilty smile and a mug of tea. "Sorry the tea's not that hot anymore, but I didn't want to interrupt you guys. It seemed important."

"I wouldn't be too worried about it, man. She's getting out now anyway," Liu said as he stood, taking me with him. "Mind helping and drying her off?"

Braxton grinned as he pulled the fluffy towel off the rack and enveloped me in it the moment Liu set me on the bathmat. "It would be my pleasure to serve my Mistress," he whispered in my ear, nipping it playfully before drying me off.

As he ran the towel down my leg, he paused, seeing the base of the plug peeking out between my cheeks. "Um... are we leaving that?"

“For now,” Liu answered as he tossed his sopping-wet boxers into the sink. “I plan to take care of that myself in a bit.”

I let out a shaky breath as his words were like kindling to the fire he’d started in the chapel—a moment that seemed a lifetime ago, even though it had only been a few hours. Once I was dry enough, Liu took my hand, lacing our fingers together and leading me out into the bedroom, not giving a flying fuck he was buck-ass naked.

“Whoa, dude, a little warning would be nice,” Ryker grumbled, turning to face the wall.

“All right, here’s your warning. Whoever is okay being intimate with Astin while others participate is more than welcome to stick around. Anyone who isn’t comfortable with that arrangement, you now know what’s going to happen in this room,” Liu announced, shocking everyone in the room. “What each of you choose to do with that information is your call. No one will be judged by the rest of us or rejected by Astin for whatever choice you make.”

The guys looked from Liu to me as if needing assurance I was okay with Liu speaking for me.

“Guys, Liu is simply repeating what I said to you all on the plane. Everyone is welcome in my bed, but I understand each of you is at a different place with this relationship. Choosing not to share my time, attention, and body during sex is fine as long as you respect that there will be times *I* want more than one partner in my bed. Saying no to this isn’t the same as

saying no to me or this relationship,” I said bluntly. “Right now, I am emotional, horny, and needy. So who’s going to help fuck me to sleep and keep the nightmares at bay?”

Braxton’s hand shot up faster than I thought possible, followed by Jace, then Hound. Luca stepped up, blocking my view from the rest of the room, and cupped my face. His kiss was commanding and tender all at the same time, making my toes curl, yet feel utterly safe in his care.

“He won’t always say no, baby girl,” Luca murmured, and I didn’t even have to ask what he meant. Kissing me like this gave Ryker the chance to leave without me having to watch him do it.

Placing a hand over one of his, I nodded. “I know.” I kissed him sweetly before meeting his gaze. “Thank you for protecting us both from being hurt tonight. Seeing you all become a family to each other as much as you are to me means everything.”

Luca smirked and kissed my nose. “You really are sappy tonight, aren’t you?”

“Can’t say I didn’t warn you,” I countered, returning his smirk with one of my own.

I loved seeing the playfulness in his amber eyes. It had once been a rare sight, but I was pleased to see it appear more often these days. Part of me worried that prison might bring back the old, guarded Luca. Thankfully, that didn’t happen.

Liu's naked body pressed against my back as his hands ghosted down my sides, making me arch against him. "Tonight was planned for it to be just the two of us, but the needs of our woman always come first. Thus, we adjust. However, I want to make it clear I'm the first one to fuck this perfect ass."

The sting of a solid slap on my asscheek had me weak in the knees. I made my claim on him clear, and now he was doing the same to me. All the meaningless sex I'd had before finding these men had never fulfilled me. It was good fun, but like anything without substance, it leaves you feeling empty before long. These men knew how to draw what I was craving out of me and give it back to me tenfold. Seeing the hungry looks in their eyes as they stripped out of their clothes shouldn't have excited me the way it was, but I'd always loved a challenge.

Twenty-Four



With a yelp of surprise, Luca scooped me up and tossed me on the bed. Hound pounced, catching me, then rolled us so he was on the bottom. Giving me a wolfish smile, he grabbed my hips and yanked me forward until I was hovering over his face. I watched as he took his hands and rubbed his face vigorously.

“What are you doing?” I questioned.

“Oh, nothing, just warming up your seat. Wouldn’t want you resting your pretty kitty on something cold, now would we?” Hound explained, which had me bursting into laughter.

“Hey, this is serious business, Luna,” Hound scolded, gripping my hips. “Now ride my face until I look like a glazed doughnut, or I won’t let you come.” With that warning threat, he jerked me down until I was truly sitting on his face.

I was about to protest, worried I might actually suffocate him until he got to work. At some point, Hound had switched his

tongue ring to one that vibrated and chose now to show me just how amazing it could be. Getting eaten out was nothing new to me, but the change in position gave Hound access to places he'd never get to without me being on top. Arching my back, I fisted some of his hair as I erupted. Never had I been able to come that fast before. However, Hound seemed determined to make it happen again.

“Baby girl, it looks like you might need something to keep your mind off what’s happening downstairs if you’re coming that fast,” Luca commented as he crawled over to me.

As much as I would have liked to offer up some witty comeback, all my mind could focus on was the hot, wet vibrations between my legs. Luca kneeled in front of me, slowly stroking his cock as he watched me grind all over Hound’s face. Another orgasm slammed into me, causing my abdominal muscles to contract, sending me forward, crashing right into Luca’s chest.

“Damn, he’s gonna suck everything out of her before we even get a chance,” Jace muttered.

“I know a way to slow him down,” Braxton offered. “But Astin has to agree to it first.”

Luca reached out and tapped Hound’s arm. “You, Hound Dog, take a break and come up for air. Braxton needs consent for something, and she needs a brain to think with.”

Off went the tongue ring, and I could breathe again. I was moved back to perch on his chest, revealing a face that was

well and truly glazed. “Ha, ha, ha, now I get it. You totally look like a glazed doughnut.

Hound smiled widely enough he could be cast as the Joker in the next *Batman* movie. “Oh, this isn’t what glazed looks like, Moonflower, just you wait.” Turning his head, he looked at Braxton. “You needed something?”

Shit, that’s right. We stopped so Brax could ask me something.

Slapping my cheeks lightly, I gathered the few brain cells that were drunk off orgasms and turned my attention to Braxton. “Yes, pet?”

“Do I have your permission to use my mouth on Hound? No sex, just oral,” Braxton clarified.

Instantly, my gaze flicked to Jace. “Does he have that permission from you?”

“Once upon a time, the three of us would have sex whenever Hound came to the house for work. I fucked Hound, he fucked Braxton, Braxton fucked him or would suck him off if I was fucking Brax. However, to be explicitly clear, since we’ve been with you, neither Brax nor I have interacted in any sort of sexual manner with Hound, nor has he tried to initiate anything,” Jace answered. “Astin, what choices Brax and I make for our relationship doesn’t mean they apply to ours with you. If you say no, then no means no. It won’t be brought up again unless you choose to address the subject.”

I felt conflicted, feeling like it shouldn't bother me if Brax sucks off Hound. They'd done far more than that before meeting me, so why should I have a problem with it? Yet a small part of me wanted to keep Hound to myself, that I didn't need to share him with anyone else. Even the idea of that made me sick to my stomach for even thinking that selfishly. Looking down at Hound, I knew I needed his thoughts before saying anything.

“What do you want, Hound? It's your body. I have no right to control who you give it to,” I reasoned.

Hound scowled, not at all pleased with what I'd just said. He moved me to the bed so he could sit up, wiped his mouth with a sheet, and wrapped a hand around my throat. “What did you just say?”

“Hound,” Luca bit out.

Brushing off the warning, Hound pinned me with his stare. “Clearly, I have failed in expressing myself to you if that's what you think. Astin, you *own* me. This body and everything in it, on it, or growing the fuck out of it is yours. You have *every right* to dictate or control what happens to something that belongs to *you* and you alone. Braxton and Jace love each other, they are in a serious, committed relationship and have been that way for a long time. It makes sense for them to be together and in a relationship with you. The one and only person I love is sitting before me, torturing herself to pick what will make everyone happy, even if it's at the expense of

her own happiness. That shit ain't gonna fly with me, Moonflower.”

It felt as if Hound had slapped me in the face and pulled me into the warmest hug all at the same time. I couldn't tell if I was being punished or if the world's most romantic gesture was happening before my very eyes.

“Fucking around with Jace and Braxton was good fun, but that's all it was. No offense, guys,” he called over his shoulder. “Now, if you tell me that allowing Braxton to suck me off as I make you weep from pleasure as I make you come again, and again, and again will bring you even more enjoyment, I'm here for it. Otherwise, the only mouth I want on my body is yours because I won't let you suffer in any way for a moment of enjoyment. Okay?”

“Okay,” I answered.

Hound pulled me into a tight hug as he kissed every bit of skin he could get to. “I'm sorry I got upset, Moonflower. There is no way for me to ever describe the overwhelming love I have for you, and I couldn't stand to see the turmoil written all over your face.” Pulling back so I could see his face, he brushed my hair back, tucking it behind my ear. “Tonight is about you and only you. We can come back to this conversation when we're not all naked and dying to make you scream our names. All I want you to do is let us show you just how safe and alive we are. Then when you pass out from so much mind-blowing sex, we'll tuck you in and guard your dreams all night long.”

“Best plan ever,” I agreed. “I love you, Hound.”

“Yeah, you do,” he teased, catching my lips in a searing kiss before flopping on his back. “Now, where were we? Oh, right, you were glazing my doughnut.”

“One sec, then I’ll be back to smother you,” I warned before crawling over to Braxton. “Come here, pet.”

A radiant smile beamed from him as he sat on the edge of the bed. Grabbing his face, I kissed the hell out of him, needing to reassure him and myself that everything was fine.

“Why don’t you get Jace ready for me? I want you two inside me tonight, making the three of us connected as close as you can be to a person... or two,” I whispered just for him to hear.

“Yes, My Queen, we will be ready,” Braxton promised.

“Good boy,” I praised, sending him off to do as I instructed.

Having made sure my submissive was taken care of, I made my way back to Hound, who was making grabby hands at me. Luca and Liu were also awaiting my return.

“This time, baby girl, we’re gonna make the dog work for his supper,” Luca said as he steadied me while I assumed the position.

“Bring it on, prison break. She might have had time to cool off, but I have plenty of tricks up my sleeve to keep her coming,” Hound shot back, then wiggled into a more comfortable place as he pulled me down. “Captain to the bridge, we are set to dive, dive, dive.”

The idea that I'd *cooled off* was quickly disproven as one flick of his damn tongue had me seeing stars. "Holy fuck," I swore, dropping forward to rest my hands on the bed.

"Come here, baby girl, show me what that dog's doing to you," Luca encouraged, guiding me toward his cock.

I willingly opened for him in hopes it would indeed give me a chance to survive this long enough to get properly fucked. This was amazing, and I loved that Hound wanted to give me all the pleasure I could handle, but I wanted to be stuffed, dammit.

As if Liu knew exactly what I was thinking, I felt him playing with the plug again. Cool liquid was poured on my skin which Liu used to massage the entrance. "You've had this in for longer than the hour we agreed upon. Do you think you're loose enough for me to pull this out and slide my cock in to replace it?"

Obviously, I couldn't answer with a dick down my throat, but I made the effort to wiggle my ass in encouragement. Liu gripped my ass, massaging it roughly before landing a slap on each cheek. The burn mixed with euphoric bliss coming from my pussy was a beautiful blend, ensuring neither of the sensations were too overwhelming. Add in Luca using my mouth as his personal fuck toy, and I was well and truly distracted, unable to give my attention to any single action. The beauty of it was I didn't have to. My job right now was to let go and just feel, which is exactly what I planned to do.

Liu swirled the lube around the back entrance coating two fingers before pulling the plug free and letting his fingers sink into my ass. Overwhelmed, my eyes rolled back in my head as I came harder than I thought possible for the third climax. Luca had to catch me when my arms gave out, saving me from actually choking on his dick for longer than a second.

“Breathe, baby girl,” Luca instructed as he let my head rest on his lap while he stroked my back as I coughed. “I think we need to switch up the position, guys.”

“I agree, but I’m not sure how I feel about fucking her while straddling Hound’s legs. I’m afraid I’ll make a wrong move and accidentally sit on his dick,” Liu commented.

I felt the bed shift as the guys moved behind me and Hound slid out from between my legs. “Hey now, I could think of worse things to have happen,” Hound joked.

Luca helped me sit up as my muscles weren’t sure they wanted to work just yet. “Guys, we need to work on group dynamic bedroom talk. You go from sexy dirty talk to sounding like we’re in a frat house,” I pointed out.

Hound let out a bark of laughter. “Yeah, I can see that. Don’t worry, Moonflower, we’ll work on it.” Then he paused as something occurred to him. “Wait, does that mean I’ve lost my chances at diving into your cave of wonders?”

Groaning, I leaned back on Luca. “What is with you and the corny pick-up lines?”

“Just my way of keeping the mood light after a shit evening,” Hound explained. “I would stop saying them, but you smile at every single one, so I feel like I’m winning this argument.”

He wasn’t wrong. They shouldn’t be as funny as they were, but every one of them had me giggling. “It’s only because you’re cute.”

“Not as cute as you,” he countered. “Now get over here so I can give your kitty some milk.”

Once again, he had me grinning as I crawled over to my playful Hound Dog. I didn’t let him gain access right away. Instead, I rubbed my sopping wet pussy over his cock, getting it nice and wet. Every outside part of my pussy was so sensitive I was halfway to another orgasm, thanks to his Jacob’s ladder piercings. Finally over teasing myself, I lifted my hips, grabbed his cock, and sank onto him.

Hound groaned, tossing back his head as his hands gripped my thighs. “Oh *fuck*, you feel so good wrapped around my cock, Moonflower. God, I never want this feeling to end. If I could stay buried in your pussy forever, I would.”

Grinning, I slid my hands up, lowering myself until we were practically nose to nose. “Now that’s the kind of talk I want to hear while you’re in my bed.”

“Yeah? Well, there’s plenty more where that came from, don’t you worry,” he assured me. “Tell me, Luna, do you want Liu to fill your other hole while Luca claims that sassy mouth of yours? You did say you wanted to be stuffed, didn’t you?”

My whole body shivered at the thought of taking three of them all at once. Jace and Liu had double-teamed me which had been amazing, but to add in a third cock, I knew it would be mind-blowing.

“Yes, that’s exactly what I want,” I answered. “Fucking plug every hole I have to offer... they are yours to use.”

Hands spread my ass, and I felt the blunt head of Liu’s dick testing out the entrance. “Then I will take the privilege of using your ass and leaving my mark *deep* inside you.”

A hand pressed on the middle of my back until I rested all my weight on Hound’s chest. Then Luca turned my head to the side, so he could stand next to the bed and be the right height to fuck my face with me resting like this. “Good, baby girl. You just lay there and let us do all the work.”

As if they timed it, Liu and Luca entered me at the same time, filling my body with all the cock it could handle. They took their time to find a rhythm that was steady and didn’t thrust me too forcefully onto Luca’s cock. Astin no longer existed, and all that remained was a sense of love, trust, and pleasure beyond my wildest dreams.

“That’s it, *omae*, squeeze my cock with your needy ass that’s begging for my cum,” Liu growled out as he landed a few more slaps on my ass.

Each time he did, it brought me out of the intensity of it all, allowing me to keep my head above water. I wanted to remember this moment, to have it etched into my body so I’d have this to look back on no matter what happens in the future.

“Shit, I don’t think I can hold out as long as I wanted to,” Luca muttered, his thrusts becoming more erratic. “Watching you get pounded by those two, knowing their cum is going to flood your sexy body is too much. God, just picturing it is about to make me explode.”

“You’re having trouble? What do you think we’re dealing with?” Jace cut in. “This is better than watching any porn ever created, and I can’t allow myself to come.”

Using what little control I had over my body, I tried to look where the sound of Jace’s voice was coming from, but he was just out of sight.

“Shit, shit, shit,” Luca swore as his hand slid into my hair and fisted it tightly, making my scalp burn at the tension. “Baby girl, I’m not going to come in your mouth. I want to see it glistening on your body so there is no mistaking you belong to us.”

That had me clenching down on the others as another orgasm came barreling down the line. Liu gave me a few good slaps as Luca roared, yanking out of my mouth, and warm ropes of cum landed on my back.

“Fucking hell,” Braxton groaned. “Why is that so hot to watch?”

Beads of sweat rolled down Luca’s abs as he stumbled back a few steps, spent cock still dripping cum as it hung there. I reached out to him. “Let me clean that up for you,” I offered.

Luca looked at his dick that twitched in excitement, then back to me. “Goddammit, woman, you know I can’t say no to that.”

Now that I didn’t have a cock in my mouth, Liu and Hound picked up the pace, switching to alternate who thrust instead of moving simultaneously. Liu’s hand gripped my shoulders, holding me so they could pound even deeper into me. I managed to get one good lick from balls to tip on Luca before screaming as I shattered into a million pieces. By some miracle, both men managed to come at the same time, tossing me over the edge I’d been riding. Hound’s cock throbbed in my pussy, causing the piercings to rub on all the best places, sending shockwaves through my body.

As my body twitched with the slightest touch and my vision remained blurred, the guys eased themselves out. Soft kisses and caresses were showered upon me with sweet words of praise and love.

“Let me get you cleaned up, baby girl,” Luca whispered, kissing my temple as he brushed hair out of my face.

“Wait,” I called, grabbing his hand. “Would you like to put some in me?”

His eyes widened at my question. “Are you offering to...”

“Let you shove the cum on my back into my pussy? Yes, that’s exactly what I’m asking,” I clarified. “So?”

Closing his eyes, Luca let out a shaky breath before kissing me breathlessly. “I would abso-fucking-lutely love to do that,”

he answered, his hand shaking slightly as he collected some of the cum on my back. “Holy fuck, baby girl, I don’t think you understand how much it means to me you’d even think to ask me.”

“Isn’t that what people do when they love someone?” I asked.

He took my hand and kissed it as he slowly slid those two fingers into my pussy. “I love that you truly love me for who I am and accept everything without judgment.” Luca went back to collect more, but this time he added it to Liu’s contribution in my ass. “If I’m being honest, I never thought I would get to have this in my life, a family who supports and protects each other, a home to return to, and a woman to love, fuck, and treasure for the rest of my life.”

Sitting up, I grasped his cum-covered fingers and sucked them clean, holding his gaze as I did it. If it were possible for a man to have aftershocks like a woman, I’d say that was happening to Luca right now as he dropped to his knees. “I once thought the same things until all of you decided you weren’t going to take no for an answer.”

I looked at the five men surrounding me and wished the other two could be here too, but this was only the beginning of our lives together. There would be many more chances for moments like this, which was something I planned to make damn sure stayed that way, starting with taking out the leaders of the two biggest threats to my happiness.

“Part of me feels like I should apologize for that, but I’m not going to,” Jace remarked. “However, Astin Caprioni, you are a woman who could never be handled by one man. I know I say that all the time, but it’s the fucking truth.”

“Never apologize for that because I won’t ever apologize for keeping you all to myself,” I pointed out. “Seriously, there is no way this should have worked, but it did, and now all of you are mine until death comes for us all.”

“Damn straight,” Hound agreed, sliding off the bed. “I’m gonna go piss, then check on Atticus and Boykov so when those two finish wearing you out, I’ll have an update so you’ll fucking sleep.”

“That right there is what true love looks like, people... take note,” Jace yelled, causing Hound to flip him off, heading to the bathroom and causing us all to laugh.

Twenty-Five



Jace

Sensing a shift in the room, Luca moved to one side of the king bed, reclining against the headboard, looking content and relaxed. Bending down to grab a pair of boxers, Liu slipped them on and sprawled out in the armchair I'd moved closer to the bed. Finally, it was our turn to spoil our woman, which I'd been dying to do in the dressing room but couldn't. I fixed my gaze on Astin. I took in how stunning she looked with her wild hair, swollen lips, and the relaxed look you only got after amazing sex.

I was about to move closer when Braxton nonchalantly started to suck on my cock once again. It had dared to droop during our intermission, which clearly was against some rule his Mistress had given him. Not that I was complaining, but I wasn't the one who typically was edged for an extended amount of time.

"Tell me, princess, what orders did you give our puppy?" I questioned, cocking my head. "The moment my cock starts to

soften even slightly, his mouth is on me fixing the problem.”

It was sinful the way Astin could look so fucking sexy by merely biting her lip as she tried to keep from laughing. “I believe it was to make sure you were ready for me...” she answered, trying to keep the smile off her face. “I might have left that order a little on the vague side, now that I think about it.”

“Yes, well, he has been doing an excellent job following your orders,” I muttered, not that I was at all upset about the situation. I loved the feel of Braxton’s mouth on my cock, the way he could swallow down every inch of it without an issue. It was almost as if he managed to turn off his gag reflex.

Using my hands on the back of his head, I thrust forward, feeling his lips kissing the base of my cock. “That’s it, pup, make sure it’s nice and hard for your Mistress.”

With a soft tap on my leg telling me to back off, I released my hold, letting him come up for air. Seeing the glassy-eyed look of pleasure he got whenever I used him roughly had me yanking him to his feet so I could tongue fuck his mouth. A shiver went through Braxton’s body as he dug his nails into my skin, fighting the urge to rub his cock against mine. He wasn’t allowed to touch his cock or give himself pleasure unless I gave him permission. Soft hands brushed down my back as Astin came to join us.

Quickly, I released Braxton, twisting to catch Astin, wrapping a hand around her throat, and using it to pull her to me. There was nothing like the feel of her soft mouth as I took

pleasure in tasting and sucking on her lower lip. My other hand was still on Braxton, so I drew him close, urging him to suck on her tits. She moaned into my mouth, which I stole as I deepened our kiss. Needing more noises to feast on, I slipped my hand between her legs and swirled a finger around her clit. It was still swollen from all the attention Hound had given it, so I was careful not to use too much pressure.

One thing I hadn't counted on being as big of a turn-on was knowing other men's cum was what I was using as lube right now. Her pussy was soaked with her own slickness, but I could feel more leaking out of her, and *holy fuck*, was that a new kink to be unlocked. I'm not sure I'd feel the same way if it was a stranger's cum leaking out of my woman. But hot damn, knowing Astin had been thoroughly fucked by one or more of the other men I shared her with was a different story altogether.

“Do you know how fucking turned on I am right now, playing with your pussy that's covered in their cum?” I asked as I switched my hold from her neck to the hair at the base of her skull. When she didn't say anything and just whimpered at my touch, I tugged her head back, exposing her neck to me. “I asked you a question, princess.”

“No, Sir, I don't, but will you tell me?” she requested, which had me grinning.

I kissed along the column of skin until I reached her ear. “Just the feel of their cum spilling out of you makes me want to fill you up once more, so I can experience it all over again.

Would you like me to do that, hmm? Fuck your sloppy pussy until I fill you up? Maybe I should have our puppy clean you up before I do it, then I know it's mine making your thighs wet."

"Holy fuck, man," Luca groaned. "You're gonna make me come in my hand talking like that."

Leaning to see past Astin, I locked eyes with Luca as he was stroking his dick. "This is your fault. I didn't even know how hot this could be until now."

"That is something I will proudly accept responsibility for," Luca admitted, grinning widely. "Trust me, breeding kinks only get better when more than one of you are playing as you're discovering for yourself right now. But this isn't about me, so I'm gonna go rub this out in the shower and leave you three to enjoy."

Astin followed Luca with her gaze as he rounded the corner to the bathroom. A second later, his head popped back out, locking eyes with Astin. "I'm not leaving, baby girl, and I plan to be in your bed tonight. Just trying to be respectful so you three can enjoy each other without me jumping into the mix."

With that reassurance, Astin's whole body relaxed. "I'll hold you to that," she warned.

"You have my word," Luca promised, then vanished into the bathroom.

Braxton crawled behind Astin and took her tits in his hand playing with her nipples, causing her to lean into him. "How

can I serve you, Mistress? Whatever it is you want, I will make it happen.”

“I want you to lay behind me as Jace sandwiches me from the front as you both fuck me, holding me tightly,” she answered. “No one should be able to tell where one person ends and the other begins.”

It was clear in that request that Astin needed reassurance and comfort. The others had given her a good fuck, now what she was craving was intimacy, to be held and worshiped in our arms.

Tenderly, I cupped her cheek and urged her to look at me. “Then that is exactly what we will do, princess. You two go get comfortable, and I’ll be right back.”

I had the strong sense she wouldn’t manage to stay awake for long once we finished so I was going to prepare. Ignoring Luca’s heavy breathing in the shower, I wet a washcloth and grabbed another dry towel just in case. When I came back to the bedroom, Brax was balls deep in her ass, nibbling and kissing along her back and shoulders. He wasn’t fucking her, just filling her, keeping his cock warm as they waited for me to return. The sheets had been pulled down to the end of the bed so we could easily pull them up when we were done.

The look on Astin’s face told me the day was finally catching up to her, but she was scared to close her eyes. I don’t think there was a single one of us who didn’t understand that feeling. We each have nightmares that haunt us from choices we’ve made since joining the Family. Yet I got the sense Astin

had more things that haunted her sleep than any of us combined.

Sliding in next to her, I lifted a leg and hooked it over Braxton's thigh. Taking the cloth, I cleaned up her legs and everywhere else I could manage with a dick in the way. "As hot as I find it, I doubt it's comfortable for you to be left like that. I want you to be able to drift off the moment you stop fighting sleep," I explained, given our previous conversation.

"There's always next time," she agreed, with a half smile. "Trust me, all of that sounded amazing to me too, but right now, I just want to be held as you two make love to me."

"Astin, there is nothing I want more in the world than to feel the woman I love come as I hold her in my arms," I murmured as I slowly entered her.

It took us a moment to figure out how best to situate everyone's legs. Once we got that settled, Braxton and I got to work showing our queen just how much we loved her. I'd had a lot of sex over the years with men and women alike, but nothing came close to listening to the sounds of pleasure pouring out of Astin as we fucked.

While to some people our relationship might be viewed as perverse or sinful, they had no concept of how heavenly and spiritual it felt to experience this moment. I could feel Braxton's cock moving, rubbing against mine as we fucked our woman. We were well and truly one entity, and Astin was the center of it all, just as it damn well should be. I could feel

the walls of her core tightening around my cock as her orgasm started to build, and I wasn't far behind.

Braxton drew her face closer so he could kiss her as I teased her nipple with my tongue. It was clear she was getting tired but wouldn't give in to the need to sleep until we'd all climaxed. So, it was my job to get her there in a timely fashion because it wasn't going to take me long once her pussy was milking my cock as she came.

Gently, I pulled her away from Braxton and swirled my hips in an effort to get her attention. "Princess, will you be a good girl and do something for me?"

She blinked those stunning emerald eyes at me as it took her a second to register my words. "Yes, anything."

I pressed a soft kiss to her lips but didn't let myself linger even as she whimpered for more. "What a perfect princess I have," I murmured, letting my lips brush along her jaw as I moved closer to her ear. "Now, when I tell you to, I need you to come all over our cocks. I want to feel you squeezing us so tight, Braxton and I have no choice but to fill you with our cum. Do you think you can do that for me, princess?"

Braxton shifted so he could get a deeper angle, making Astin cry out, back arching, taunting me with her breasts. "You need to answer him, My Queen. You don't want him to change his mind, now do you?"

Another moan burst out of her as I slipped my hand between us so I could lightly stroke her clit. "Yes," she groaned. "I'll come. Please let me come, Sir."

“Good girl, that’s what I like to hear,” I praised before sucking harshly on one of her nipples, knowing it would bring her to the edge as Braxton and I picked up speed. My finger on her clit sped up as well, making her body quake with the impending climax, but she held off waiting for my order. Quickly, I glanced at Braxton, whose face told me all I needed to know—he was ready.

“Now, my love, come for me,” I ordered, pinching her clit as I thrust as deep as I could inside her. “Let me see you fall apart in our arms.”

Astin wasted no time letting out a strangled cry as she imploded, her nails digging into my back as she clung to me. Just as I predicted, feeling her pussy grip my cock so tightly had me growling into her neck as I exploded. Braxton’s telltale grunts told me he was right there with me. I could feel his cock pulsing as he continued to rut into Astin, clinging to her as he filled her ass. As our bodies started to relax and the euphoria took over, we slumped against one another. All I could hear was Astin’s heart pounding and our heavy breathing as we enjoyed the high while our bodies recovered from all the exertion.

“Holy shit, that was amazing,” Braxton said with a contented sigh. “Can we do that again sometime?”

I huffed out a laugh and somehow managed to push myself up on one arm to look at him. “Really, Brax?”

“What? It’s an honest question,” he pointed out as he snuggled closer to Astin’s back.

Shifting my gaze to look at Astin, I found her eyes closed and breathing, falling into a deep, even rhythm. We had *literally* fucked her to sleep. Gingerly, I brushed a few hairs out of her face and kissed her temple. “Sleep well, my princess. We will be right here when you wake up.”

She hummed, curling into me as if she heard what I’d said. Taking a chance, I decided to just fucking say what I’d been wanting to tell her for a while now. “I love you, Astin Caprioni.”

“Love... you,” she mumbled, a soft smile appearing on her face.

Braxton peered over her shoulder at me with a wide grin on his face. “Wasn’t that hard, was it?”

“Pup,” I warned, causing him to retreat behind Astin’s body where he believed he’d be safe.

My dick now softened, I slipped out of her and went to grab the washcloth, but it wasn’t there. Liu rounded the corner with the cloth in his hand after having rinsed it off using warm water. If anyone ever asked me why I was willing to share my girl with other men, I would share this moment. Seven men who loved the same woman, and that meant six other people were looking out for her happiness at the same time I was. Who wouldn’t want that for the person they loved?

“Thanks, man,” I whispered, taking the washcloth. “I can’t believe she actually fell asleep so fast.”

“Goes to show just how scared she was to close her eyes,” Liu pointed out.

Hearing him say that had my stomach clenching, knowing he was right. “When she says she won’t survive losing one of us, I don’t think she’s kidding.”

“That’s why we need to look after each other better,” Luca stated.

I hadn’t even noticed him slip into the room. He must have gone to his room since he now wore sleep pants and a tank top. It made me question whether we should try to get Astin into something, but I didn’t want to risk waking her. Braxton switched places with Hound who must have come in with Luca, the sneaky bastards.

“Seeing as I’m still alive, thanks to Atticus, I’d say we’re doing a pretty decent job so far,” I commented as I stood. “If he hadn’t done what he did, I don’t know if I’d be standing here right now.”

“Part of that is my fault. I shouldn’t have trusted that the guy didn’t have any other hidden weapons. If I’d patted him down, I would have noticed the bomb sooner,” Luca admitted. “Each of us needs to keep the fact that we’re not in Kansas anymore in the forefront of our minds. This isn’t Springmont, and we aren’t the top dogs the others are scared of. Everyone is to be treated like a threat until we end things.”

Hound grunted his approval as he combed his fingers through Astin’s hair. “I think that’s going to happen sooner than we think. She was distracted and caught up in her

emotions tonight, but I bet you anything when Astin wakes up, there will be fire coming out of her eyes.”

Running a hand through my hair, I sighed. “That means we need to be ready for her to do something batshit crazy yet fucking brilliant.”

“Then I suggest you clean up and settle in for whatever amount of sleep she’ll allow us to get before hell breaks loose,” Liu commented.

Feeling Liu had the right idea, I yanked on my boxers and slipped out to grab sleep clothes from my room. Before I could get there, though, Ryker stepped out, blocking my path.

“Hey, man, I’m surprised you’re not asleep,” I said. “Everything okay?”

“I need you to be brutally fucking honest with me, all right?” Ryker demanded.

A little taken aback at his tone, I raised my hands in surrender. “Sure, but don’t get mad at me if you don’t like the answer.”

Swiping a hand over his face, he turned away from me. I could feel the self-hatred rolling off him as he stood there.

“Hey,” I ventured, gripping his shoulder. “Talk to me, man. What the hell is going on in that morally rigid brain of yours? Come on, you know you can talk to me. I’m not going to judge.”

“That’s just it, I do judge,” he muttered. “I judge me, you, them, us, all of it. Sometimes I think I’ll eventually be fine

with all of this, then moments like now I fucking hate all of you for being able to be there for her, and I couldn't. Jace, I don't know how to get over being jealous or worrying that my inability to be comfortable with this relationship is going to make me lose her."

I let my hand fall from his shoulder as I leaned against the wall, knowing this wasn't going to be a quick conversation. "First of all, you're not going to lose her unless you make her choose you or us. Astin is one of the most understanding people I've ever met. She's not going to hold this against you, which means you need to find a way not to hold it against yourself. So what if you never join in on orgy-gangbang nights? As long as you make time for her and show how much you love her, then I don't see what the problem is."

Ryker spun to face me. "You don't see the problem? The problem is me, Jace. I'm possessive of her time, overreactive to the slightest hint of her being in danger, and I challenge her choices all the fucking time. How could I ever possibly learn to be happy sharing the woman I want all to myself?"

"Woow," I said, drawing out the word. "You, my friend, are spiraling hardcore right now. What the hell triggered this? It can't simply be because you didn't stay for the fuckfest, so what is it?"

"Don't talk about her like that," he snapped.

Not willing to rise to the bait, I just stared at him, waiting for him to give me an answer.

“Fine, you want to know what it is? What’s really fucking bothering me?” Ryker pressed.

My answer was to simply raise an eyebrow and gesture for him to continue. There was no way in hell I was going to give him the fight he wanted. I knew Ryker, and when he felt out of control, the first thing he’d try to do was create a situation he *could* control. However, egging me into a fistfight wasn’t going to be one of them.

Growling in frustration, Ryker slammed his fist into the stone wall, doing nothing but hurting himself. “Those bastards got to her. They stood there face-to-face chatting, taunting us in our own house. Do you know how easy it would have been for them to kill her, throw the acid in her face, or fucking set off the bomb standing right next to Astin? Who gives a fuck about us or Boykov getting hurt. *We. Almost. Failed.*” Ryker snarled, spit flying out of his mouth as he spoke. “Then what do you all decide to do? Have a fucking orgy. We still don’t know who’s behind this or what their intended goal was. Why the hell should we be bothered about any of that when you could have sex?”

My intention was not to let him provoke me, but I wouldn’t allow him or anyone else to speak about my family like that—even a member of the family. The sting of the slap I landed on Ryker’s cheek registered before I even realized I’d done it. I watched as his jaw dropped and raised a hand to feel the place where a red outline of my hand appeared.

“Did... did you just slap me?” Ryker questioned in disbelief.

“Sure as fuck did,” I answered, owning up to the action. “Don’t even try to tell me you didn’t deserve it for acting like a fucking prick just now. How dare you stand there like a self-righteous ass and tell me I don’t give a damn because I put her needs first. If you could manage to pull your head out of your ass, you’d have realized that the woman you claim to love so much came this close...” I said, shoving two fingers with just a sliver of space between them in his face, “... to shattering into a million pieces.”

Ryker stumbled back a step at the steely tone of my voice. There weren’t many times I got well and truly mad, but he’d pissed me the fuck off. “Ryker, I’m talking about Astin nearly splintering to the point we wouldn’t be able to save her. If that happened, the woman we love would have been gone for good. So the one way Liu knew he could prove to her all of us were safe and alive was to fuck the truth into her. So yeah, I chose to protect the mental health of the woman whose well-being I put above all else. You want to know why I wasn’t concerned about her safety? Because I fucking knew that *you* wouldn’t let any danger get within a thousand feet of her after such a close call. So take your insecurities and shove them up your ass.”

Shoving off the wall, I slammed my shoulder into him as I passed, heading to my room. I was done with this conversation, and I had better places to be than dealing with Ryker’s foul mood. As I shoved open my door, I caught sight of Atticus watching us from his doorway. We must have woken him up, and I felt bad about that.

“Sorry, Atticus, I didn’t mean for things to get that loud,” I apologized before slipping into my borrowed space, grabbing clothes, and heading right back to Astin’s room without acknowledging either of them. I’d reached my limit of what I could handle in a day. It was time to get what little sleep I could and pray tomorrow would be a better day.



Atticus

Sleep never came, no matter what I tried.

There had only been two occasions in my life I struggled to sleep. One of them occurred after I lost my mother. It hadn't been a shock, and I knew one day I was going to walk into her room, and she would be gone. The cancer had taken everything from her, leaving a feeble husk of the warm, kind woman who was my mother. I had been so used to being a light sleeper, listening for any sign my mother might need my assistance. We only had a nurse for her during the day, so I watched over her in the evenings. Suddenly, the house was silent, no noises from the machines or the ever-shifting air mattress they had her laying on to keep her from getting bedsores. After a week, I adjusted to the quiet and began to understand my need for eight hours of sleep.

The second time was right after Astin spent the night in my bed. Having experienced the satisfaction of holding her and allowing the sound of her steady heartbeat to lull me to sleep

changed everything. It was one of the many reasons I found myself sleeping in her bed more often than not. As long as I had her, I could sleep anywhere, but tonight I was alone. I'd been in the middle of reciting the decimals for Pi when I heard raised voices.

Typically, I wasn't one to insert myself into a situation, but considering tonight's events, I felt it was best if I checked. Upon opening my door, I discovered Jace and Ryker in a heated conversation. I could tell by their expressions and the tension in their bodies the emotion they were most likely experiencing was anger. The more Jace spoke, the louder he got, and I could now clearly hear what he was saying.

"... Liu knew he could prove to her all of us were safe and alive was to fuck the truth into her. So yeah, I chose to protect the mental health of the woman whose well-being I put above all else. You want to know why I wasn't concerned about her safety? Because I fucking knew that *you* wouldn't let any danger get within a thousand feet of her after such a close call. So take your insecurities and shove them up your ass," Jace snapped.

It appeared I caught the end of the argument as Jace slammed into Ryker as he walked away. I was about to head back to bed when Jace spotted me. Assuming he was going to be upset with me for witnessing this fight, I braced for his anger.

"Sorry, Atticus, I didn't mean for things to get that loud," Jace apologized, then immediately entered his room.

Ryker turned on his heel, hearing what Jace said, and spotted me. “Fuck, I’m sorry, Atticus. Can I get you anything? Is the pain bad? I think the doctor is still in the room with Boykov if you need more pain meds.”

I held my answer as Jace charged out of his room with a bundle of clothes under his arm as he returned to Astin’s room. “Aren’t you going too?” I asked, confused as to why Ryker would choose to be elsewhere.

“What?” he questioned. “Go where?”

“To sleep in Astin’s room. Isn’t that where you want to be?” I inquired. “If I wasn’t worried about my shoulder, that’s where I would choose to sleep. I’ve recently discovered I don’t find much enjoyment in sleeping alone like I had before.”

“I have to agree with you there,” Ryker muttered, rubbing the back of his head. A self-soothing gesture people did when they felt uncomfortable. “Thing is, I don’t deserve to be there tonight. I failed to keep her safe, so I’m going to stay up and make sure she can sleep without worry.”

My brows knit together. “Forgive me if this is insensitive, but how did you fail her? As far as I could tell, Astin doesn’t have a scratch on her from the events that occurred in the dining hall. The person who should be held responsible is the one who allowed them on the plane or the security who let them enter the estate. You made sure there was security posted in many places to ensure no one who wasn’t supposed to be there was given entry. Correct me if I’m wrong, but you had pictures printed of each family member attending, and all

security had a copy. I sincerely don't see how this is your fault."

Ryker just stared at me for a moment, his eyes blinking more quickly than was normal. Perhaps they'd gotten irritated from the blast.

"Atticus, do you realize what you just said means someone on the security team was in on this?" Ryker informed me.

Cocking my head, I adjusted my glasses as they slid down my nose. Tomorrow, I needed to prioritize getting a new pair. These were simply not effective any longer with the cracked lens and bent frame. Clearing my throat, I refocused on the conclusion Ryker just stated.

"Yes, I suppose that is true," I agreed. "Astin was tipped off that something was amiss when she noticed that there were no marks on their arms from the oath ceremony. It could be that they came late after the ceremony when everyone was moving to the next building. However, if that is when they arrived, security might not be involved."

"How so?" Ryker challenged.

"I believe it is safe to assume security wouldn't be as diligent about checking identities since everyone was checked earlier. Two people slipping into the midst of a crowd of three hundred people would be an understandable miss," I reasoned.

Ryker absently rubbed the side of his face where a mark that looked remarkably like a handprint sat. "That actually makes perfect sense. If security had no reason to look for party

crashers, having had the area secured, it's possible these two snuck in on their own." He turned his gaze to me. "You planning on getting some sleep, or do you want to tag along to see if we can figure out who these people really were?"

I considered his offer against the reality of me actually getting any sleep. "I'll join you... something tells me I won't be sleeping tonight."

"All right. First, I want to take a look at the woman who didn't get blown to bits by the bomb. I want to know if she really is a Raffa or if the whole thing was a setup," Ryker said as he headed for the stairs. "Either way, the next step is finding out who leaked the information about the meeting. From what we know, this has the Leoni Family prints written all over it."

"Do you know what they've done with their bodies?" I asked, holding my slinged arm steady as we hurried down to the first floor.

Ryker paused, then pulled out his phone. "Gemma, where did they take the bodies? More specifically, the woman?"

I could hear Gemma's voice on the other end and someone else yelling something to her in the background.

"Got it. Atticus and I are heading over there. Wait for us to arrive before doing anything else," he ordered. "Let's go. They've got one of their detectives here taking fingerprints. We should know who she really is by the time we get there."

"They can get that information right there on the spot?" I inquired.

Numbers, charts, and graphs were my specialty. In most cases, I preferred to avoid technology, knowing there was always a chance it could miss something if not imputed correctly. I'd much rather look at things on paper, running the calculation in my head, trusting my ability to memorize what I've seen and can never forget.

“Yeah, they have a handheld scanner. If she's in any system, they'll be able to pull up her information,” Ryker explained. “The only problem would be if she's not in any system or had someone wipe her records clean. I don't want to get too far ahead of this and lose sight of the real danger. That bitch is dead, and the person we need to pin down is whoever fucking sent her after Astin.”

When we arrived at the dining hall, Beatrice was there waiting for us. Once we reached her, she led us to what looked like an old barn on the outside, but when you entered, it had been renovated. There was every kind of supply you could possibly need to maintain the house in the front half of the barn. Passing through an unassuming door that looked like wood but was really metal was a fully stocked hospital room.

Laid out on a metal table was the dead woman with Cleto, the doctor's assistant, carefully cutting away her clothes. The way he was handling the body made it seem as if he thought she was still alive. Then I saw the wires which had been hidden under her dress. She'd been strapped with a bomb as well.

“Are we sure that’s safe?” I called out. This is where I would remain until it was made clear to me the bomb was disarmed. Almost getting blown up once was more than enough for me.

“Sure is. I pulled the detonator out myself,” Von answered, tossing the metal pin in the air before catching it. “That shit was amateur hour, but would have done the job if Astin hadn’t killed her before hitting the switch.”

Instantly, my mind replayed the moment I saw Fiona reaching for something under her dress. It had been that moment Astin’s training took control and snapped her neck. Even if it hadn’t killed her right away, the woman would have been paralyzed. Rounding the table, I lifted the skirt of the dress and found a garter on her thigh, but this one looked as though it was specifically made to hold something.

“Did you find the arming device she had hidden here?” I asked.

Something tapped against my good arm, pulling my attention from the body. There stood Bear, offering me an object that looked about the size of a large Sharpie marker. How a man his size and stature could move so silently, I had no idea, but it was impressive.

“Thank you,” I said, taking the trigger from him. “Von, are we sure the bomb doesn’t have an additional switch or anything that I might trigger? I would prefer not to be blown up after surviving the first attack.”

Von walked over to join me where I stood, shoving Bear out of her way. Grabbing a handful of wires, she yanked them out

of the device strapped to the woman's chest. "Okay, now I'm sure," Von announced. "No way it can work without something attached to the receiver to get the message."

Cleto let out a strangled noise of concern before his legs gave out, sending him crashing to the floor. I peered over to make sure he hadn't hit his head or anything on the way down, but he appeared fine.

"I might be wrong in saying this, but I'm not sure this man has the ability to do this job," I mused aloud.

Von barked out a laugh, shaking her head. "You know I think you might be right there, Plato."

"It's Atticus," I corrected.

"Oh, I know, but when I think of you, the first thing that comes to mind is the Platonic philosopher, Atticus. He was wicked smart and kind of odd just like you, but the whole world remembers him as one of the great minds of the past," Von explained. "Plus, I give everyone a nickname, and you have no say in what it is, so don't even try to change it."

Utterly surprised by the correlation she came up with, I had to admit it was rather flattering. "Now that I understand the logic behind your choice of nickname, I will accept it with honor."

She grinned at me, clearly pleased with my choice. "I see why Queenie likes you so much, Plato. You are not a man to play games... it is what it is with you. I dig it." Hopping up on the exam table, she put two fingers in her mouth and blew a

shrill whistle. “All right, detective, it’s safe for you to do your thing.”

A middle-aged man dressed in a navy blue police uniform entered with Gemma from a different door than we’d used. Cleto had regained consciousness and moved out of the way so the inspector could get close enough to the body. Pulling a scanner out of his front jacket pocket, he rolled one finger after another over a small gray square. Once all five were complete, the larger screen lit up with a loading bar.

“Have we done our part and looked over all the images we have to make sure we don’t already know who she is?” Ryker questioned.

“Yes, Master Ryker, there is no one in the entire Raffa Family who resembles either the man or the woman. I pulled an image from the man’s face off security cameras to use as a comparison,” Gemma shared since we all know there wasn’t anything recognizable about what was left of the head. “I should also mention we found a flask filled with acid on her as well, but nothing to show she had any intention of throwing it. There is a chance it could be for her to use in case she was caught, but there are faster and easier ways to kill yourself.”

I was glad to see I wasn’t the only one impressed with the information Gemma had gathered while we dealt with taking care of Astin and Boykov. We’d all been slightly suspicious of her at first, but it was beginning to look as if those judgments had been made in haste.

“She’s in the system, and I have a name... well, several names,” the detective announced.

Ryker held out his hand for the device. Besides Liu, Ryker was one of the most proficient in speaking and reading Nepreeian. I was picking things up quickly, but I still had much more to learn about the nuances of the language.

“Where’s Ivy?” Ryker asked as he continued to read. “I feel like she might know who this woman is... looks like they run in the same circles.”

“Ah... Poison had to deal with a situation,” Von offered, but her choice of words and hesitation had me thinking there was more for us to know.

The frown on Ryker’s face told me I was right to think that. “What does that mean?”

Von hopped down off the table and shrugged. “Look, it’s not for me to tell, and you’re just going to have to trust me when I say it’s nothing you need to worry about. Let me take a look. I know pretty much everyone in our line of work from the lowlifes all the way to the bosses.”

To my surprise, Ryker didn’t argue or press the issue like he normally would, but I noticed he wasn’t looking at Von. Ryker had his attention locked on Bear who had a lip curled in a snarl, making it clear why he agreed to drop the matter, which was the wise choice.

“No way this skank is The Siren,” Von blurted.

Shoving the scanner at Bear, he grabbed it before it fell. Von then climbed onto the exam table and straddled the legs, ripping the remaining fabric off the woman. “If this bitch really is that cunt, she’ll have a scar from a knife wound right about here...” She pointed at the two-inch-wide scar where the hip and pelvis meet. “What do you know, it is her. Damn, she got a shit ton of work done on her face if I can’t recognize her.”

“You know, part of me isn’t sure I want to ask,” Ryker admitted. “But I’m going to anyway. Who is The Siren?”

Before she could answer, Bear grabbed Von with one arm around the waist and pulled her off the body. He signed something to her that had Von snickering. “Don’t worry, I promise to take a shower and use disinfectant so her cooties don’t stick to me.”

I found it odd that Bear would be concerned about something like that when most diseases wouldn’t be transmitted with just skin-to-skin contact. However, it was obvious, even to me, how protective this man was over Von.

“The Siren, as she called herself, was a cheap knock-off version of me.”

Everyone’s attention instantly turned to Ivy, who had stood just inside the door with a man I didn’t know behind her. While some of the others took issue with Ivy and how she did things, I trusted Astin to be a wise judge of character. If Astin has decided that this woman is worthy of being a trusted friend, then who was I to argue the matter?

“She is Bosco Leoni’s favorite pet assassin,” Ivy explained. “He groomed her from an early age to be his eyes and ears at parties or other gatherings, where women would be viewed as furniture in the room. The last time I saw her, she didn’t look like that, though. As Von pointed out, they changed her face.”

“Too many people figured out who she was,” Von reasoned. “Probably because I put a bounty on her head and plastered a picture to go along with it everywhere on the dark web. That was about six months ago, plenty of time to give her a new look and heal without anyone the wiser. Bold move, but if sugar daddy Bosco wanted it, she’d do it.”

“May I ask what she did?” I inquired.

Von rocked back on her heels as she glanced quickly at Bear. “I caught her making moves on my brother, Matteo, at some shady bar. The bitch had him cornered, alone, and rubbing her ass all over him. My idiot brother was too high for him to see she was pouring something into his drink. So I marched right over, got right up in her shit like I was into her, then shanked the bitch. I thought that was the end of it because she vanished. Only about an hour later, I find her humping Bear’s leg. That’s when I decided I needed to have The Siren’s head on a platter.”

Bear growled, signing, in quick angry bursts of motion that Von was trying to ignore until he grabbed her jaw and forced her to look him in the eyes.

“Yeah, I know, Bear,” Von muttered, pulling her chin free of his grasp. “It doesn’t matter if you were never going to do

anything with her. Everyone fucking knows not to touch my things, and she crossed the line messing with you and Metteo.” Von shrugged. “Bitch had to go.”

“Before we say anything more,” Ryker cut in, stepping forward with his gun in hand. “Ivy, can you introduce us to your friend and explain why the fuck he’s here?”

Ivy’s gaze dropped to the gun for a moment. “Really, Ryker? I thought we’d gotten past this point in our relationship, or do I need to put you on the floor again?”

“Just answer the question, Ivy. Tonight is not the night to play games,” Ryker snapped.

Before Ivy could say anything further, the man stepped forward, raising his hand, putting himself squarely in front of Ivy. He was about her height, even in her heels, making him an effective shield. His hair was dark brown, neatly cut and styled, suggesting he was a detail-oriented person. The clothes he wore were expensive and well made even for a simple lightweight sweater and dark wash jeans. In my estimation, he was about our age, if not slightly older. There was no sign he had a gun hidden on his person, but I couldn’t see his back so there was still a chance.

“There’s no need for threats. We’re all allies here in this room,” the man assured. “My name is Cedro Endrizzi, I’m Domenico’s half-brother. I apologize for showing up unannounced, but I’d received a tip that Ivy was here and had to see for myself. If I had known what happened tonight, I never would have dropped in like this.”

Ryker didn't seem interested in taking this man at his word, but I wasn't sure what other option we had. To harm this man would break all alliances, but after the night we've had, even I might be willing to take that risk.

"Take a breath, RyRy, he's telling the truth," Von interjected. "I've known Cedie and Daddy Dom practically my whole life. It kinda happens when you grow up in the same circles of Family hell."

"Well, if it isn't little Evonnia. I should have guessed you'd be wherever trouble is brewing," Cedro greeted. "How come you didn't give me a heads-up that my girl was back? I thought we were friends."

Von's face lit up, and her smile grew so wide it looked more like she was baring her teeth at the man. "*Your* girl? What, you and Daddy Dom not willing to share her anymore? Also, I didn't know she was coming either until she and Queenie showed up to bust me out of jail."

A shrill whistle cut through the air, ending any further chatter. To my surprise, Gemma was the one who'd done the whistling, but she nodded to Ryker once we all fell silent.

"Thank you, Gemma," Ryker murmured. "It's clear to me now that tonight was an attack by the Leoni Family. This woman, The Siren, is our proof of that, but I still want to find out who the other person was. We *need* to be certain this isn't connected to someone inside the Raffa Family who's working with the Leoni. Detective, if we give you blood or DNA, can you tell us who it is?"

“You can, but I wouldn’t recommend it,” he answered. “It would give too many people access to the information.”

“Let me handle it,” Cedro offered. “The De Santis Family owns a few labs to go along with our prisons. I’ll be able to control who does the test and what happens with the information. Give me a few hours, and I’ll have all the information you could possibly need on the guy.”

“Cleto, help him get what he needs,” Ryker ordered the assistant, who bobbed his head like a chicken before gathering the supplies needed.

I really need to suggest to Asta that she make the doctor find a new assistant.

“I want to keep both bodies for now, but this room needs to be guarded so no one can access it and fuck with them,” Ryker decided. “Gemma, Beatrice, while Boykov is recovering, Thad and I are your go-to if you need or suspect anything. The property is full of people we don’t know. Stay vigilant, and trust your gut. Von, if you and Bear could stick around a few days until everyone leaves, I would appreciate having more eyes I can trust.”

“Ay-ay, Captain RyRy,” Von answered, giving him a salute. “Seeing as things have calmed down, I think I’m gonna get some sleep. Fair warning... three in the morning is when I normally go to sleep, and I don’t wake up until there are double digits.” She turned to leave but paused. “Oh, just in case you need me earlier, Bear is the only one who can wake

me up. Trust me when I say that's for everyone's safety. Nighty night."

Cedro chuckled. "Good to know some things never change, and she's still mad as a hatter."

"Did you want me to stick around too, or am I not on the list of trusted people?" Ivy asked, resting a hand on her hip.

Ryker gave her a confused look. "I didn't ask because I assumed you were staying here until this was over. Unless you planned to go with Cedro?"

"No, I'm not going with Ced," Ivy answered. "I apologize for jumping the gun and assuming I wasn't welcome here."

"Look, Ivy, it has nothing to do with who you are or what you do. I don't trust Astin with anyone, sometimes not even my fellow lieutenants. It's a problem I'm working on, but please don't think my distrust is a reflection of my opinion of you as a person," Ryker shared. "You are welcome to come up with us and stay on the third floor... there are extra rooms."

"Thank you. I will happily take you up on that offer." Ivy turned to Cedro and kissed him on the cheek. "Sorry you made the trip out here for nothing, but thank you for offering your assistance."

"*Preziosa*," Cedro said in a pleading tone.

I wasn't sure of the meaning of the Nepreeian word, but I deduced it might be some term of endearment.

"Don't," Ivy snapped, her back to him. "I'm not doing this here. Now take what you need for the test and leave."

Cedro let out a sigh, his shoulders slumping. “As you wish.”

Ryker and I exchanged confused looks, but neither of us wanted to add to the list of things we needed to worry about. Finally, my body felt like it would let me sleep, and I planned to get whatever rest I could. Once Astin knew what we discovered, there would be no rest until revenge for tonight’s events was accomplished.

Twenty-Seven



A warm breeze brushed over my skin as I sat on the patio wearing a silk robe, enjoying a cup of coffee Braxton made for me. I'd slept a deep, dreamless sleep, which I was incredibly thankful for. Typically, when things like last night happened, they triggered the dark memories Darkness kept hidden to herself. I knew she was there just under the surface, allowing me to detach from some of the emotions that would cripple me.

This was the first time I could honestly say I felt whole. There was a balance between the two of us leading to peace of mind. Normally, I would be lost and blind to what happened when Darkness took over. Now everything had changed. I could be *me* but also the darker version of myself at the same time. No longer did I feel the need to summon that part of myself—she was already there to do what had to be done. I'll never understand why it took so much loss and heartache to

get to this point, but all that mattered was that I'd found the balance of yin versus yang.

I hadn't mentioned anything about this to the guys yet. I'd wanted a moment to myself to sit and absorb this new reality, so they left me to get ready for the day. There was so much freedom in not fearing myself or what I could possibly do to someone without ever remembering it. Darkness was never my enemy. She'd been the part of me that society believed to be too evil to show the world. Without ever giving me a chance to heal from the abuse of my training, it was decided to lock that evil away, allowing it to grow in resentment toward others.

The truth of the matter is I'm not a monster.

I'm a Raffa, which was something far more dangerous.

Then again, I wasn't just any Raffa—I was the Raffa Family's leader and the queen of the Caprioni Family. Those who feared me before I blossomed into my true calling should be afraid, so very afraid.

Standing, I leaned against the rail, looking over the courtyard below as someone entered my room. Calmly, I sipped my coffee, enjoying the bitter taste on my tongue, helping to wake me up. I'd shocked Braxton when I asked for it black, knowing I normally enjoyed it far sweeter and creamier. From this moment on, there would be no more indulging in small enjoyments until I got the satisfaction of watching the life bleed out of my enemies' eyes. Each sip I took was a reminder of the bitter end they would face.

“Good morning, darling,” Ivy greeted as she joined me on the balcony. “I was surprised to see the guys up and about before ten. I figured you’d sleep late.”

“I slept enough,” I answered.

Ivy shifted to look at me as I continued staring at the property. “Something’s different,” Ivy murmured, gently turning my face to look at hers. She studied me with her crystal gaze, analyzing everything about my features. I just calmly looked back, curious to see what she’d say. If anyone outside of my men would notice a change like this, it would be her.

“You decided, haven’t you?” Ivy murmured, dropping her hand. “When?”

“At Domenico’s party celebrating the new Don of the De Santis Family,” I answered.

She frowned for a moment, then I watched while understanding bloomed as Ivy guessed my plan. “What if they don’t all show up?”

“As long as the men who signed my parents’ death warrants are there, that’s all I care about. The rest I plan to leave to Von,” I admitted.

Laughter bubbled out of Ivy. “Oh, she’s going to love that. Does anyone else know?”

“No, but they will soon enough. I just needed to be sure first,” I explained.

“Sure of what?”

“That I was ready to accept the fact I would be known as the Bloody Raffa Queen who slaughtered two founding families in one night,” I confessed. “I’ve always wanted to be judged on my skills, intelligence, and the ability for my enemies never to see me coming until it’s too late. While I’ll be doing all those things, the only thing people will talk about is the fact there was a massacre, bodies littered the floor, and blood painted the walls.”

Reaching out, I gripped Ivy’s neck and stepped closer, darkness pouring off me. “Yet when I woke up this morning, I discovered something. What *I* want out of all this is for them to know with their dying breath the person who managed to pull it off was *me*.”

“People will remember more than that, Astin,” Ivy countered. “After all, they will never forget the Raffa name or what it means if you cross them. That is no small feat, my darling friend, so don’t cut yourself short.”

Dropping my hand, I smiled and pulled her into a hug. “Thank you, Ivy. I needed to say that out loud to someone who I could trust not to turn their back on me. This is who I’ve fought against becoming, but it’s who I was always meant to be. A queen can only hold her throne as long as she’s willing to shed blood for it, and I don’t plan on losing.”

“I won’t let you lose,” Ivy assured me. “None of us will.”

“God, you were so right when you told me I needed some female friends.” I sighed, stepping back. “There are just some

things in life you need a woman to weigh in on. Luckily for me, you decided to take that role.”

“Aww, darling,” Ivy cooed, tapping my nose with her finger like I was a cute puppy or something. “You’re too sweet. I might even blush if you keep talking like that.”

“The day I see you blush, I will need to mark it down somewhere because that will be history in the making,” I teased.

Tossing her head back, Ivy laughed. “Oh God, I’m not even sure if I can blush. It’s been *years* since I’ve felt innocent enough to do something so pure.”

Waving off the idea, she coaxed me inside and directed me to the bathroom. “Let’s get you ready for the day. I want you to shower, put on a hair mask, shave *everything*, and do all the steps in your skincare routine before stepping back out. If you’ll allow me, I’ll pull together an outfit and lay it on the bed for you. Once you feel like the queen you are, meet the rest of us in the dining room. There were some rather interesting developments last night while you slept.”

I’d been feeling good about taking my time getting ready and centering myself for what was ahead, but now she’d ruined it with that last remark. “What happened? Is everyone okay?”

“Darling, do you really think I wouldn’t lead with that if something was terribly wrong?” Ivy challenged. “Goodness, no wonder you and Ryker end up butting heads all the time. You go from hot to cold and back again in the blink of a

fucking eye. Go, do as you're told, and if you're a good girl, I might send one of your men in to give you an update on Mr. Boykov."

Tossing my hands up in defeat, I surrendered. "Fine, you win. I'll go get ready."

Ivy's pleased look made me want to do something childish like mess up her perfect rose-gold hair, but I didn't. She was being the friend I needed right now and forcing me to take care of myself. I'd been in Nepreea for four days, and it was wearing me down faster than I'd like to admit.

"Oh, and Astin," Ivy said just as I was about to close the bathroom door. "If you show up downstairs in less than an hour, I'll make you come up here and start all over again. A queen might need to fight for her throne, but I'm gonna make sure she looks damn good doing it." With that warning, she pulled the door closed and left me to pamper myself.

An hour and a half later, I made my way down the hall to the dining room. I stopped to see Ralph but didn't stay long since he was sleeping. The doctor wanted to keep him from moving too much and pulling at the fragile skin. Thankfully, Dr. Necci had full confidence that everything would heal in time, and we just needed to be wary of any possible infection. With a promise to keep me updated with any changes, I kissed Ralph's head and left him to rest.

Ivy had been right—I needed this time to myself. I don't know what it was about truly investing in a little self-care, but it had me feeling like a whole new woman. There was a bounce in my hair, a sway in my hips, and damn, that sound of my heels hit differently.

Ivy had left me with an outfit I hadn't packed or would have ever picked out, yet it was exactly what I was feeling today—black, high-waisted flare slacks with a white cropped sleeveless sweater and a red cropped blazer to pull it all together. The only thing I switched out was the shoes Ivy chose. Today, I needed my trusty tried-and-true pair of black red-bottom heels—these babies had never let me down.

When I entered the dining room, I found my guys, Armond, Von, Bear, Gramps, Demaso, Zani and his wife, along with Domenico and a man I didn't know seated beside him. Upon seeing me, the room fell silent, and everyone stood while Braxton pulled out my chair. A little unsettled at the change in attitude, I approached slowly, trying to figure out what the fuck was going on. Once seated, the rest followed suit, and the atmosphere relaxed at the table. Staff came out and set the food on the table for everyone to dig in, except for me. Anselma set a full plate down, filled my coffee cup, and gave me a friendly wink before disappearing again.

“I didn't realize everyone was going to be here for brunch,” I commented as I cut up my eggs benedict.

“That's because it wasn't planned,” Ryker grumbled. “They just kept showing up after they heard about what went down

last night.”

My fork screeched across the plate at that information. Setting my utensils down, I took a deep breath, trying to calm the anger burning in my gut. “Is that so,” I said, letting my gaze drift over everyone at my table. “Would anyone like to share how they came by that information? Or have my people forgotten that a loose tongue flapping about will get them killed?”

Von leaned over to the man I didn’t know and whispered loudly, “See, just like I said, Astin is a total boss-bitch. Still think it was smart to crash the party?”

The stranger looked from me to Von, looking a little worried but not as much as I would have thought. He believed he had every right to be here sitting at my table, and I wanted to know why.

“Anyone here feel like introducing this man since he clearly doesn’t possess the manners to do it himself? Or have you found your balls while sitting at my table eating my food?” I questioned, my tone cold as I stared him down.

His light green eyes went wide as if shocked by what I was saying. Then the man dared to ignore me, shifting his attention to Ivy. “You didn’t tell her?”

Ivy dabbed at her mouth with her napkin. “What exactly did you expect me to tell her, Ced? Since this is your world, I assumed you’d know how to introduce yourself to the head of one of the five families.”

“Ivy,” Dom cut in with a low-warning tone. “Don’t take your anger at me out on him. You know damn well he doesn’t deserve it. Not telling Astin we were coming was a choice made to get us in trouble.”

“Trust me, if I wanted to get you in trouble, you’d know,” Ivy corrected. “No, what’s happened is a case of assuming, and now you’ve made an ass out of yourself all by yourself.”

Domenico stood, shoved his chair back, and threw down his napkin. Everyone tensed, and Von even stopped cleaning her nails with the knife she held, watching the situation.

“Astin, please forgive me for *assuming* Ivy would tell you we were coming by this morning. This is my brother, Cedro,” Dom introduced, gesturing to the man. “He stopped by last night looking for Ivy, not realizing what happened. As luck would have it, Ced was able to help with the matter of figuring out who the man wearing the bomb really was. Although I’ll let him share that information, I’m not a scientist, and I wouldn’t want to give misinformation.”

Having explained who Cedro was, Dom sat back down and smoothed his napkin over his lap once more, composing himself. It was the first time I’d seen Ivy manage to get under his skin, or was it simply having his brother here that made the difference?

Cedro was next to stand, but he walked over to me and offered his hand. “It’s lovely to meet you, Astin. I’m sorry I didn’t introduce myself right away, but I hope you won’t hold that against me and allow me a do-over.”

These brothers couldn't be more different. Dom was confident and self-assured, sometimes to the point it made him seem stuck up. Cedro had a softer presence to him, but I didn't see him as weak but more of a quiet confidence of being comfortable in his own skin. I took his hand, and instead of shaking it like I thought, he kissed the back of it.

"Well, that proves you two are related," I muttered, pulling my hand free. "Word of warning... I have seven men who are rather possessive when it comes to people touching or making advances on me."

"Dom did mention something about that. I wasn't sure if it was true or wishful thinking that a relationship like that could work," Cedro commented, purposefully not looking at Ivy or his brother. "Thank you for the heads-up. I'll make sure not to cross any lines."

Once he returned to his seat, everyone dug into their food, and I was forced to wait to get my answers. Finally, Ryker was the one to take pity on me and explained everything they discovered last night. I was impressed they managed to learn as much as they did with the little we had to work with.

"So that's how Cedro ended up running the DNA profile for us," Ryker concluded. "I know you wouldn't be satisfied until there was proof if he was Raffa or not."

"And this is one of the many reasons I love you," I shared. "So, do we have an answer for that, Cedro?"

Leaning to the side, Cedro picked up a folder from the floor and flipped it open. "So he wasn't listed in any of the

databases, so that means he's never been suspected of a crime or given his DNA for a lab to test. However, I compared his markers to other known Raffas that we do have in the system. There were enough people to sample from that, and I can say with a good amount of certainty he *wasn't* a Raffa. Both of them were plants."

The relief that washed over me hearing this was a telling sign. I'd been fully expecting him to say the opposite, and I was going to have to add even more blood to my stained hands. Knowing, without a doubt, they were Leoni spies made what I was planning all that much easier to go through with.

"You have no idea the peace of mind you've just given me," I admitted. "Thank you, Cedro, for going above and beyond to get me that information. It's funny that both of you are here for this conversation because I want to propose an idea to you, Dom."

"Oh?" Dom questioned.

"How are things going for you in terms of your impending promotion?" I asked, but he hesitated to answer, looking around the table. "Don't worry about them, they're trusted people in this fight."

"I guess I'll have to take your word on that," Dom said, not sounding convinced as he eyed Armond.

"Don't get your tie in a knot, boy. If you're truly an ally to Astin, then that makes us allies too," Armond assured him. "Hell, Von and Astin are blood-oath sisters, so there's no way I could turn my back on her now, even if I wanted to."

That shocked Dom as well as Cedro.

“I am part of that pact as well, and I vouch for all the people here,” Ivy added. “Unless, Dom, you’ve decided I’m no longer to be trusted.”

Dom pinned Ivy with a look as he took her hand and flipped it so her wrist was face up. I now knew what that raised mark was and the meaning behind it as Dom kissed it just as he had after our first meeting. “Ivy, I trust you with my life, but I also know you don’t trust me the same way. If you, Von, and Astin have created a blood pact, then I won’t question the trustworthiness of anyone in this room again. As you know, this life we live doesn’t breed trust between strangers and those who have been enemies to my family.”

I watched as his thumb smoothed over the branded skin and saw Ivy’s eyes flutter closed at the touch. Even a blind man could tell you the connection between Ivy and these two men was intense. Without there once being love, there can be no hate, and she hated these men as much as she still loved them.

“Astin, to give you a more direct answer, I have everything in place. What’s slowing me down is getting the people I need to Dolsa, where our Family’s main estate is located. It’s been tricky to balance pulling in those I trust without those loyal to my grandfather noticing,” Dom explained.

Nodding absently, I leaned back in my chair tapping my fingers on the table. “What if you don’t need to hide it?”

“I’m not following,” Dom said, frowning as he tried to catch up with my thinking.

“What if your grandfather were to die in his sleep?” I asked. “In... I don’t know, a day or two? Then there would be a funeral everyone would come to, and you’d be made the new leader of the De Santis Family. I imagine something like that would warrant a party, and we both know how good you are at planning those. Everyone would assume you’d invite the who’s who of the Accardi and Leoni Families since your Family has always been loyal to them, gathering everyone into one specific place.”

“Why would I do any of that?” Dom demanded, clearly not understanding what I was saying. The whole point of why I wanted to do this is to break free from those pompous assholes.”

“Because that’s where I’m going to kill them,” I announce. “It will be like shooting fish in a barrel. They won’t see it coming. It’s too simple, and they would never dream of the day the De Santis Family would turn against them. Just think, you get to take over, establish the new pecking order within the Family, and no one will ever realize the truth of it all until it’s too late. I know you wanted a big show of strength to prove to everyone that you ripped the crown off the head of that bastard who killed your father and Cedro’s mother. But let me ask you this...”

I paused, making sure I had his attention. “Is it worth the people you will lose, doing this with brute strength, just to show people who will be dead in a few days you won?”

Domenico seemed blindsided by my challenge and sat there stunned as he considered what I'd said. On the other hand, Cedro looked as if he was fully on board with my plan, and it made me curious if he'd thought of something similar.

“That could work, but I know there's someone who would challenge my right to lead,” Dom shared. “Doing it the way I had planned would also remove this problem.”

Frowning, I leaned forward, utterly confused. “I'm sorry... that's what is holding you back? Domenico, I thought you were smarter than this, so I must be missing something. If he's going to be a problem, then just take his ass out... problem solved.”

“It's his mother,” Cedro explained. “If Rocco De Santis dies in any other way than at Dom's hand, his mother will betray him to the Accardi Family. Once they find out we were going to betray them, they'll slaughter the whole De Santis Family as a warning.”

“What the actual fuck is that about?” I blurted. “Why would she do that?”

“My mother believes my father was too weak, and that's why he was going to run away with Ced's mother and leave this life behind. When she learned of my plan to take over the family, she decided this was the perfect way to prove that I was nothing like my father. If I take the easy way out of this, in her mind it will prove I'm just like my father,” Dom explained.

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I tried not to lose my temper hearing this bullshit excuse. “Look, Dom, I don’t know the relationship you have with your mother, but I’ll tell you right now, if she can control you that easily, you don’t deserve to lead the De Santis Family.”

The room crackled with tension at my words, but I didn’t care. If we were allies, then I wouldn’t lie to him or pet his ego when it was clear he was behaving like an idiot. Dom just sat there holding my gaze, neither of us backing down. We didn’t know each other well, but I got the sense that if Dom ever became my enemy, he would be a worthy nemesis.

“You make a valid point, even if I don’t agree with you entirely. When my father betrayed her by deciding to turn his back on the Family, it broke her. It had nothing to do with him having a mistress... pretty much everyone in the five families has one. No, what drove my mother to the edge of sanity was the gauntlet she survived to be named his wife. My father was to be the next leader of the De Santis Family and not just anyone could be accepted to fill the role of wife,” Dom shared. “The hazing from the other wives and those who resented her for getting chosen went on until I was born. She had now performed the most important part of her role, giving the Family an heir. Once it was announced she was pregnant, a magical switch was flipped, and everyone loved her. Then my father had the audacity to decide he’d rather walk away from it all.”

There are not many women in the world who wouldn’t be jaded and scarred from that kind of ordeal. However, I still

didn't see how this meant she could control how her son took over the family.

“If you don't put your mother in her place now, what's to stop her from doing something like this after you're in charge?” I questioned. “Let's say you do things her way, but down the road, you make a choice she doesn't agree with? Do you plan to cave to her wishes again? I'm not saying this to be a bitch, but trust me, I get what it's like to have a deep need for your parents' approval, but a problem like this doesn't get better with time.”

Dom nodded, but I didn't count that as him agreeing to do what I said, more that he understood what I was saying.

“I want to see this plan of yours worked out on paper down to the last detail before I make my decision,” he decided. “Although, I should ask if I choose not to do it this way, does that mean I've lost your assistance?”

As much as I wanted to tell him no, that I would help him either way, I wasn't sure it was the truth. “Let's cross that bridge once you give me the chance to prove this is the better plan.”

“Fair enough,” Dom conceded. “Then it's going to be a case of laying all our cards on the table.”

“Seems like it,” I agreed. “You should be prepared, though. I'm full of surprises.”

“Of that, I have no doubt,” Dom remarked with a grin. “Ivy wouldn't choose to be friends with a person who was

predictable.”

Twenty-Eight



After breakfast, Gramps led our group into a large conference room, where we started to strategize. In order for me to plan this out, I needed some information only Dom and Cedro would know, such as the location of their main estate, venues that wouldn't raise any questions for hosting an event, and how big the head of the snake would be that I needed to chop off. I knew I wouldn't be able to get everyone to show up at the party, but as long as the players who would cripple the Families attended, that was my goal.

When it came to the Accardi Family, Gian Accardi was the head of the family, and his five sons made up the key leaders I needed to take out. The pompous bastard had named all five boys from various wives and mistresses after the Greek gods. I had to acknowledge his dedication to keep the Family secure with so many heirs. What I didn't approve of was how it took three wives to do it.

When the first wife, Nella, didn't give him any children, he took a mistress, Serena, who gave him three sons. Serena's reward for having so many boys was to become the second wife. Feeling that three sons weren't enough, Gian had two more with his mistress, now wife number three, Alessa. These sons happened to be closer to my age, impressive for a man who was now in his eighties.

"The sons you need to worry about are Zeus, Hermes, and Aries," Cedro shared. "Apollo and Poseidon are just backup heirs who haven't gotten much attention. They've been trained and educated but think of them like the guys who sit on the bench all season while the main players take care of business. They have to train just as hard and know everything there is to know but don't get any real practice."

"Right, but if their siblings are killed, then it would bring them into the game," Jace pointed out.

Dom and Cedro exchanged a look that told me they doubted that would happen.

"Gian has had an iron grip on the Family for years. Only his first three sons have the specific knowledge of how the Family is run. When those three are out of the picture, it's going to be a war zone," Dom explained. "The crusty old man has kept those two sons in hiding much like your father did you, Astin. No one knows what they look like, which means anyone could walk to the front of the line spouting some bullshit about being one of the two heirs. So unless they had a plan in place for bringing them forward, I don't see this being an issue."

Understanding where Dom was coming from, I turned to Von. “Since you’re going to be in charge of cleanup around here, I’m going to make this your problem. The Accardi Family can never rise from the ashes. You feel me?”

Von rubbed her hands together excitedly. “Oh, I feel you, all right. If their own internal war doesn’t finish them off, and I need to set off a nuke to ensure they stay dead, that will just be the icing on the cake.”

Bear signed something that had Von laughing. “Yes, I did hear there was a game called hide-and-kill, some crazy bitch named Two Tricks came up with it. This would totally be the perfect time to try playing it.”

“Hide-and-kill?” Hound asked, perking up at the name.

Von nodded like she was trying to impersonate a bobblehead. “Yeah, you know like hide-and-see, but the ones you find don’t become it, they become dead. I never really understood the original way of playing the game... it didn’t seem like it was all that exciting. However, if you get to hunt down those who are hiding and take ’em out, that seems *way* more my kind of game.”

“Huh...” Hound grunted. “You’ll have to let me know how it goes.”

Dom cleared his throat, pulling our attention back to him. “Sorry to interrupt, but I only have so much time I can be gone without being noticed. I would like to cover as much as we can now in person so there is no risk of information being leaked,

especially with an idea that I'm not one hundred percent sold on."

"Mama's bitch," Luca coughed into his hand.

Rolling my eyes, I decided to rein in my boys and get us back on topic. "While Gian preferred to keep his control tight, I know the Leoni Family didn't follow suit. Seeing how Bosco is valued with all his traps and tricks, he managed to turn his Family into more of a spy network for Gian. Tell me something... do you think the Leoni Family could exist without the Accardi? That question is open to whoever might have an answer."

"I suppose I never considered there being an option of one without the other," Gramps commented. "Those two families have been in a rather symbiotic relationship for generations. The Leoni do the dirty work, and the Accardi take all the credit."

"Which is why I need to know just how deep the roots grow," I explained. "In my mind, the Leoni is the bigger threat. We don't know who they've dug their claws into or strings they have to pull. They are masters at having the right puppet in the perfect spot. Look what they managed to do last night when we only gave a twelve-hour heads-up to the meeting."

Armond leaned forward, pulling the copy of the Leoni family tree closer for him to inspect. "The bond between those families has always been backed by marriage. Honestly, the system is brilliant because they always have their first-born

children marry if they can. Gian's heir, Zeus, is married to Ambrosia, Bosco's first-born with his late wife, Mia. It's how they've chosen to keep leverage over each other. They function like the kings and queens of old who back all treaties with blood ties, not just money."

"Wait, wouldn't that lead to some *close* family relations getting married?" Braxton questions.

"With how many wives and mistresses all the families have, that is easier to avoid than you think. However, if that would become an issue like it would have been for Gian, they pull from extended family. They might want to act medieval, but they won't cross some boundaries," Frediano said with a chuckle.

"If I might weigh in on the matter," Ivy interjected. "Astin, you're correct in that the Leoni trap those who will be of use to them, creating this network of killers and spies. However, once Bosco, his lieutenants, and handlers are gone, there is no one holding their leashes. Many will vanish for a time until they begin working for themselves or just go into hiding until they believe the threat is truly gone."

"Ah, so that plays back into my theory of what gives these men power over people," I mused aloud. "If it's not money, it's fear or blackmail."

"When it comes to these people, yes, your assumptions are correct," Ivy assured me. "Yet I would still caution you to keep an eye out for those who, like The Siren, are truly loyal to Bosco. When you manipulate someone's mind in the

manner the Leoni Family has done for generations, it creates a soul-deep loyalty.”

That had me slightly on edge to know I’d taken out the true evil of that Family, but the devil’s spawn might still be coming after me for years to come. I suppose I should be prepared for something like that anyway—it’s not like taking out these two families means all my problems disappear forever. Someone would always be willing to test the boundaries and try their luck against me, but they’ll lose every time. I’d make sure of it.

“I’ll keep that in mind, but there’s not much we can do about that before it happens,” I reasoned. “So for this plan of mine to work, of the Accardi, we need Gian, his three oldest sons, their wives, and mothers to show up to this event so I can kill them. That’s straightforward enough. As for the Leoni Family, the only thing I know for sure is Bosco, his lieutenants, and both sons who will be a threat. Ivy, you mentioned something about handlers... would they need to be dealt with, or are they as trapped as the people they handle?”

Her expression went dark as she met my gaze. “Those will be mine to deal with.”

There comes a time in every friendship when you just need to take them at their word, and this was one of those times. It was obvious to me there was some kind of history with these people, and I wasn’t going to press the issue in front of others.

“Works for me,” I assured her. “Von will deal with the Accardi cleanup, and you can have the Leoni Family. The less

I have to manage so I can focus on running two different Families, the better.”

Dom leaned forward, tapping a finger on the map of Dolsa. “So you want this to happen in the city? Don’t you think that will be risky?”

“As opposed to a converted monastery out in the middle of nowhere?” I sassed back. “Think about it, Dom, Dolsa is the capital of Nepreea. Where do all the visitors go? What town has the most tourists? It’s the one place we can move through freely without attracting attention. Also, let’s just acknowledge that keeping my presence here quiet is already blown out of the water. I have no doubt his two spies made sure to send word back before they came to talk to me. If their plan was to blow themselves up, you don’t hold back information ’til the end.”

“What makes you think a party is something they wouldn’t suspect?” Cedro questioned.

My brows shot up. “Seriously?” Then I paused for a moment, trying to remember what Ivy said about them. “Hold on, you *did* grow up in this world, right?”

“Yes,” Cedro answered.

“Okay, then you know these self-centered pricks love to flaunt their power and wealth around,” I challenged. “They thrive off any excuse to have a party, dress up, and make everyone else jealous would be commonplace. Also, do you really think these good old boys wouldn’t make Dom pay homage, and prove he’s loyal like the good little De Santis he

pretends to be? Trust me, if Dom weren't looking to break away from tradition, there would be a party of some kind."

"When you put it that way, I suppose you're right," Dom muttered. "I'm not saying yes to this yet, but I can see where you're going with it. If, and I mean *if*, we managed to pull this off, how exactly do you plan to take them all out? I don't see you mowing them down with a machine gun... you're too classy for that."

"Dom, don't even try to flirt with me. It's not a good look for you," I warned, pointing a finger at him. "As for your question, I haven't quite decided how I want to do that yet. Well, that's not really true... I do know how I want to kill Gian and Bosco. Those two dried-up-past-their-prime-bastards will die by my hand, leaving no room for doubt I was the one who ended their lives. Nothing too fast, but I also don't want them to think I care enough to take my time, so that's going to take a little thought. However, when it comes to everyone else, we could spike the punch for all I care. Dead is dead at the end of the day."

Cedro's jaw visibly dropped at my words. I suppose he wasn't expecting something so callous or crude to come out of my mouth, but I didn't give a shit. This was long overdue, and I planned to make sure my revenge made an impact. No one would ever question the lengths I would go to when it came to settling a score.

"I might be able to offer some ideas when it comes to the other guests," Ivy commented. "Over the years, I've had to

come up with some creative ways to take out my targets that couldn't look like an assassination.”

“Oh, I want to listen and learn too,” Von cut in. “Subtle isn't really my thing, but Astin, if you wanted some options with more flair, I might have a few suggestions.”

The more time I spent with Von, the more I grew to like her even more. She had this manic golden retriever psycho energy that I found strangely endearing. In some ways, Von had me thinking she just might be Harley Quinn come to life.

“I'm always open to suggestions, Von. Just because I don't use the idea this time doesn't mean I won't later on,” I shared.

Dom looked between the two of us and rubbed his forehead like we were giving him a headache. “God, why does it scare the shit out of me that you two are becoming such good friends?”

Von's smile faded as she gave Dom a baleful look. “Because you have a healthy dose of self-preservation running through your veins. Most people wouldn't trust the tingle on the back of their neck when in the presence of something or someone who could kill you.” Instantly, her smile was back, and Von perched her chin on her hands. “Guess you have your grand-pappy to thank for that.”

Armond nearly choked on the drink he was sipping at his daughter's words. Once he recovered, it was clear he didn't appreciate his daughter's sentiment. “Evonnia,” he snapped. “Domenico is an ally, meaning there is no place for threats like that. I don't give a shit that you've known each other for most

of your life, he will be the head of the De Santis Family, and that means you show him respect.”

My brows shot up, seeing this side of Armond and hearing what Von’s full given name was. If this was the man Armond had turned into when trying to rein Von back in, I can see why it did the opposite of what he intended. The room fell silent as we waited for Von to respond, but in true Von fashion, she chose option C. With no explanation, she got up, lifted both hands, kissed her middle fingers, and flipped her father off. Then she walked right out of the room.

It took everything in me not to burst out laughing, but the irritation that crackled off Armond told me that would be a terrible idea.

“Armond, I appreciate what you were trying to do and understand why you felt the need to correct your daughter. However, if you presume to know my feelings about a situation again, I will take it as an offense,” Dom threatened. “If I have an issue with how someone is speaking to me, I will address it.”

If there was ever a moment a person could replicate what a human boiling over with anger might look like, it was this.

“Then you should have no problem with me telling you that I have a big fucking issue with how you’re speaking to me right now?” Armond exploded, shoving to his feet and knocking his glass off the table, where it shattered on the floor. “No one tells me how I can speak to my daughter, much less a man who

my daughter had to smuggle a sex-trafficked woman away from.”

Holy fuck, he did not just say that.

Dom’s face turned to stone. All the walls came crashing down, and there sat the man who was willing to do whatever it took to take over his grandfather’s place in the Family. This was the person I’d expected to meet, not the charming prince who stopped by for lunch.

“Armond, I’m going to give you five seconds to make the right choice and leave this room. If not, then I will, and all agreements come to an end. I’ll find my own way to get what I want that doesn’t include dealing with *you*,” Domenico stated, his tone cutting as he stared the older man down. “One... two... three...”

In a fit of rage, Armond kicked his chair over and let out something that was between a roar and a scream of frustration. Having gotten that out of his system, Armond charged out of the room, slamming the door to the conference room so hard the wood groaned under the assault.

“Anyone else feel the need to make a dramatic exit?” I asked, looking around at the men and women still left at the table. When no one made any move to leave, I took that as their agreement to play nice. “Great, glad to see we have some people who know how to work as a team.”

“I apologize for how that went down, but I know Von and how she is. What her father refuses to realize is the reason they

butt heads so much is because Von is far too much like him,” Dom shared.

“What I want to know is if you were serious?” Ryker questioned. “If he didn’t back down, were you going to let this whole thing blow up in our faces?”

Dom turned to look at Ryker. “I don’t say things I don’t mean.”

“So you would have walked away from all of this?” Braxton pressed.

“Without a second thought,” Dom answered. “I’ve learned a long time ago the only way to win a standoff is to not be the one bluffing. If I threaten to do something, then that is exactly what I do... no one questions my intentions. Armond knew that which is why he walked away because he couldn’t risk fucking things up between you and me.”

Hearing him say that, I realized I felt very much the same way. If no one believed what I said or promised to do, good or bad, then what was the point of saying anything at all?

“Is this why you’re struggling to tell your mother there’s a change in plans?” I inquired. “Because from where I’m sitting, *you* never said that was your plan. She made it your plan.”

“True, and no one but my mother and I know of this ultimatum,” Dom agreed. “Doing things the way I originally planned might prove that I’m not my father to my mother, but it does nothing to further my standing with anyone else. I know who needs to be dealt with and removed from the

Family to make the transition easier. However, with the plan you presented, I could handle that matter at the same time you take out everyone on your list.”

I smiled, knowing he was finally seeing things my way. “Well then, Domenico, when do I expect to hear the news about your grandfather’s passing?”

Cedro and Dom turned to look at Ivy who returned their gaze cocking her head slightly. “Yes?”

“Am I wrong in assuming you’d like to be the one to kill the man who originally bought you?” Dom questioned.

“No, but I suppose I was waiting to be asked instead of just assuming once more that I would be the one pulling this off,” Ivy countered. “Remember, you two are clients. I don’t do anything without a formal request, along with upfront payment. This is a high-risk job, after all.”

“Name the price, and you will have it in your account tonight,” Dom assured her without a second’s hesitation.

Ivy smirked, leaning back in her chair as she crossed her leg over the other. “Five hundred thousand is the price. If it shows up in my account tonight, then you’ll be grandfather-free within the next twenty-four hours. Work for you?”

“Deal,” both men answered simultaneously.

In a manner only Ivy could do, she gracefully stood, shook their hands, and turned her attention to me. “I hate to run before our meeting is over, but something important has come

up that I must attend to. Any chance I could borrow a car? Mine might be a little too flashy for what I need.”

“Help yourself. Whatever is mine is at your disposal,” I answered. “Call me if you need anything else.”

“You’re a doll,” she said with a wink and blew a kiss before heading out of the room.

Once she’d left the room, I leaned forward, arms resting on the table. “Well, gentlemen, I believe we have some events of our own to plan for while I get things settled here so we can shift operations into the city. The birth of a new age is coming for the criminal world, and we have a week to make sure it goes off without a hitch. Now get to it.”

Twenty-Nine



It was Monday morning when the news Rocco De Santis had passed away in his sleep at the ripe old age of eighty-six. The funeral would be held at the Dosal Cathedral in two days, and I knew for sure I wasn't going to be on the list of invited guests. That was fine with me since I had five days to get everything in order for the party Domenico would host on Saturday.

Zani, Frediano, and I worked together for two days to get things settled within the Raffa Family. While Frediano might have handed over everything to me, the law didn't take a blood oath as proof. Since we needed to review all the legal documents, I took the opportunity to add Zani to certain things that allowed him some access where it was needed if I weren't here.

“Lady Astin, are you sure this is what you want to do?” Zani questioned, looking at the paperwork that would make him an authorized person on a few bank accounts.

Letting out a heavy sigh, I tapped the paper. “Just sign the damn thing, *please*. Seriously, Zani, if we have to argue over every single paper that gets put in front of you, I’m going to make you my heir. Then you’ll have ten times the things to sign and panic over.”

The look of terror on his face told me that was the last thing he wanted to have happen to him. In a meeting before this, I’d already had a new will drawn up where the guys would be the ones to take over. I hadn’t told them I’d done this, but I didn’t feel like it was necessary. It would have made them panic and assume I was going to do something crazy without telling them. In reality, I was simply preparing for the future. Leaving no one to inherit would have been worse, and my half-brother, Jameson, was not an option. This left me with the only reasonable choice of making them the benefactors.

Frediano thought I was crazy since there was no way for me to know if we would be together forever. The funny thing is—I did know. I knew deep in my soul the eight of us would be together until the day we died. There was no rhyme or reason behind that other than I knew how much I loved them and they loved me. Our relationship wasn’t perfect by any means, yet I had a feeling we’d be working on making it better and learning together for the rest of our lives. This is why legally, on paper, we were as good as married, another reason I wouldn’t tell them about this. I could just picture how they would all react to the idea of us tying the knot when I’m fairly certain that wasn’t possible.

“That’s the last of them, Mistress Raffa,” the lawyer said. “Is there anything else you need from me today?”

I glanced at Frediano, who shook his head. “No, I believe we’ve covered just about everything there is to cover.”

“Very good,” he answered, collecting the papers and tucking them into a folder. “I will get these all filed on Monday and send copies to your lawyers for Caprioni Enterprises so they have them as well.”

Standing, I escorted the lawyer out of the office to the driveway, ensuring no one would stop him or find out what he was doing there. Once the lawyer was in the car, I signaled to the driver of the SUV he was good to go. Since the attack from the Leoni Family, it had forced my hand to send everyone back home much sooner than planned. However, it was the only way to ensure we had complete control over the property.

Thankfully, everyone had more than enough to do with the shift in plans. Zani and Hound were still working on the secure communication between the members of the Family. This was how the Leoni knew when to attack. We might not need it for the purpose I’d originally thought of, but nonetheless, it was important.

Braxton and Jace coordinated with Domenico’s people to ensure this party would be exactly what we needed it to be. While we couldn’t openly show we were allies, behind closed doors, things were coming together seamlessly, and I couldn’t be more relieved. The venue was popular, surrounded by water, limiting the ability for people to escape, and secretly

owned by yours truly—a new acquisition to the Raffa portfolio but one well worth the price I paid. I now had complete control over who stepped foot on the property.

This was where Ivy and Von working together became invaluable. The connections and people they knew weren't tied to any of the five families. While they were loyal to Von, it wouldn't raise any red flags from those we lured into our trap. Ivy had been right when she told me Von was exactly who I needed if I wanted to win this fight, and I've learned never to doubt that woman.

“Well, Gramps, I think I'm gonna take a little break before dinner,” I shared, stretching my arms overhead. “This is the part of being the boss of two families I'm not looking forward to. Why does there have to be so much paperwork?”

Frediano chuckled. “Then you probably don't want me to tell you this is a light day. Right now, I only have you dealing with things that cannot wait or need to be settled before this massive upheaval takes place.”

Groaning, I raked my fingers through my hair. “I'm telling you right now that I plan on taking a vacation when this is over. It's been hell since day one, so this boss bitch is gonna need some sun and relaxation.”

“Let's hope things go well enough that you can do that,” Frediano offered. “Go, relax, take a nap, or if you're at all like your mother, a bath.”

“I do enjoy a good bubble bath,” I murmured. “See you at dinner, Gramps.”

With a wave, I headed up the stairs trying to figure out what it was that my body *needed* right now. It was on the tip of my tongue, but I couldn't quite grasp the word until I heard it. Pausing, I waited to be sure I did hear what I thought I did. A grin spread across my lips when the sound of a needy moan slipped out into the hall from behind a closed door.

I gripped the handle to Braxton and Jace's room, pausing, to be sure it was both of them and not just Brax rubbing one out while watching porn. Truthfully, the latter wouldn't stop me from entering, but I *really* wanted to play with them both.

"That's it, pup, sit nice and deep on my cock," Jace ordered with a telltale sound of an encouraging slap on the ass.

Quickly, I slipped into the room and found Jace seated on a padded chair with Braxton on his lap facing me. Brax paused for all of a second as I entered, and once he realized it was me, he got right back to work. Jace had a hand wrapped around Braxton's throat, squeezing hard enough I could see the veins on his hands popping. Instantly, the sight had me horny as fuck, but seeing Braxton's rock-hard, leaking cock flopping up and down as he rode Jace made me wet.

"Fuck, I can feel your ass tightening around my cock. Do you like having your Mistress watching you that much?" Jace asked, loosening his hold so Braxton could answer.

"Yes, I love that she's watching me as I ride your fat dick," he panted, his movements speeding up. "Please, Sir, can I come? Having her watch makes me want to come so hard."

“No, you can’t come until I’ve bred your ass like the fucking whore you are,” Jace growled, shoving to his feet and bending Braxton over so his hands rested on the bed. “Ugh, that’s right, take my fucking cock nice and deep. Yes, grip it tighter, pup. The faster I come, the sooner you get to come.”

Watching Jace slam into Braxton as their bodies shone with sweat, had me kicking off my heels. The dress I was wearing had a zipper in the back that Ryker had to help me with after he’d tongue fucked me into a puddle of goo. I tried to undo the zipper but could only get so far before the stiff fabric wouldn’t let me contort the right way.

“Fuck it,” I muttered, then yanked the skirt up and my underwear off before crawling onto the bed.

Even though Braxton couldn’t do anything but hold on for dear life as his ass got railed, he was more than eager to shove his face in my pussy. A shout burst from me as he sucked on my eager clit, causing me to clamp my legs on his head, refusing to let him move. Jace slowed just a little to allow Braxton to get a better hold of me as Brax slipped his hands under my ass.

“Holy shit, yes, use that fucking mouth on me,” I encouraged, rocking my hips in time with his tongue.

Jace caught my gaze and smiled at me with a wicked glint in his eyes as he slapped Braxton’s ass. “Show me what a dirty fucking pup you are and make your Mistress come before I fill your needy ass.”

Braxton didn't need any further motivation as he speared me with two fingers, pulling a surprised scream from me. This man was not fooling around as he found my G-spot right away and started to stroke it in time with him sucking on my clit. I'd walked into the room with a simmering need that boiled over the second I saw them fucking. Now, thanks to Jace's motivation and Braxton's desire to please both of us, I was scooped up and tossed over the edge straight into bliss.

"Oh fuck," I moaned, but the feel of my walls clamping down on Braxton's fingers did nothing to slow his movements. "Hah... ah... ah... ugh," I mumbled, my head thrashing from side to side as another orgasm slammed into me.

"Are you ready, pup? I'm gonna breed this fucking ass as a reward for taking such good care of your Mistress," Jace announced, pulling Braxton away from me so he could pound deeper into his blissed-out submissive.

Seconds later, a roar filled the room as Jace came, pouring his cum into Brax, whose eyes rolled back in his head as cum shot out of his dick. Brax had been on the verge for so long that it hadn't taken any additional attention for him to explode. Both men turned into grunting, rutting cavemen as they milked the last bits of pleasure out of the moment before collapsing on the bed.

"Hot damn, I had no idea how badly I needed a rough and dirty dick down." Braxton sighed, pulling on Jace's arms until the man wrapped him up in a hug and began to kiss along his neck.

“You were amazing, babe,” Jace praised, nuzzling affectionately against Braxton’s cheek. “I wasn’t planning on going that hard on you, but fuck, having Astin here with us changed the game.”

Rolling over, I crawled to them and kissed each deeply, enjoying the feel of their lips on mine. When I kissed Braxton, I could still taste myself on his tongue which had my engine starting to purr once more.

“You two aren’t done playing, are you?” I whispered as I propped my head on a hand.

Jace’s brows shot up, and Braxton burst out laughing before grabbing my face to pull me in for another kiss. “Fuck, I love you so much, Astin.”

“I love you too, but that doesn’t answer my question,” I pointed out as I let my hand glide down his arm.

“No, it didn’t,” Braxton agreed. “I’m down to play some more, but Jace is out for at least ten minutes if you want to get dicked down. However, I do have an idea for something that might help pass the time.”

“Oh?” I asked, curiosity peaked.

Grabbing Jace’s hand, he kissed the back of it before slipping free of his arms. “One sec... I have to grab a few things first, then I’ll explain.”

I bit my lip as I watched Braxton walk to the other side of the room, his perfect ass giving me the strangest urge to sink my teeth into one round cheek.

“Hey, princess,” Jace said, hooking a finger on my chin to turn me to look at him. “You’re drooling.”

“Oh, and you’ve never drooled over his ass?” I challenged.

“Trust me, I’ve done far more than that because of that ass,” Jace answered with a chuckle. “I’m guessing you didn’t hear my question then.”

“What question?”

Jace pushed up into a sitting position, smirking at me. “I asked if you’d like me to help you out of that dress, but if you feel like leaving it on, I won’t judge.”

“You did not ask me that,” I argued.

“Hate to break it to you, My Queen, but he really did ask you that,” Braxton interjected as he crawled back onto the bed. “Trust me, I would like to agree with you on account of it being my ass that you were so distracted by, but it’s the truth.”

“Sooo?” Jace pressed, gesturing to my outfit.

“Off, definitely off,” I decided, slipping off the bed to stand in front of Jace. “I don’t know why this dress is such a pain, but Ryker had to zip me in this damn thing. Should have guessed it would take one of you to get it off.”

Jace made short work of removing the dress, then took it upon himself to help me with my bra too. Soon, I was standing naked with only Jace’s hands cupping my breasts as he kissed along my shoulder and up my neck until he could nibble on my ear.

“Sounds to me like we need to buy clothes we have to help you in and out of,” Jace purred in my ear as he teased my nipples with his fingers. “I’m quite enjoying the perks that come with the job.”

“Hey,” Braxton snapped. “I was trying to show Astin a new game we could play, but you’re hogging her.”

In a final move before releasing me, Jace rolled my nipples between his fingers, making me groan with pleasure. “My bad. I’ll stop distracting her.”

It took me a moment to convince my brain to focus on something other than the need to have Jace’s hand elsewhere on my body. When I turned to Braxton, my gaze fell on the two objects in his hands. Not only did I see a strap-on harness, but it had *Mistress* stitched into the woven fabric just above the place you inserted the dildo. In his other hand was a girthy neon green and red swirled dildo with all the veins and lifelike features.

“Brax...” I hesitated. “Don’t either of you take this the wrong way but isn’t that a little *intense* for me to be using? I’ve never done this before.”

“Trust me, after the pounding I just took from Jace, this will be no problem for me to handle,” Braxton assured me as he dropped the items in my lap. “Of course, lots of lube will be needed, but that’s with any dildo up the ass.”

I examined the harness and was impressed with how soft yet strong the material was. “So, who’s going to show me how to put this damn thing on?”

The beaming smile on Braxton's face told me how much this really meant to him and made me feel more confident in my choice. Hopping off the bed, he pulled me to my feet, slipped the silicon cock into the hole, and secured it in place before dropping to a knee.

"If My Queen would allow..." Braxton asked as he gripped my ankle.

"Permission granted, pet," I said, offering my approval.

It took some shimmying and adjusting, but soon I was the proud owner of a green and red cock jutting out from my body. I couldn't stop smirking at it and shaking my hips so the cock waggled side to side like a happy tail. "Oh, this makes so much sense why you guys do this... it's way more fun than it should be."

Braxton reached up and grabbed the cock halting my movements as he smeared lube over the shaft, stroking it up and down as if it were the real deal. Instantly, my breath caught in my throat, and need pooled between my legs. Our eyes were locked on each other as his hand continued to move up and down, causing the ribbing of the harness to tease along my clit in a delicious way.

"Why is this so fucking hot?" I whispered in a breathy tone.

"Because this only adds to the power that I willingly give to you in a physical way," Braxton answered.

I hadn't been able to put this feeling into words, but hearing him say that, I agreed wholeheartedly with his theory.

Gripping his jaw, I stepped closer so the tip of my cock brushed his lips. “Do you want me to fuck you with this cock of mine, pet?”

A shiver ran through Braxton as his eyes became hooded. “Yes, My Queen, I’m desperate for you to own my ass with your cock.”

“Then get on the bed, lay on your back with your legs up so I can see you begging for my cock,” I instructed.

Immediately, Braxton did as he was told, his cock half hard with how excited he was. There he lay on the bed, hands gripping behind his knees, holding his legs wide open displaying himself to me. I watched as his breathing sped up, making his chest rise and fall rapidly, eyes dilated in anticipation of what was about to happen.

Jace stood to the side, watching, allowing me to rule over what happened on the bed, giving me full control over our submissive. He shook himself out of whatever trance-like state he was in to grab something off the nightstand. “Here, what he used is best to start since it’s good and thick, but this will be better for when you need a little extra slickness. This is where men and women differ with toys. We need constant reapplications if things start to get a little dry.”

I took the spray bottle and tested it, coating the dildo in a fine mist of lube. “Damn, this shit is nice.”

“Only the best for my loves,” Jace murmured, kissing me, which was followed up with a light slap on the ass. “Don’t think too much, princess, just have fun. I know he will.”

Grinning, I took his encouragement and climbed up on the bed, pinning Braxton with my gaze as I slowly approached. “Look at that tight ass. It’s just begging for me to fuck it,” I said, letting my nails scrape down the back of his thighs. “You have no idea how lucky you are to have a Mistress willing to do this for you. I think I deserve some begging, don’t you?”

“I have the most gracious and wonderful Mistress in all the world because she’s willing to fuck my ass with her big cock,” Braxton answered, wiggling as if to entice me to use him faster. “This humble manwhore doesn’t deserve to be stuffed by his Mistress, but I humbly beg for the privilege. Please, My Queen, this needy asshole is craving to be stretched and ruined by you.”

Holy hell, if he kept that up, I was going to lose my mind as I ravaged him with this fucking dildo. Not to mention seeing Jace’s cum leaking out of Braxton had me all kinds of turned on. Coating two fingers with lube, I hooked them in Braxton’s ass, checking to see if he was still loose enough to shove this girthy cock up in him. They easily entered, and I could fit a third with no issue, spreading them to stretch the hole even wider. He was more than ready for me to own his ass.

Pulling my fingers free, he grunted, upset not to have anything filling him. “Please, My Queen, fuck my ass, ruin it if you like, but please just put your cock in me.”

While I would like to say I managed to fulfill his wish with a smooth, skilled move, it was anything but as I shuffled closer and adjusted myself, gripping the base of the dildo so I could

guide it into him. I'm sure I took longer to let it sink into him than I needed to, but I knew what it felt like to get your ass roughed up with someone who thought they could just slam home. Once I was balls deep, Braxton writhed and moaned with how full he was.

“Thank you, Mistress,” he panted. “Thank you for stuffing your cock into me.”

I didn't answer him as I tested out the best way to move my hips. The harness was a little loose, but Jace was right there to help tighten things and show me the right way to roll into the movement using the shape of the dildo to help keep my movements smooth. Once I got the hang of it, Jace let me take control, adding a little lube before he sat in the chair to watch, giving me a reassuring wink.

“Fuck, the sight of you taking my cock is sexy as hell,” I said, looking down at how easily the dildo slipped in and out, making me understand why guys liked to watch so much.

Feeling the need for more contact, I leaned over, resting my chest over his so I could look into his face. Seeing his unfocused gaze as he was lost in the pleasure I was giving was something I would remember forever. Cupping his cheek, I kissed him, to which he instantly responded, but not once did he let go of his legs, though I'm sure he would have liked to.

“I release you from my orders, pet. Right now, I want to fuck my boyfriend,” I whispered against his lips.

The change was remarkable and exactly what I needed. His legs wrapped around me, forcing me to thrust deeper as one

hand clawed at my back while another slipped into my hair, gripping it tightly as he shifted the angle of our kiss.

“I love you so goddamn much, Astin,” Braxton shared, rolling his hips to meet my thrusts. “To be clear, it has nothing to do with the fact you’re fulfilling one of my biggest fantasies right now and everything to do with you simply being you.”

Hearing him confess his love in such a vulnerable position had me melting into his embrace. When we first started this relationship, I wasn’t sure I could be who he needed me to be, but now I realize he was who I needed. Braxton brought out something in me that none of the others could, and that’s what made this all the more intimate.

I buried my face into his neck as I thrust into him with a new determination. Right now, it wasn’t about me. This was all for Braxton’s enjoyment, to give back a fraction of the trust and love he’s been showing through all of this madness. Listening to the sounds I was forcing out of Braxton had me on the verge of coming. So when fingers teased my pussy, I nearly exploded on the spot.

“Tell me, princess, can I join, or do you want to keep this between you two?” Jace crooned in my ear as he draped himself over my back.

I could feel his silky hard cock rubbing between my ass cheeks, teasing me with the hope he might thrust it into me. “If you’re just going to tease me, then I suggest you back away, but if you plan to put that damn cock to good use, you can join in,” I announced.

“As much as I love getting you to submit to me, I truly do enjoy hearing you tell me exactly what you want,” Jace commented, nipping at the shell of my ear before sitting up to grab my hips and pull me onto his cock.

Doing this had me almost slipping out of Braxton, but I shouldn't have doubted Jace. That cocky bastard always knew what both of us needed like any good Dom should. Using his body weight, he shoved me forward so my dick was once more deeply nestled in Braxton's ass.

“I'm going to show you all the fun things you can do with multiple partners who have cocks,” Jace informed me as he cupped my breasts, teasing my nipples again. “Sit up nice and tall just like this. Good, now swing your hips back and forth, just your hips, nothing else.”

It was an odd feeling to keep the rest of my body still, but once I understood the motion Jace was trying to get me to make, I saw the benefits. Essentially, I was fucking them both and myself at the same time, but I controlled the speed and depth of every movement. The room was filled with sounds of our moaning, the slapping of skin, and the erotic sound of a sloppy wet hole being well fucked.

At one point, Jace shoved me back down on Braxton and shifted himself so he was thrusting downward, causing me to thrust deeper into Brax. With one move, Jace was fucking us both, and I was all for it. However, Braxton seemed to be teetering on the edge but not quite able to hit the finish line.

“What do you need, Brax? Tell me, even if it’s to say you need Jace to finish the job,” I said, assuring him I wouldn’t be offended.

He shook his head. “No, that’s not what I need.”

“All right, does it need to be faster? Deeper? Harder?” I pressed.

“More, just more,” Braxton begged, unable to verbalize past that need.

Jace pulled out of me and somehow managed to flip us both over so Braxton was straddling me. “I think I know what he wants. Hold still for a minute while I get situated.”

Braxton cried out, arching his back and digging his nails into my arms. “Fuuuck.”

“Is this what you needed, pup? To have two cocks stuffing your tight ass, stretching you to the max?” Jace taunted. “You wanted more, so I’ll give you more.”

Getting double-stuffed was clearly what Braxton needed. The man lasted all of five minutes before exploding, covering my stomach in his cum as he collapsed on top of me, twitching with how intense his orgasm was. This was an odd moment for me not having a real dick, unable to feel what it was like to have Jace’s cock rubbing along mine as we fucked our lover. However, Jace decided to find a solution to that.

Lifting Braxton off me, he rolled him to lay beside me, grinning like a fool. Then Jace was stripping the strap-on off,

giving him full access. “Come here, princess. We’re gonna see if Braxton can return the favor.”

Not tracking what he was saying, Jace scooped me up only to set me down on Braxton’s cock. It hadn’t fully gone soft, so it was more of a half-mast deal. Confused, I submitted to Jace pressing me to lay on Braxton, only to shoot back up when I felt the head of Jace’s cock nudging at my already occupied entrance.

“Whoa, what are we doing?” I questioned.

“Like I said, he got two dicks, so why shouldn’t you?” Jace reasoned in a manner that didn’t quite make sense.

Looking back at him, I saw he was totally serious. “You’re not going to fit... there’s no way.”

“Willing to let me try? Brax isn’t even all that hard, so it’s the best time to experiment,” he explained.

“You never know until you try, and believe me, it’s damn well worth the try,” Braxton assured me as he pulled me back down to his chest. “If you don’t like it, then we’ll stop, and Jace will fuck your brains out however you like, My Queen.”

Letting out a sigh, I relaxed. “All right, I trust you guys.”

Jace had to reinsert Braxton’s dick before he tried to add his own again. I gasped at the burn of the stretch, but it wasn’t anything I couldn’t handle. Braxton was breathing hard under me as his cock was overly sensitive having just come.

“That’s it, let me in, princess,” Jace encouraged as he used short thrusts to work himself deeper. “Holy shit, I knew this

was going to feel amazing.”

As my body relaxed, his rhythm picked up, and soon he was fucking me nice and deep, just how I liked it. The feeling of fullness was just on the edge of too much, but hell, if I was going to tell him to stop. Braxton, in a feat I didn't think was possible, started to get hard again, deepening the stretch as he began to move and thrust. I was soon lost in the bliss of having these two men fucking me together in the same damn hole. When my orgasm hit, it was compounded with Jace and Braxton coming at the same time, which set off a second climax.

I couldn't tell you what happened after that because I blacked the fuck out.

When I came back to, I was in a tub, cradled in Jace's lap while Braxton massaged my feet and legs. “There she is,” Braxton said, grinning at me. “Seems we might have gone a little overboard there.”

A chuckle slipped out, which then turned into a full-on belly laugh at the understatement of the century. “A *little* overboard?” I managed to say between laughs.

“Brax, I think we broke her,” Jace commented, pulling me more snugly against his chest. “When you manage to take a breath, can you tell me how you feel? We didn't hurt you, did we? I seriously had no idea Braxton could get hard again that fast.”

After a moment of true effort, I managed to pull myself together. “No, I'm not hurt, at least not that I can tell.

Everything still feels a little numb, but that good numb feeling, if that makes sense.”

“Thank fuck,” Jace murmured, kissing my cheek. “I hope you don’t mind, but we asked for your dinner to be sent up here. We weren’t sure how long you’d be out or if you’d be up to being down there with everyone.”

“Ooo, does that mean we can eat dinner in the tub?” I asked, feeling like that sounded like an excellent idea.

Braxton kissed my knee as he started to work on my thigh, rubbing life back into the limb. “How about in bed? We’ll finish getting you cleaned up, wrap you in a robe, and then we can sprawl out in your bed so we can tuck you in when you’re ready to sleep. Remember, we have to be up super early to make it to the airport like you wanted to.”

“Ugh, whose bright idea was it to fly into Dolsa at four in the morning,” I grumbled.

“Pretty sure that was you,” Jace pointed out.

I glared up at him. “That was a rhetorical question.”

“I know, but you’re hot when you scowl at me like that,” he pointed out with a shrug.

“You’re lucky I love you, or I’d punch you in the mouth for saying that shit,” I muttered.

Chuckling, Jace kissed along my neck. “I love you too, Astin.”

Thirty



There isn't much to see when you arrive in a city while it's still pitch-black outside. Yet it's the best time to show up someplace when you don't want to be seen. Rocco's funeral was yesterday, meaning anybody and everybody I wanted to avoid was in the city. We'd decided I couldn't arrive sooner because we can't take any chances of drawing attention away from the funeral. No one could suspect there was foul play or the whole plan we'd come up with would go to shit.

The Raffa penthouse was located smack dab in the middle of the city, which is why we weren't going to use it right away. Instead, Von had a house on the edge of the downtown area, which would give us a little more time to stay hidden. Thankfully, while people knew I was the new head of the Raffa Family, not many knew what I looked like. When it came to the guys, no one had a clue to even guess at their appearance so they could move about the city all they like while I had to stay behind closed doors, hidden from the world

again for a short time. The difference was, it was my choice this time.

I hadn't been expecting a typical house or a flashy penthouse suite when it came to where Von chose to live. Yet, rolling up to a rough-looking warehouse in a historical industrial district had me second-guessing my choice to do this. However, once we were inside the garage part of the building, I realized it was all a ruse.

The interior of the warehouse had been remodeled and turned into an impressive modern living space. The building was three stories high, and the garage was separated from the living area by a wall of glass that ran from floor to ceiling. Von was out of the car first, flipping on the breakers, powering the place up. It was like a scene out of a movie as lights flickered on, revealing an impressive sight.

“Welcome to the hub,” Von announced, tossing her arms wide to show off the place. “This was our headquarters for a long ass time, but business kept taking me out of the city, so we moved. Now we’ve set up shop closer to the major port, which helps keep shipments from getting noticed.”

“This is fucking sick,” Hound blurted with a grin. “Seriously, Von, this is badass.”

“Aww, thanks, Hound Dog... that’s sweet,” Von commented, patting him on the arm. “Let’s head in, and we can find beds to pass out in for a bit. At least, that’s what I plan to do. My ass does not get up this early for just anyone.”

Entering the ground level, it was obvious this place was meant to conduct business first and be lodging second—meeting rooms, an office, an armory, and an industrial kitchen with an eating space that had a cafeteria feel to it. The second floor had the hangout areas with a library, pool tables, ping pong, a small movie room, and a fully equipped gym. We didn't linger on the second floor long since Von shared that all the sleeping spaces were located on the top floor.

“How many people did you have living here?” I asked, peering into a room that looked like a military barracks.

“Oh, it fluctuated,” Von explained, waving us to follow her down a wide hallway. “It depended on how big an order was, where it was coming from, and if training was going on... it was always so hard to predict, so I went big. Most of the time, we just used the big bunk areas and left the individual rooms for special guests.”

Turning to the left, we entered a different section of the place that had a more lived-in feel. Art was on the walls, artificial plants were scattered about, giving it a dorm-like feel instead of being so sterile.

“All right, so you guys can pick from any of these rooms, but for the five at the end of the hall,” Von instructed, pointing to the rooms behind her. “They'll be locked, so you can't use them anyway, but figured I should let you know. I have someone who comes once a month to check on the place, but I gave them a heads-up that the place was needed, so the sheets and shit should be good to go. If you're hungry, the kitchen

ought to be stocked, so help yourself. I'm not your fucking mother so if you can't find something, then figure it the hell out. With that cleared up, I'm going back to fucking bed."

Von marched off to one of the five rooms and entered a code to let herself in. Bear did the same for a room next to hers, leaving the rest of us to fend for ourselves. Atticus let out a loud yawn and kissed me before picking a room at random. The poor guy hadn't gotten a proper eight hours since the bombing happened, and I was a little worried about him.

"I'm gonna head down to the kitchen," Hound shared, catching my hand. "You want anything, Luna?"

"Actually, I'm gonna join you. There's too much for me to go over. I won't be able to sleep," I answered.

Ryker's phone rang, surprising us since no one in their right mind should be awake. He looked at the number and sighed. "Boykov, I'm sorry I didn't text you to let you know we landed, but we just got to Von's place."

I motioned for Ryker to hand me the phone which he did without a fuss. As much as I wanted to have Ralph at my back through all this, there was simply no way. He was recovering and doing well, but definitely not well enough to take on this fight. Telling him he needed to stay at the estate with the doctor looking after him was one of the hardest conversations I'd ever had to have. Of course, he'd taken it well and acted as if he was completely fine with my choice, but little things like this told me he was anything but fine.

“Ralph, what are you doing awake right now?” I asked, moving away from the rooms people were trying to sleep in.

“Lady Astin, why didn’t you pick up your phone?” he demanded.

“Because I didn’t take it with me. We only have burner phones that can’t be traced,” I reminded him. “Look, I promised to keep you in the loop, and I meant it, but you’re still on some pretty intense meds.”

Boykov’s burns were healing, but that kind of skin damage didn’t heal fast, and the extent to which they covered his body meant he was pulling at raw flesh every time he turned or twisted. It took a direct order from me that he *had* to take some kind of painkiller to manage his recovery for him to actually take the damn pills. I understood not wanting to get hooked on something, but it hadn’t even been a week since the incident.

“I’m only taking them because you’re making me,” Ralph countered. “Lady Astin, I can still be of help to you even if I can’t be your bodyguard. Please, let me do something.”

“First of all, Wreck-It Ralph, you are still my bodyguard, but right now, you’re recovering from saving my life. There is nothing for you to prove. I’m not sure how much more anyone could ask from you,” I growled into the phone, not liking the tone of defeat in his voice. “This will all be over in a matter of days, and when the dust clears, we’re all going home. That’s where I’m going to need you watching my back because when they find out about me running the Raffa Family, shit is gonna

hit the fan. So you better rest up and find your waders because I'm gonna put you to work," I warned.

There was a pause on the other end of the line and a heavy sigh. "Understood, Lady Astin. I'll make sure I'm ready for the return trip. I believe I even packed my poncho as you once suggested."

Hearing him sound more like himself, I smiled. "Didn't you tell me it would be smarter to get an umbrella since you'd need to use it more than once?" I teased.

"Yes, I believe I might have made that statement, but then I realized I'm going to need both hands free. Your delightful personality seems to bring out the crazy in people," Ralph replied, his tone taking on that bemused lilt he used when he was humoring me.

"Well, it seems like you put some real thought into it, so I support your choices," I said. "Now hang up and get some rest. Otherwise, I'll tell the doctor you need a pill to make you sleep."

Low muttered curse words in his native language were all I heard before Boykov hung up the phone, causing me to snort out a laugh. "Oh, Ralph, what would I do without you?"

I tossed the phone back to Ryker, who was the only other person in the hall besides Hound. "Thanks for making sure he knew how to get a hold of one of you. Not being here is making him want to wreck things."

“He’s family to you, which means he’s family to us,” Ryker pointed out. “That, and if I hadn’t made sure he could contact me, I’m pretty confident he’d just show up. All in all, this was the better choice.”

Reaching out, I grabbed Ryker’s shirt and pulled him to me. “God, it’s so sexy when you do things just to make me happy.”

“Yeah?” Ryker asked, wrapping his arms around me. “Well then, you’re one lucky woman to have a man as sexy as me around because I always want to make the woman I love happy.”

“Woow.” I gasped, trying not to laugh. “That was... awful. Stop taking tips from Hound. It barely works when he says shit like that.”

“Hey,” Hound interjected, scowling at me. “Don’t be nasty just because you’re tired. You love my cheesy lines.”

Ryker caught my chin, turning me back to him so he could kiss me. When he’d finished kissing me breathlessly, Ryker threaded our hands together and started down the hall. “Come on, let’s get you some coffee and see if that helps take the edge off your sass.”

“Doubt it,” Hound mumbled. “That was a great line, man... wish I had thought of it for you to steal.”

“Yeah, well, maybe there is a thing or two I can teach you. I have known Tin-Tin the longest,” Ryker taunted, but there was no real challenge in his words, just two cocky, stubborn men bonding over terrible pickup lines.

It was almost one by the time everyone reemerged from their bedrooms looking much more alert. Hound had passed out on the couch in the meeting space I'd been using, but Ryker was there to keep me company and talk things through. Not to mention he kept the coffee flowing and my mug full as I pieced together these last pieces of the puzzle.

“Darling, did you get any sleep last night?” Ivy asked, her brow creased with concern.

“Ah...” I answered, trying to remember if everything that had already happened was still today or yesterday. “I think so?” I offered, sounding more like a question than an answer. “Wait, yes, yes I did,” I announced. “There was sex, a bath, dinner in bed, then Braxton had me for dessert so the orgasm would knock me out. I don't know what time that was, and we got up before two in the morning.”

“I see,” she murmured, resting her hip on the table, looking down at the three coffee mugs I'd been drinking from. “Looks like you have things *well* under control.”

Leaning back in my chair, I crossed my arms and frowned. “You got something to say? Don't spare my feelings now... that's never been our thing.”

“Astin, you look like death warmed over,” Ivy stated bluntly. “Go upstairs and take a nap while I look over what you've done so far.”

“Why?” I demanded.

“Because you’re only awake right now due to copious amounts of caffeine and sugar. You just wrote down that someone needs to bring the Dalai Lama when I’m fairly certain you meant to write diorama. You know, the one we built of the inside of the event center to show all the fake staff Von and I brought in and where to block the doors. Unless you truly wanted to invite the holy man himself to witness you committing mass murder?” Ivy challenged.

My gaze dropped to the notes I was making, and sure enough, there it was just like she said. “Fuck.”

“Darling, I know how important this is to you, but it’s equally as important to me. So please, go rest and let me double-check what you’ve done so far. That way, when we meet with everyone tonight, it will be all squared away,” Ivy instructed.

Letting out a sigh, I nodded. “Fine, I really didn’t think I was this tired. Sorry to make you do double work, Ivy.”

“I know,” Ivy assured me and nodded to someone who entered the room. “I promised you we wouldn’t let you fail, but it’s him you should be thanking. He called me, knowing you wouldn’t listen to him if he told you to quit.”

Tilting up my head, I found Ryker watching me with a worried expression. “Will you let me hold you as we sleep, Tin-Tin? Just the two of us?”

Really, he was asking if he was in the doghouse for calling Ivy to deal with me, but I knew he’d done the right thing.

“I’d love that,” I answered, taking his offered hand as he pulled me to my feet, only to scoop me up in a bridal hold.

“Sorry, but I’m taking advantage of every second I get with you right now,” he admitted with a look of chagrin.

Wrapping my arms around his neck, I leaned my head on his shoulder and let out a yawn. “So even a dark knight can be a prince charming. Who would have known?”

“Only for you, Astin,” Ryker whispered, kissing my head.

Thirty-One



We entered the club as a group with Astin in the center, keeping her hidden from sight. Ivy had done an amazing job disguising her with a wig and contacts, but none of us were willing to risk her drawing attention. Why we changed the meeting location to this place at last minute still didn't make sense, but Domenico assured us it was the safer option.

Music thumped as lights danced around the room, making it impossible to see who anyone was. While this setting was beginning to make sense, I didn't like it one bit. There was no way for me to see danger coming or to spot someone we needed to avoid. Thankfully, we were escorted into a back lounge area with security watching the door. A curtain was pulled back, and another door was revealed which needed a handprint scan to unlock.

“Okay, why do I feel like if we step foot behind that door, we'll never come out again?” Hound asked.

“Because you watch way too many scary movies,” Braxton offered. “Are you really telling me you couldn’t hack us out of this place? It’s all guarded by technology... that’s your wheelhouse.”

Hound just shoved his hands into his pockets and glared at Brax. I agreed with the dog—this whole thing felt like a setup, and we were just walking blindly into it.

When the door opened, Cedro was on the other side, grinning at us. “You guys should see your faces right now. All of you look like you’re walking into a horror movie.” No one laughed at that, cluing the man in that we actually felt that way.

“Guys, it’s all good. This is where Dom and I have been working on things for years,” Cedro explained, his expression sobering. “We know this building is secure, and only our people run the place, so it’s as safe as we can make it.”

Ryker and I exchanged looks, to which I nodded. Jace, Ryker, and I had talked about Astin’s security after what happened at the dinner. With Boykov out of commission, that left Thad to run point with the two women backing him up. None of this was a problem, but the situation made us realize just how much we relied on Boykov to keep our girl safe. Staying in the city meant danger was lurking behind every corner, being this close to those fucking bastards. Soon enough, they would be a distant memory, but right now, they were all I could think about.

Cedro led us to another door where he had to enter a code and scan his handprint to enter. Holding it open for us, we filed into the room, and I couldn't help but be impressed. If you had told me we actually walked into some government spy agency, I would have believed it. Screens covered one whole wall, watching various places in the city, but also flipped to a new location every couple of minutes. Some places I recognized from the De Santis Estate and other properties they owned, but most of the others were random buildings.

“Welcome to ground zero, my friends,” Domenico greeted as we entered. “I’m sorry for the abrupt change, but things around the estate were too volatile to risk going someplace out of the ordinary. It’s well known that this is my favorite place to go and the one club I personally run. Guess it’s not hard to figure out why.”

In the middle of the room was a long table with maps and blueprints spread out, along with the layout one of Von’s men built to show the inside of the event hall Astin acquired for this plan. It was driving her absolutely crazy that she couldn’t see the place for herself and get a feel for it. I guess this was something Astin normally did before picking her next target to steal from.

“Dom, I thought we were going to do a run-through with the staff of Twilight Hall,” Astin pointed out, crossing her arms to hold back her irritation. “It’s Wednesday night, ... we have two days left to make sure we don’t fuck this up. You and I

both know there's only one shot to pull this off without it turning into an all-out war.”

“I'm fully aware of how little time we have,” Dom snapped. “Do you know how hard it is to pretend to be their fucking lap dog? I have their people in my home all the time treating me like I'm just a puppet for the people to see while they run my legacy. Trust me, I want nothing more than to see them all dead. However, you're the one who decided not to make it clear that we were allies, so guess what? This is me keeping that secret for you.”

Just as Astin was about to lay into Dom, Atticus grabbed her hand, pulling her back, as Ivy stepped between the two hotheads.

“This is not productive,” Ivy stated, glaring at them. “Dom gave me a heads-up he was having trouble getting away without one of Bosco's men following him, so I agreed this was the best choice. I know working as a team isn't what either of you are used to, but it's the only way this is going to work. So play nice, or I'm going to be the one you're in trouble with.”

Domenico instantly backed down and took a seat, raising his hand in defeat. Astin wasn't quite as easily persuaded, but she gave in enough to relax against Atticus, who whispered something in her ear that got her smiling. That man had a magic touch when it came to Astin digging her heels in on something. I wasn't going to question it, just like I wasn't

going to question the voodoo magic Braxton used when she was pissed to calm her down.

Hell, I was the one she came to when things were too much, and she needed someone safe to turn her emotions off around. It was something I'd noticed after coming back. The more Astin let us in, allowing us to love her, also brought the floodgate of emotions she'd learned to lock away. Out of all the guys, I understood how overwhelming this could be since she was doing the same damn thing to me, but I wouldn't change any of it, and neither would she.

“Can we get down to business now?” Ivy asked, to which we all nodded or mumbled our agreement. She might have meant her threat to the top dogs, but the rest of us weren't looking to draw Ivy's anger either. “Excellent, Von, I'll hand them over to you.”

Von popped out of the chair she'd been lounging in as Bear absently spun it while we talked. “About fucking time,” she said, clapping her hands together. “As we speak, the temporary staff Ivy and I have pulled together are entering the club. They should all be here in roughly a half hour so we can do the rundown. I brought all the tools we'll be using for this shindig so they won't have any problems when it comes down to it. What I want to be crystal clear on tonight is who are the people off-limits? You know, the walking dead who are reserved for a more refined hand to end their life.”

“Gian and Bosco are mine,” Astin declared. “If anyone lays a finger on them before I do, I'll kill 'em.”

Von mimed licking an imaginary pen and jotting down notes. “Crusty-dusty one and two belong to Queenie. Touch them... you die. Got it.” Pausing, she looked up at the rest of us. “Do we have any strong feelings about the wives? What about the grown-ass spawn also referred to as children?”

“Do we know which ones will show?” Jace asked.

Cedro flipped open a laptop, and with a few key taps and clicks, a guest list appeared on a large screen. “This is what we know right now. It’s a given that Poseidon and Apollo won’t be there, but the other three of Gian’s sons will be. Two of them are married, and I believe Hermes just got divorced for the second time.”

“Zeus is married to Bosco’s daughter, right?” Braxton questioned.

“Correct, and it looks like they’re both going to be there,” Cedro confirmed. “As for Gian’s wives, only two are marked as coming, but sometimes he does that if he’s mad at one of them. If they’ve made up by the time the party rolls around, all three will be there.”

“Which wife or wives do we *need* to be sure are there?” Astin inquired. “If there’s anything I know for sure about women in this world, there are some who are in it for the money while the dangerous ones are here for the power.”

“Serena,” Von and Domenico answered in unison without hesitation.

“Don’t get me wrong, Nella is a witch too, but she’s nothing like Serena,” Domenico continued. “The reason Gian will never divorce Serena even though they hate each other is because of the influence Serena’s family has in Trian politics. I’m sure Von can vouch for this after her recent visit, but since Gian married Serena, no Accardi has ever been held in that prison. She’s like his get-out-of-jail-free card and one of the only reasons he can do business in that country.”

“Man speaks the truth,” Von added, pulling a package of beef jerky out of the side pocket in Bear’s leather jacket. “Nella is the face of the family, but Serena is the one pulling the strings behind the curtain.”

“What’s with the third wife then?” Braxton pressed.

Von bit into a hunk of jerky and tore off a piece, looking just as feral as her namesake. “Oh, she’s just the insurance policy. Alessa is easy to please, cheap to pay off, and will fuck anyone Gian wants. Why else have a wife that’s half his age?”

“That’s so fucked up,” Astin muttered. “Okay, so if worse comes to worse, we need to take out Nella and Serena. Sounds like Alessa isn’t the one to worry about.”

Ivy chuckled and shook her head. “That’s exactly what everyone wants you to think, but you couldn’t be more wrong. Alessa is just as Von described, but Gian is the only person she takes orders from. She’ll claw your eyes out should anyone else dare to speak to her like Gian does. The woman isn’t trained or skilled at fighting, but Alessa is scrappy, and that can get you far in this world. No, the one who will be of the

least danger to us, and the one he never is without would be Nella.”

“Great, so we have original Barbie coming for sure, which leaves psycho Barbie or wear-your-skin-as-a-coat Barbie we might need to deal with later,” Hound grumbled. “Is there anything we can do to make sure they all show up?”

“If they don’t, then that’s my problem to handle,” Von pointed out. “Remember, Queenie gave cleanup on aisle one to me, and aisle two is Ivy’s mess to deal with.”

Hearing Von say that was a helpful reminder that even if we missed out on the chance this time around, the major players wouldn’t survive this party, and that’s what really mattered.

“Moving on to Bosco,” Cedro cut in, directing the conversation forward. “He will be attending with his wife, Ottavia, and their two sons have also RSVP’d. Those two aren’t the players we need to be worried about, though. Bosco isn’t as concerned about the Leoni Family getting passed down to one of his boys. In fact, I’m fairly certain Marin, the youngest, has no clue what the Family actually does. He went to art school and whores around with his models he pays to stir his muse into action.”

Jace almost choked on his own spit hearing Cedro describe the guy. “Seriously? How is that man still alive?”

“Because people are scared of his father,” Domenico answered. “Bosco is one ugly, mean sonofabitch, and he doesn’t like it when people mess with his family. It’s not out of

love, and I'm not sure he even knows what that emotion is. To him, it's a matter of respect."

Astin hummed in agreement as she finally took a seat. My guess is her leg was starting to get sore, not that she'd ever admit it still bothered her on occasion. Ryker might threaten to take away her heels, and that was a fight none of us wanted to witness.

"That is a sentiment I understand," Astin commented. "So if his sons aren't who he plans to handle things, then who is? Right now, as far as the rest of the mafia world knows, Curtis is named his heir."

Ivy let out a bark of laughter that surprised us all. "I'm sorry, it's just after all these years of studying Bosco, the last thing Curtis should ever be is the heir to the Leoni Family. Don't get me wrong, the man is brilliant but only when it comes to science. He is more focused on getting printed in a medical journal than running a criminal empire. As Nella is the poster wife for the Accardi Family, Curtis is the stand-in covering for the real heir, Torben Hecht."

Frowning, I glanced at the others, hoping one of them had heard of this person, but the looks on their faces told me we were all in the same boat.

"Who the fuck is that and how do I not know his name?" I demanded.

Before Colmazio pulled me in to work for the Caprioni Family, I'd spent quite some time being an assassin for hire. I put that knowledge to good use working for Colmazio and

kept tabs on new faces or names that entered the scene. The biggest threat to import and export was loose lips or a pest who saw more than they should and needed to be taken out. Sometimes I could do the job of cleanup, but others I needed to outsource. Knowing who to trust and who to steer clear of was important, which was why I had no issue with Ivy and Astin being friends. I'd kept an eye on Ivy's work because she impressed me. After meeting her in person, I can say she didn't disappoint.

“Torben doesn't go by his legal name. However, you might know him as Deadlock,” Ivy shared.

My brows shot up at the name. “You can't be serious... he's supposed to be dead.”

“Dead to the assassin world but not in real life,” Ivy explained. “It's true he was shot and fell off a building, but he didn't die. Bastard is like a damn cat with nine fucking lives. My guess is he used up eight and only has one more life to live.”

“Deadlock might be alive, but there is no way he could walk away unscathed,” I reasoned, knowing the story of how he fell off a five-story building. “So what's fucked up? Arms or legs?”

“One leg. He lost it and now has a new one made out of titanium,” Ivy revealed. “From what I can tell, he's also in immense pain from spinal trauma, but he uses that as fuel to keep the various tools they acquire in line. People think Bosco

is a bastard, but they don't have a clue just how awful Torben truly is."

"I'm going to take a wild guess and say he isn't coming to the party," Astin commented. "That means we need to make damn sure there is nothing left for him to control. If Gian and Bosco are gone, that means the hold on those who were being blackmailed into working for him will scatter. Hearing how awful Torben is, do you think anyone would stick around to follow him? I suppose the better question is, if we don't kill him now, will he take on the Leoni mantle or create his own empire?"

Ivy tapped her fingers rhythmically on the table as she considered Astin's question. When the tapping stopped, she met Astin's gaze.

"Honestly, I'm not sure," Ivy admitted. "My gut says Bosco could have used the fact he saved Torben's life, got him his leg, and gave him purpose to keep Torben tied to him. Yet, I've watched Torben, and he strikes me as someone who might have started out feeling indebted to Bosco, then learned to love the job. If Bosco had the ability to adopt Torben and make him his real heir, I think he would, but Gian won't allow it."

"Why?" I blurted, not seeing the logic in that.

"Gian is all about the family line, keeping things pure and in the family. Remember, the two families intermix on the regular, and he wouldn't want some unknown riffraff muddying the waters," Domenico reminded. "Bosco might be

the head of the Leoni Family, but Gian is the man who controls what happens.”

“Which leads us back to my question... will Torben rebuild the Leoni Family or choose to build something new with the connections he has?” Astin pressed.

“He already has his own empire that he lets Bosco believe he runs,” Von announced, looking up from her phone. “I’ve had a hunch for a long time about this group who keeps trying to buy from me. There are rules to working with me, no exceptions, and these boys won’t give me the answers I need to hear. So I sent some people to look into it.”

Setting her phone on the table, Von gave it a shove, sliding it down for Ivy to catch at the other end. Ivy became completely absorbed in whatever Von had pulled up, making me want to snatch the phone out of her hands so I could see, but I didn’t. Ivy would fill us in, so I just needed to wait.

“He’s the current leader of the trafficking ring here in Nepreea,” Ivy said, her voice flat as she relayed the information. “Torben is the reason things have gotten so much worse and explains why I couldn’t pin down who was truly running the organization. The bastard was hiding in plain sight within the Leoni Family.”

The cloud of anger that shifted over Domenico’s expression had me tensing up. I knew he wasn’t a threat to Astin, but the dark energy coming off him put me on edge.

“There’s no way to get him to show up to the party, but no matter what, he will be on my list to deal with as soon as

things settle,” Domenico bit out between clenched teeth.

Ivy glanced at him out of the corner of her eye and sniffed. “Get in line... this piece of shit is mine. I’ve been hunting for the leader of this trafficking ring for years. No one is going to take this from me, not even you.”

In a move that startled us all, Domenico’s hand snapped out to grab Ivy’s jaw and forced her to look at him. “I know you think you hate me, *mia amata*, but you’re not going to do this on your own. As much as I know you want to take this man down, I won’t allow you to lose your life doing so.”

Ivy’s crystal blue eyes flashed with rage. “Why, because you still think you own me? I keep the brand on my body to help me get into places without anyone paying the slightest attention to me, and not because it has any other meaning.”

“You can continue to lie to yourself if that helps, but I won’t let you lie to me,” Domenico countered, releasing his hold on her and taking a sip of his drink. “If you really believed that, you never would have come back to help me, yet here you are. Yes, yes, I know it’s because of Astin, not me. Dress the situation in whatever logic you like, *mia amata*, but just know I’ll be waiting right here for you when you’re ready to face the truth.”

The two glowered at each other for a moment before Von cut the tension. “The last of my people just entered the club. I think it’s time we had our meeting, don’t you?”

Everyone stood and exited the war room to join those who’d been escorted into the lounge area. Gemma and Thad placed

the Twilight Hall model on the table set up in the middle of the lounge. Watching Astin, Von, and Ivy coordinating and laying out the plan for everyone involved was like watching a magician reveal the magic trick and being even more impressed.

We were there for a good two hours working out the kinks and making sure everyone knew their job. The trickiest part to this whole plan was to mark those on our team and needed to be dead by the end of the night. Interestingly, one of Von's people came up with an idea.

“Does the party have a theme?” the woman asked.

The three women looked at each other and then to Domenico.

“Well, the family colors are gold and blue which we've incorporated heavily in the venue,” Domenico offered. “The name De Santis is derived from the term holy or devout. Not sure that helps any.”

“What if everyone was pinned with flowers... blue and yellow flowers for those who we slip the poison to and white for those we save?” another person suggested.

Ivy nodded as she grabbed the tablet she'd been keeping notes on. “That we can absolutely work with, making little wristlets for the women and others to pin on the men. If anyone asks, it's all a play off the meaning of the De Santis name and crest. Using the double colors will help disguise the fact we are marking them. All right, so everyone is clear that

white flowers mean pure, and no poison will pass through their lips?”

The group nodded.

“Excellent. Now, just a reminder that champagne glasses will have poison on the rim of the glass, so it doesn’t matter how small a sip they take, it will do the job. Everyone must wait for the announcement that a toast will be happening, which is your cue to pass out the drinks,” Ivy reviewed. “Once you’ve all left the room, the doors will be sealed, and the real party will begin. Oh... just a friendly reminder, if you dare to try and betray us, we will know, and you’ll be dead before you even get the chance.”

Everyone shifted uneasily at her words, knowing it wasn’t an idle threat. One thing people knew about Ivy Foxxx is she never promised something she couldn’t deliver on, which was one hell of a reputation to have.

Cedro stepped forward and started to hand out chips to everyone. “As an incentive and since you’re here, this token will get you five free drinks. Go, enjoy a night at The Aurora on us.”

A cheer rose, lifting the mood as they all slipped out onto the dance floor. Soon, they were lost in the sea of people, leaving no trace there had ever been a secret meeting in this room. Not long after, we slipped out the back and returned to Von’s place, where the girls hashed out the final changes to the plan before turning in for the night.

Thirty-Two



Feeling Atticus’s hands on my hips as he turned me so he could zip up my dress grounded me. All day, I felt like I’d been lost in a fog counting down the seconds until I could start getting ready.

The day had finally come.

I was going to get the revenge I’d been owed since the day they took my mother from me. The rage that burned within me had been building for the past twenty years, and now it was finally time to let it loose. All day, I’d been thinking about how I wanted to end their lives, what I wanted to say to them, and if I needed to hear them admit their sins against me. Not many people got the opportunity to stare into the faces of the men who were the cause of all their pain, but I wasn’t one of them.

“Asta,” Atty called, sliding a hand down my arm. “Are you listening?”

Shaking myself back to the present, I looked at him standing behind me in the full-length mirror. “I’m sorry, Atty, I didn’t hear you.”

He studied me a moment before turning me to face him. The new glasses he’d ordered came in the other day, and they had him looking like a sexy professor. He wasn’t sure he was a fan of the roleplay we tried last night, but damn, it had turned me on to be a naughty schoolgirl who needed a firm hand from her teacher.

“Stop,” Atticus scolded. “Your eyes are dilating in a manner that tells me you are becoming aroused, and we don’t have time for that.”

“Are you sure?” I questioned. The look he gave me was all I needed to know he wasn’t in the mood to be teased. “Okay, you’re right, we don’t have time. Now what was it you said that I clearly missed hearing?”

“We have confirmation that Serena didn’t make it to the party, but Nella and Alessa are there. In better news, all three of Gian’s sons are present with their wives, save for Hermes who is no longer married. Bosco and all his family are accounted for along with his top advisers and lieutenants who typically attend events with him,” Atticus informed me. “I also felt it was worth noting that a few government officials loyal to the Accardi Family are there as well, meaning less work for us later.”

Smiling, I cupped his cheek and pulled him down into a chaste kiss. “Thank you, Atty.”

“There is no thanks needed, Asta. It is my duty as your lieutenant to keep you informed, and as your boyfriend, I know having all the facts keeps you from worrying,” he explained, pressing another kiss to my lips. “We all know how important this is, and everyone is doing their part so you can finally have revenge.”

“Don’t go all sweet on me,” I mumbled with a sniff. “You’re going to make me cry and ruin my makeup.”

Atticus smiled, kissed my forehead, and stepped back. “Asta, you look absolutely stunning in that dress, and I am so honored to be by your side.”

“*Stop*,” I said, fanning myself. “God, you have no idea what you do to me, do you? Never in my wildest dreams did I think I would be a sap who cried at compliments from a man.”

“It’s because that compliment is from a man you love,” Liu interjected as he drew attention to himself. “Atticus is right, though. You in that dress is a sight I want to treasure in my memories forever. A true queen stands before me, reminding me how lucky I am.”

“Are you two trying to make me redo this makeup?” I demanded as Liu pulled me into a hug.

“No, *omae*, it’s just hard to stay silent when the most gorgeous woman in the world is standing before me,” Liu answered.

Pushing back, I slapped his chest halfheartedly and faced the mirror once more to double-check my appearance. Ivy had a

woman come to the warehouse to do our hair and makeup. The woman had outdone herself with smokey black eyes and lips to match the color of my dress. I felt like a badass. I was even a little sad that this look would be ruined by the end of the night. The same sentiment also applied to the dress, but it was too perfect for the occasion not to wear it. My gown was a strapless mermaid style, made in a dark red color with a black lace overlay covered in black glass beading. It was very *Queen of the Vampires*, but I fucking loved it.

Around my throat was the necklace Gramps had given me, adding the crowning touch to the whole look. For my shoes, I decided on my trusty black leather beauties who had been through hell and back with me already. Now was not the time to experiment and risk something going wrong. These stilettos would carry me to the finish line even if I had to run a mile in them. Although I had a feeling after tonight, they might need to be retired.

Taking a deep breath, I squared my shoulders, and as I let out that breath, it took my worries with it. “I think it’s time to end this party with a moment for them to remember...” I paused to face the guys. “Well, the ones who survive, that is.”

They both offered me their arms, and I let them escort me to where the others were waiting. Ivy was at the party working behind the scenes to make sure everything was going off without a hitch. Von planned to join us as we made our entrance to show her support so they’d know we were allies when the news of what happened here tonight got out. This would not only impact the balance of power within Nepreea

but the criminal world as a whole. Everyone would be watching who survived once the dust settled and alliances would shift, changing things even more.

Entering the living room space, I took my time eyeing my men from head to toe, dressed to the nines. Even Hound had on a full tux with his hair slicked back, making him look far too normal. Yet that was exactly what we were going for, blending in until we reached the moment to stand out. It was a good thing Von and Bear were here with us because I might have decided it was worth it to be late. Speaking of Von, she wore a dress that looked like a leather jacket if a leather jacket could be floor length. The zipper was offset and ran from her neck to the floor, so it created a slit in the front that could be adjusted to your preference. There were not many women who could pull off a dress like that, but it seemed to be made for Von. I also loved that the lining of the jacket dress was bright red, a nod to our alliance since everyone knew red was a Raffa color. On the other hand, Bear wore his typical leather pants and jacket but dressed up by wearing a black T-shirt.

“Damn, we look good,” Von blurted, making me laugh.

“Hell yeah, we do,” I agreed, the two of us grinning at each other.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Ryker subtly tapping his watch. Nodding, I grabbed my clutch off the coffee table and planted my foot there instead, making it easier to slip the gun into my thigh holster.

“Are we positive we need to leave now?” Jace asked, his eyes traveling up my bare leg.

“Don’t even try,” Ryker warned. “This is too important, and once this is over, there will be all the time in the world for spontaneous sex.”

“Ugh,” Braxton groaned. “Why does he have to be right?”

Gun secured, I hid my leg away once more, giving them back full use of their brains. “Let’s go, boys. The sooner we take out the trash, the faster we can do something fun.”

Hound marched over and scooped me up, heading for the door. “You heard the woman, let’s get a move on. I want to peel her out of this dress so she’s only wearing heels and a gun.”

“Fuck, why’d you have to go and put that picture in my head? Now I’m gonna be hard all night long,” Luca muttered.

Listening to them, you’d have no idea we were about to crash a party, kill roughly one hundred people, and have a heart-to-heart with two unlucky men. Personally, I thought it sounded like a lovely night, but I’m betting most wouldn’t agree. Then again, that’s why the eight of us worked—they got my crazy and loved me all the more for it.

The limousine driver spotted us and hurried to open the door for Hound. We’d decided to go for the SUV version to give the guys more room, and the fact it was bulletproof also helped. Once we were all in, Von popped the champagne and took a long swig from the bottle before handing it to Atticus. The

look on his face as he swiftly passed it to Liu had me snickering.

“What, you don’t drink, Plato?” Von asked.

My brows shot up at the nickname and the fact my sweet Atty didn’t seem to mind it.

“Forgive me if this sounds rude, but I don’t know what diseases you might have. It is my duty to ensure I don’t acquire an illness that might be passed to Astin, which would then be spread to the rest of the men in our family,” Atticus explained. “Although I do not enjoy the feeling alcohol gives me, so I prefer to abstain.”

“Huh, that’s actually really sweet, Plato,” Von decided and bent down to grab something else out of the mini refrigerator. “How do you feel about sparkling water?” she asked, offering him a small bottle of the beverage.

“Thank you. I think I would enjoy that,” Atticus admitted.

Liu leaned forward, looking from the bottle to Von. “Ah... now that Atticus made that point, maybe you and Bear should split this one, and we’ll open our own.”

“Damn, and people say I’m the brown-noser,” Braxton teased, knocking his shoulder against Liu’s.

Von snatched the bottle and tossed another to Braxton, who scrambled to catch it. “All right, Good-Times, since you want the attention, go ahead and open that one.”

“Damn right, I’m a good time,” Braxton agreed as he rolled down the window and waited until we stopped to shoot the

cork at the stop sign. The *ting* of it striking the metal confirmed he'd hit his target. "How many people do you know can do that?"

Shaking my head, I leaned against Hound as I watched my family interacting with such ease. For as long as I could remember, this was the dream I wanted and wished for as I blew out my birthday candles, but I never expected to have it happen. Hell, back then, I would have settled for just having my father around or being able to see him a few times a year. Now, I was surrounded by people who chose to be part of my life, and it was better than anything I dreamed up as a child.

"What are you thinking right now, Tin-Tin?" Ryker whispered, looking at me with a worried gaze.

Reaching over Hound's lap, I wiggled my fingers until he gave me his hand. "I was just realizing my wish actually came true."

He cocked his head, not following my train of thought. "Ry, come on, what did I wish for every year growing up?"

Understanding dawned on his face, and he lifted my hand to kiss the back of it. "Looks like I was proved wrong then."

"What did you tell her?" Hound demanded, sounding irritated that Ryker would dare to discount my wishes.

"I told her you can't tell anyone what you wish for, but I knew she always whispered it to the picture she kept of her mom. One year, I told her that if she really wanted it to happen, she had to keep it to herself," Ryker answered, which

caused Hound to scowl. “Hey, I was an even bigger idiot back then, all right.”

“Scary to think that *you... now* is an improvement,” Jace added with a smirk.

Ryker proceeded to flip Jace off, making everyone laugh.

All too soon, we turned down the driveway that would lead us to the island Twilight Hall sat on. The humor and lighthearted mood slipped away, replaced with a somber tone as we prepared for what was coming next.

The limousine parked at the main entrance, and two men came to open the door, offering their assistance as we exited the vehicle. I headed straight up the cobblestone path to the stunning arched entrance. Twilight Hall was modeled after the historic baroque style of Nepreea which made this the perfect setting for the *coup d'état* that was about to take place.

Ivy was waiting for me in a stunning dress that looked like liquid gold had been poured over her body. She pulled me into a hug and kissed my cheeks like we hadn't seen each other this morning. “Ready?”

“There has never been a moment in my life I've been this ready for,” I shared.

With a squeeze of my hand, she knocked on the door which I heard unlock before opening. Striding forward, I walked down the long, columned hall with the sound of my heels filling the silence as I reached down to turn off the safety of my gun. This was it—the end of an area and the beginning of a new

criminal empire that the next generation would mold for the future. Too long has it been lost in the past, shackled by antiquated tradition and ideology. All that ended here, tonight, by the very person they feared would be their undoing.

That, my friends, is what we call a self-fulfilling prophecy because if they'd left me and my family in peace, I never would have needed to hunt them down. Yet here I am, their own personal grim reaper, come to collect the souls owed to me.

Climbing the three steps leading to the entrance of the room chosen for this evening, I paused, waiting for Thad to give me the signal. It might have been arrogant of me to plan my surprise entrance for the moment they lifted the glasses to their lips but fuck it.

This was *my* show.

Even through the door you could hear the roar of clapping as they congratulated Domenico on his rise to power. Dom had chosen his grandfather's closest friend and adviser to give the toast just so he could tell the man the truth before he died. A choice I fully supported and understood. We'd been worried the absence of his mother at the funeral and the party would be a problem. However, a rumor about how she wasn't handling Rocco's death well at all had been circulating like wildfire, almost like someone had planted the idea.

Of course, Ivy refused to admit it was her, but I knew better.

"It's time," Thad said, pulling the chain off the door, gun in hand.

Both doors opened, revealing me like I was the belle of the ball. The way we had the room set up, everyone was facing this direction for the toast so there wasn't a chance they'd miss my arrival. With my resting bitch face firmly in place, I entered the room, my dress sweeping across the floor as I made my way over to Domenico. There was a cry of surprise, and men went to grab their weapons, but they wouldn't be found. One requirement we had for those chosen to work this event was their skills as pickpockets. They could take anything else they liked for themselves as long as whatever weapons they found were removed.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I'd like to introduce you all to a dear friend and ally, Astin Caprioni-Raffa,” Domenico announced, taking my hand and kissing it quickly before turning his attention back to his guests. “From this moment onward, the De Santis Family will no longer be a pawn for the Accardi and Leoni Families to use. May you all rot in hell next to my grandfather.”

In a moment of sheer luck, the first of the marked guests started to bleed from every opening in their body before dropping to the floor and convulsing.

There had been many poisons to choose from, but I wanted all the drama. I was a Raffa, and red is our color, after all, so why not claim the kill in a manner befitting the queen of the Raffa Family? Screams filled the air as people began to panic, racing for the exits, but they were blocked and chained from the outside just like the door I'd entered was. Those in Domenico's trusted circle were calm as they gathered the

others marked with white flowers to the side, away from the chaos of bloody bodies dropping like flies.

My attention wasn't focused on the madness. No, it was locked on the two oldest men in the room. Each of them was dressed in tuxes with their white and slate-gray hair neatly styled, unfazed by the bodies that surrounded them. I spotted a man behind Gian, who I recognized as his son, Ares, pulling a gun from a leg holster. The angle I was standing, I couldn't take him out without hitting Gian, but I wasn't worried.

Before he could get the gun free, Luca put a bullet between Ares's eyes, dropping him instantly. I heard a few more shots being fired, since we'd guessed there would be a few who wouldn't participate in the toast or didn't drink. That's the true test of a good plan—you would account for the outliers who wouldn't do or act the way you expected. So far, things were going just as expected.

Slowly, I walked up to the two men who'd haunted my dreams since I was five. The thing about facing your demons is sometimes they don't live up to expectations. Looking at these men, you'd never guess they'd killed hundreds of people who dared to get in their way or threatened their power. To the untrained eye, these tyrants were a loving grandparent too senile to be considered a true threat, but I knew better.

“Well, gentlemen, looks like we finally get to meet face-to-face,” I said. “So nice of you to dress up for your funeral.”

Thirty-Three



Without saying a word, my men converged on Gian and Bosco, shoving them into chairs and zip-tying their arms and legs to the metal frames. Neither of the leaders said a word, and I was curious if they would speak at all or if they'd die holding in their cries of pain. It didn't matter—nothing that came out of their mouths would be of any interest to me. Everything I needed to know about how they viewed my family was made clear by their actions.

This moment was for me. I was the one who had shit to say, and they were going to damn well listen. I'd decided I was going to start with Bosco. He might have been the one to send people to kill my mother, but Gian was the one who gave the order.

Bear dragged over a cocktail table, and Luca placed a leather duffel full of tools he thought I might want to use for this chat. The fun thing about having a best friend and a lover who are assassins, they know the most interesting ways to torture

someone. One thing I knew for sure I wanted to start with, was helping Bosco to understand what those women and children went through once they were snatched off the streets.

Luca and I had talked about my idea, which he was all in on helping with. So while he prepared the opening act, I decided to take the moment and share all the things I'd wanted to say to these men over the years. My childhood therapist has always said bottling things up inside was unhealthy. Well, here comes the cleansing.

“Tell me, does it bother either of you that you're responsible for what's about to happen?” I inquired, walking a slow circle around them. “Twenty years ago, you failed to kill me along with my mother, but honestly, if you'd left well enough alone, I never would have connected the dots. Is it your egos that got in the way?”

There was no response or even recognition that I was speaking to them. It was as if they'd turned into statues. What they didn't realize was that the more they ignored me, the more it drove the need for them to acknowledge me.

“From my perspective, it had to be that because why else would you take so long to wipe out my family? You had my father marry a woman you thought you could control... but couldn't,” I reminded them. “In fact, she took it upon herself to champion my uncle to take my father's place as head of the Caprioni Family. Surely, she knew what she was doing, but Flora didn't have enough brains to make that happen without you taking notice. Or could it be that you were just going to let

the internal feud cause the family to crumble into nothingness?”

“Mistress, it’s ready,” Luca informed me, holding out a glowing red brand in the shape of a crown.

Walking over to Luca, I kissed him soundly before taking the brand. “Thank you, my love.”

In a dramatic move, I spun around, causing my dress to sweep out around me as I faced my victims. “Eeny, meeny, miny, moe...” I sang while gesturing with the hot poker between the men.

Of course, I’d already chosen Bosco first, but they didn’t know that, so why not take the time to enjoy playing with them? When Bosco saw the glowing metal coming toward him, I finally got a reaction. It was a small one, but it was something, and oh, what joy it brought me.

“Now, Bosco,” I started, then paused to tap my chin as I looked him over. “I know when you help the trafficking ring, you collect anyone you fancy regardless of age or Family connection. Correct me if I’m wrong, but I’m told you wait until they’re sold, then you mark them with the brand chosen by the new owner. Well, since I now own your ass, it would be fitting to put my mark on you, right? Unlike most of your clients who want to keep all this buying and selling humans’ deal a secret, I plan on doing the opposite.”

Without any warning or preamble, I jabbed the brand right between his eyebrows. The sound of sizzling skin and the stench of burning flesh filled the room. Bosco struggled,

fighting against the restraints, but Hound and Jace held him tightly against the back of the chair. Normally, you'd only leave the brand on for a few seconds to scar the flesh, but I wasn't doing this for any other reason than to cause him unimaginable pain.

“Take it all in, you sack of shit. Each and every person you kidnapped endured this pain which paled in comparison to being turned into a fucking slave,” I snarled, yanking my arm back roughly since the metal started to fuse to the bone of his skull. The brand was still hot, so I went for his cheek right under the eye next. “Here’s a new question for you... did you know your man, Torben, is the new leader of that trafficking ring? That he’s been using you to do the work of building his clientele and acquiring the goods while keeping himself hidden in your fucking skirts.”

Seeing the brand had cooled to the point of not being effective, I tossed it away and grabbed at random for another tool. I grinned when I saw it was a ball-peen hammer with a rounded head that was perfect for taking out kneecaps.

“Looks like we’re going old-school here, boys,” I said with a chuckle. “I’ve always wondered how much force you need to use when breaking kneecaps. It’s a bone, right?”

“You are correct. The patella which makes up the kneecap is a bone,” Atticus confirmed for me.

Twirling the hammer, I grinned at him. “You wouldn’t happen to know how much pressure it takes to break that bone, do you?”

“Well, a rib can be broken with as little as three pounds of pressure, but that bone doesn’t have the support a patella does. My suggestion would be to use all the strength you have,” Atticus offered.

“Excellent, just what I wanted to hear,” I mumbled, shifting to the side like I was gearing up for a golf swing. “Light in the knees, keep the elbows locked, and swing through.”

My aim was slightly off, causing me to miss the knee, but because I followed through with all the power I had, the hammer slammed into the underside of Bosco’s jaw. This caused him to bite his tongue in half which shot out of his mouth to land in his lap. Blood poured from his mouth, soaking his shirt and spilling to the floor.

“Huh...” I grunted, looking at the mess Bosco had turned into. “Didn’t picture that ending.”

With a shrug, I got back into position. “Well, this is why we practice. I need to be sure I have this down so I don’t kill Gian too fast. That would be deeply unsatisfying.”

The second time was the charm, and the sound of bone cracking was unmistakable. Bosco screamed which meant he opened his mouth, and blood started to squirt everywhere. In a surprising turn of events, Bear grabbed Bosco’s face. He slammed the man’s mouth closed then tilted it back so Bosco started to choke on his own blood.

“Oh, that’s clever,” I commented, watching Bosco thrash around, fighting to breathe, but he was getting nothing but blood in those lungs.

Glancing at Von, I saw her eyes welling up like she was going to cry. When she caught me looking, she waved me off and mouthed, *tell you later*. That's when I realized she wasn't crying because she was sad. That crazy bitch was having a proud-mother moment watching Bear finish Bosco off.

Now that I knew she was fine, I shifted my attention to Gian. His milky-brown eyes watched me with something that I might almost consider appreciation. This fucker was impressed with my brutality, and that made me a little sick to my stomach. I wasn't sure how I felt about being admired by a man who would give the devil himself a run for his money on evil deeds done in the world.

"Don't look at me like that," I bit out.

Gian cocked his head slightly as a smirk pulled at his lips. He liked that he'd gotten under my skin. The way the guys tied Gian to the chair left his hands sitting on the metal armrests. Before I could think about my actions, I slammed the hammer down in the middle of the back of his hand. Bones fractured under the blow, leaving an indent where the hammer had landed. A low grunt of pain followed with Gian closing his eyes—the only reaction I got.

The part of me that had been splintered off to create Darkness raged at not getting the reaction I wanted. Twice more, I pounded the hammer on his hand, breaking the skin open and causing it to bleed. Still the man didn't give me what I wanted. Lining up to take out his kneecap, I was going to

give this one more try before switching tactics. My strike was perfect, hitting the bone dead center and shattering it to dust.

Gian tossed his head back, letting out a roar of pain, so I quickly followed up with the second knee. The man's body began to shudder, overwhelmed with the pain I was inflicting on his aged body. If I didn't want him to pass out or die from shock, I needed to take a breath, or this would be over too soon.

"Look at you, a sad old man beaten and bloody in a chair, getting his ass handed to him by a goddamn woman. What would the good old boys think of you now?" I taunted, tossing the hammer away.

"Women don't belong in the criminal world, right? God, what would it be like to deal with a woman who's so emotional and unable to handle the gritty reality that comes with the job? They'd never be able to stomach the blood, death, and gore. Hell, I bet you a hundred bucks they'll pass the fuck out at the first sight of blood," I ranted, my chest heaving with the fury boiling inside me. "Tell me, Gian, how am I doing so far?"

The man cracked open an eye to look at me, then spat in my direction. "I see a woman all worked up over me looking at her a certain way. You might be able to handle the blood and brutality because you're a Raffa, but you're driven by your emotions. That's what will make you lose every time."

"You know I used to be an emotionless zombie like you," I confessed. "Nothing could touch me, and no one mattered..."

ice had more feeling than I did. Yet when you become a person, you handle whatever comes your way. The thing no one tells you is you're doing it all alone."

Gian scoffed at me. "The fact you care about that proves everything we've been saying."

"Once I agreed with you, but if our situation was flipped right now, I know there would be people who I matter to and would fight to save me. None of the people you brought with you tonight gave a shit about you. The second things got scary, they fucking ran the other way. Look where you were standing," I gestured. "It's empty. No one was giving you a second thought."

"My son—"

"Was protecting his wife, not you," I stated, cutting off his words. "I have people who would take a bullet for me and would rather rot in jail than betray me. Hell, I even have a friend who risked their damn life stepping foot back in Nepreea. So you know what, take your chauvinistic moral high ground and fucking choke on it. I'm the bitch who's still standing, and you're the one who's going to be six feet under fertilizing my mother's goddamn flowers."

With one fluid motion, I pulled my gun free and aimed. "Tell the others you'll join in hell hi for me, won't you?" Then I shot him in the dick, the heart, and finally in the head for good measure. You can never be too sure when it comes to men like Gian Accardi.

Letting my arm fall to my side, I looked up as if coming out of a daze to see the others had formed a semi-circle around the two chairs. Gian was wrong—they were all wrong. This wasn't a world you could survive on your own. We might be as evil and corrupt as those we just took out, but the difference was we did it together. I wasn't using them to get what I wanted out of this. Each of us had gained something, and it never would have been possible without every single one of them.

“This is where the era of the five families dies,” I announced. “With us begins the age of enlightenment, an era meant for the history books because we are going to fuck up all the shit.”

Thirty-Four



The week after the Mafia Massacre, as the media was calling it, was insanity. We'd purposefully set things up so the media got wind of what happened. This ensured news of the demise of the Accardi and Leoni Families was worldwide, saving us the trouble of having to do it. With some gentle persuasion and hefty bribes, no charges were brought against anyone. Truthfully, so many people were relieved to be freed from whatever hold those two bastards had on them, it was an easy sell.

It might have also helped that we provided information to the government and law enforcement so they could round up the outliers of both families. They got the headlines and the ability to say they were cleaning up the streets while making our lives easier. Dom had more than enough to deal with once his mother was brought out of hiding. That woman was about to claw Dom's eyes out when she learned the full story.

Thankfully, he'd cleaned house well enough that running the De Santis Family as a whole didn't have too many upheavals.

Ivy hung around for a few days, but no matter how Dom or Cedro tried to persuade her, she refused to stay. The story she told everyone was, now wasn't the time for her to relax if she was going to hunt down Torben, who magically vanished. Of course, I knew the other half of the story as her best friend, but I wasn't going to tell those two idiots the truth. There was no better case study of the truth that love and hate were one fine line apart than those three.

Von vanished with only a note for her father, saying she had to get back to business since she'd been gone for so long. However, that didn't stop her from texting me and Ivy nonstop. It was true she needed to deal with things at home base, yet Von assured me she had eyes on anything to do with the Accardi Family. Serena had slipped out of town before law enforcement could lock her ass up. Then there was the matter of the mystery sons, Apollo and Poseidon Accardi, but The Wolf was on the hunt, so I shouldn't worry my pretty head.

I grinned at Von's latest text rambling about some guy who didn't understand the meaning of a one-night stand as I soaked in the tub. We'd thought about going back to the La Prosperità Estate, but the Dolsa penthouse was far more comfortable and suited our needs better. Besides, working with Zani through video chat was good practice since we'd be heading back home to Springmont in a few days. I was more than ready to return to the Caprioni Estate and find something that resembled normalcy.

The guys promised we would go away and take a real vacation soon, but I didn't see that happening anytime soon. Just when I thought I'd got a handle running two criminal organizations, Gramps added more to the list. Bastard refused to tell me how many more things are on the damn list, just kept saying I'll know all of it in time—*asshole*.

“*Omae*, I thought you said you were getting out?” Liu commented from where he was leaning against the counter.

I looked up from my phone and gave him an apologetic smile. “Sorry, Von needed Ivy and me to weigh in on a situation. If you give me a hand, I'll get out right now.”

Nodding, he grabbed a towel and hauled me out of the tub, setting me on the plush bath mat before starting to dry me off.

“Are we in a hurry?” I asked. “You guys are the ones who urged me to take the bath in the first place, telling me I needed to relax.”

“I know. Do we have to be in a hurry for me to want to spoil you?” Liu asked, cocking a brow at me.

That stopped me in my tracks. Here I was getting grumpy at him for doing something so incredibly sweet. “No, you don't,” I agreed, pulling him so I could wrap my arms around his neck. “I'm sorry. Things have been intense the last couple of days, and it's making me testy.”

With a squeak of surprise, I clung to Liu as he scooped me up, so I twined my legs around his waist. “There is no need to apologize so long as you let us take care of you every once in

a while. That's what we're here for, isn't it?" he reasoned as he carried me into the bedroom where Braxton was waiting.

Spotting us, he sat up from where he'd been stretched out on the bed. "My turn?"

"Yup, I got her out and dried, the rest is all you," Liu assured, letting my naked body slide down his as Liu released his hold on me. "Be good and let Brax serve his Mistress."

With a quick kiss and a wink, he left the room, confusing me even more about what was going on. "Brax..." I started to ask, but when I turned to look, he was kneeling on the floor, head down, hands resting on his thighs. This was the position we agreed he would use when we were alone if he needed me to take control of the situation.

"Pet," I called, padding over to him. "Look at me."

His dark brown eyes looked up to meet mine filled with love and happiness. "Will you let me serve you, Mistress?"

"I'll allow it," I agreed. "Tell me, pet, did your other master set a task for you?" I questioned, feeling there was some kind of coordination happening.

"Yes, Mistress. I'm to inform you that your other lovers have made dinner reservations, and I'm to help you get ready," Braxton explained.

"Interesting," I murmured and noticed the outfit laid out on the bed. "Well, pet, get to it. It seems we are on a schedule here. To speed things along, I don't want to be asked any questions. Let's see how well you know your Mistress."

Braxton grinned, popping to his feet. Moving with purpose, he gathered various bits of clothing along with accessories before laying them out on the bed to take one last glance at the outfit together. Plucking the white thong he chose off the bed, he kneeled, holding the garment for me to step into. The cheeky bastard snuck a quick kiss to my inner thigh as I lifted my leg, sending a shudder through me.

“Pet, do we have time for that kind of play?” I questioned.

Brax tilted his head to look at me as he slid the underwear up my legs. “No, Mistress, we do not.”

“Then I suggest you don’t tease your Mistress, or you might find yourself forbidden to come for the next twenty-four hours,” I warned.

This was a game we’d played before, but the look of terror on his face told me that was the last thing he’d want to have happen tonight. “I apologize, My Queen. I’ll be good.”

My hair was already piled on top of my head since I didn’t want to wash it after soaking, making it easier for Braxton to secure the white, lacy bodice top. Frowning at it, I ran my fingers over the delicate lace that showed my skin through it from the bust down, keeping my actual breasts covered.

“Did you buy this?” I asked, knowing it wasn’t something I’d bought.

“Actually, this is a gift from Ivy. She said to tell you it’s from Grace and Darla, who say hello as well,” Braxton answered, the question clear in his words.

Grinning, I looked at the rest of the all-white silk pantsuit. “Of course, Ivy would try to cheer me up with something from those two. Grace is the woman who made my dress for Domenico’s gala and the party a week ago. Since they have my measurements, all I need to do now is tell them what I’m looking for, and like a fairy godmother, those two just know.”

“Ah, so they are your suit guy,” Braxton muttered to himself as he helped me into the pants.

They fit perfectly, sculpting my ass then hanging in a loose wide-leg style so they just brushed the floor, knowing I love to wear heels. The jacket was tailored to perfection, cropped, and buttoned low to show off the lace underneath. Looking in the mirror, I grinned, loving how chic it made me feel.

Braxton finished the look with a layered gold necklace, simple gold hoops, and a bracelet I’d never seen before with charms dangling from it. When I took a closer look, I noticed the charms had a letter for each of my men, along with a few other symbols that represented events that happened since meeting them.

“Braxton,” I whispered, brushing my finger over the piece, my eyes welling up with the rush of emotion.

“That wasn’t just from him,” Jace interjected as he walked over to stand next to Brax, wrapping an arm around his waist. “We all came up with the idea, just as a way to keep all of us with you no matter where you are. Things are going to be hectic for the next couple of months as you learn to balance

both Families, and there might be a time when we all can't travel with you back and forth.”

I quickly dashed away the tear that slipped out. “How did I end up so fucking lucky?”

“Guess you could say it was the luck of the draw, but personally, I like to think it's karma paying you back for all the shit you've been through,” Jace said, reaching out to take my hand and draw me into a group hug.

A contented sigh left my lips as I just enjoyed being held by them. These were the moments I needed to remember to make time for—the simple pleasures that boosted my spirits like no other.

“As much as I don't want to let you go, I came up here for a reason,” Jace divulged. “I know dinner out isn't like some major affair, but tonight is about us spoiling you. The woman, Bella, who did your hair and makeup, is downstairs if you want. No pressure if you'd rather do that yourself. We just wanted to make her available to you.”

“How can a girl resist an offer like that?” I grinned, kissing Jace then Braxton. “I would love to have someone else do the work for a change. Braxton, could you hold onto this jacket for me, though? I wouldn't want it getting dirty.”

“It would be my pleasure, Mistress,” Braxton said with a bow before slipping it off my shoulders. “Bella did tell me she brought along a smock to cover you, so the rest of the outfit shouldn't be in danger.”

Jace took my hand and led me down the stairs while Braxton had my jacket and the shoes he picked out for me. Seated with a glass of champagne and draped with a smock, Bella set to work. It was just the thing I needed, forced to sit in one spot, close my eyes, and zen out while music played in the background.

Once Bella was done with me, she spun me around to check my new look. I was pleased to see she kept the makeup light and fresh, drawing attention mostly to my emerald-colored eyes and full lips. The style Bella did for my hair was a half-up-half-down with a light wave completing the effortless elegance style the rest of the look was creating.

“Such beauty to work with... you make my job so easy,” Bella commented as she sprayed down a few hairs that dared to escape. “I already made sure your lover has my card. Please don’t hesitate to reach out for any occasion, even if it’s last minute. The mafia queen calls, and I will happily put everything else on hold.”

Twisting in the chair, I looked at her. “Mafia queen?”

“Surely, that’s not the first time you’ve heard someone call you that,” Bella challenged, but the longer she studied my face, she realized I hadn’t. “My apologies if I offended you by calling you that, Mistress Astin. Clearly, the nickname is only being used by us common folk.”

“It’s fine, Bella,” I assured the woman. “The name just surprised me, is all. Why would they be calling me the queen when I’m not ruling over anything?”

Now it was Bella's turn to look surprised. "You are the head of two different mafia families and have two others that have aligned with you. How does that not make you a queen?"

I started to argue with the woman but decided it wasn't worth the effort. Given time, I'm sure the nickname would fade once they see that I had zero plans to rule this new generation.

"Thank you for the beautiful look, and I will be sure to keep you in mind for the next occasion," I said, dismissing the woman.

Bella smiled then lowered the chair for me to get out before cleaning up her tools. Luca stepped out of the kitchen as I stood like he'd been waiting for me. "Baby girl, you look beautiful," he shared, taking my hand and kissing the back of it. "So much so I don't trust myself to kiss your lips."

"Okay, are Braxton and Hound giving lessons now?" I asked with a chuckle. "As cheesy as that was, I appreciate the sentiment."

Luca grinned and walked me over to the ottoman, where I sat so he could slip on my heels. "That one was all me, and a perfect example of why I don't use the lines I think up."

"Well, it wasn't *that* bad, and you shouldn't stop telling them to me," I teased. "It's nice to see this side of you coming out more often."

Instantly, I was trapped in Luca's mesmerizing amber gaze. "You're the one who showed me I even had the ability to feel

like this. Everything you said to Gian was the lesson you taught me, and I couldn't be more grateful to have you change my life for the better.”

Leaning forward, I grabbed Luca's face, and not giving a fuck about my makeup, I kissed the hell out of him. When I pulled back and didn't see the slightest color transfer, I was impressed. “I wouldn't have been able to figure it out without all of you. So I should be the one saying all this sappy shit.”

“Baby girl, you never stop showing or telling us how much we mean to you. We're the ones who need to step up their game, not you,” Luca countered.

I kissed him once more, taking a second to simply be in the moment before he pulled away. “Come on, the others are ready and probably standing near the car.”

Sure enough, when we walked out the front door, they were waiting near a limousine, just like we took to the party a week ago. This time, instead of tuxedos, they wore their normal suits, albeit slightly nicer ones since this was a date, after all. Ryker helped me into the limousine, climbed in after me, and opened a bottle of my favorite white wine.

He handed me the glass along with a quick kiss before settling next to me. “It will take us about fifteenish minutes to get where we're going since it's just outside the city limits.”

“Do I get a hint?” I asked as I absently traced the scar on his palm that I had a matching version of on my hand.

“Sorry, Tin-Tin, tonight you’re along for the ride,” Ryker informed me with a smirk. “All I’ll say is I really hope you like it because we put a lot of thought into this.”

“All of you?”

“Yeah, all of us,” he repeated. “Sometimes, there needs to be conversations between men to get things off their chests before they can move forward. I might have needed a slap in the face from a friend to set me straight, but trust me when I say I deserved it.”

My brows shot up. “One of them slapped you?”

“Hey, did you miss the part where I said I deserved it?” Ryker countered.

“Damn right, you did,” Jace interjected.

Looking between the two men, I didn’t know what to make of this revelation. “What the hell were you fighting about? Didn’t we agree we’d be honest with each other about things that upset someone?”

Ryker grabbed my glass, handing it off, then caught my chin and forced me to focus on him. “Take a breath, Tin-Tin. We’re fine, he’s fine, everything is fine. On occasion, there are going to be times that a fight between brothers will happen. It has nothing to do with our love for you or the relationship we have. Family argue, and it’s healthy to fight as long as resentment doesn’t build. My ass was bent out of shape, and Jace called me on it. End of story.”

“If you say so, but what does this have to do with tonight?” I questioned, feeling like I was missing something.

Letting his hand fall from my chin, Jace took mine so he could trace the scar there. “What I’m failing to say is that my insecurities and past failures kept me from believing you when you tell me you love me. My struggle with you having them is you might not need me one day.”

I tried to say something, but he shook his head, asking me not to interrupt. “I know that’s not true, but getting my mind to accept that as easily as my heart did wasn’t going well. Then after the bomb scare, my self-loathing kept me from being there for you, and that was the last straw. Never again will I let anything keep me away from being there when you need me, whatever that looks like. I might not relish the idea of sharing you *all* the time, but I’m in, Astin. No more hiding and denying myself time with you as punishment. Will you forgive me, Tin-Tin?”

My heart broke hearing him ask that, causing me to straddle his legs so I was all he could see. “Ryker, there is nothing to forgive, but if you need to hear that from me, then listen the fuck up. I love you and forgive you for everything in our past, present, and future. Just promise me you’ll keep talking to me, or them, when you get stuck in this spiral so we can help. Do that, and I’ll always forgive you.”

Ryker wrapped me in a tight hug as he buried his face in my neck. I just held him as he’s held me over the years, praying with all my heart he believed me this time. Yet, just like

Atticus offered, if I needed to remind every one of my guys that I loved them every day, I would. Eventually, Ryker shifted me so I sat sideways on his lap, allowing me to see the others, each with a look of contented happiness. These moments were what told me the eight of us would be together forever. While the guys might not love each other on an intimate level, they did love each other like family.

The limousine came to a stop, but I didn't bother looking out the window. It didn't matter where they were taking me as long as we did it together. I smiled at Atty as he helped me out and held up my suit jacket for me to put back on. The air was a bit chilly now that fall was setting in. Looking around, I noticed we were in a historic district and had been let out in front of a beautiful cathedral.

Atty offered me his arm, and I took it eagerly, leaning into him for a moment. I'd expected us to go right or left toward the restaurant, but instead, Atty started up the church steps. "Um... Atty, I thought we were going to dinner?"

"We are, but there's a stop we need to make first," he answered, refusing to look at me, and his voice strained like he was holding something back.

It took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the dim interior, but I marveled at the structure once I could see clearly. There was so much detail carved into every surface it would take you days to see it all. When we entered the chapel, a flicker of recognition teased my brain until I came to a halt, releasing my hold on Atticus.

“I know this place,” I blurted, slowly spinning to take in the rest of the space. “This is where my parents got married, isn’t it?”

When no one answered me, I glanced back only to find all seven of my men down on one knee.

Whirling to face them, I clutched my stomach as butterflies erupted at the sight of Hound holding out an open ring box. Speechless, I just continued to gawk at them, waiting for someone to say something.

“Astin Caprioni-Raffa,” Hound started.

“Will you,” Luca continued.

“Marry us?” Atticus asked.

“Today?” Braxton pressed.

“He means... right now,” Liu clarified.

My heart thundered in my chest so loud I believed everyone could hear it. “Yes,” I managed to gasp out. “I will absolutely marry all of you today, right now, this very second.”

There was an uproar of cheers from the pews to my right, pulling my attention from the guys. No longer hidden in one of the alcoves were Von, Bear, Domenico, Cedro, Ivy, Gramps, and even my dear Wreck-It Ralph. The guys stood, and Hound took my shaking hand, slipping on an exquisite ring that looked almost like a crown with one big diamond in the middle and seven smaller diamonds wrapped in swirls around the band.

“Oh my God, this is really happening,” I whispered as I tried to fight against bawling my eyes out.

“Yes, Moonflower, this is really happening if you still want it to,” Hound assured me.

My gaze flicked up to him. “You aren’t getting rid of me that easily, Harold.”

“Astin,” Hound hissed. “What the hell, woman? I ask you to be my wife, then you go and announce that god-awful name to the world?”

“Don’t you need to put it on the paperwork to make it legal?” I countered. “Besides, if they are going to be your brother-husbands, that little fact is bound to come out at some point.”

“You’re damn lucky I love you more than life,” Hound grumbled, kissing me with brutal passion that made him the man I loved. “Come on, let’s do this so we can tell the world you’re ours and have the paperwork to prove you’re officially off the market.”

I just laughed as he pulled me to the front of the cathedral, where everyone was waiting for us. Ivy, the crafty bitch, handed me a bouquet of red flowers, and Von flashed me a box that had seven gold wedding bands waiting to be put on each of my husband’s fingers. The priest approached us, and I recognized him as the same man who married my parents thirty years ago.

“Hello, Astin,” he greeted. “I can’t tell you how honored I am to officiate this wedding. Seeing the love between all of you reminds me of your parents’ wedding day. Those three were beaming with love just as I see here.”

“Thank you so much for helping to make this happen,” I managed to say, even as my emotions threatened to overwhelm me.

The priest stepped back and cleared his throat, giving me a reassuring wink. “We gather here today to join this woman and these men in holy matrimony,” the priest announced. “Have you, Astin, Ryker, Atticus, Luca, Braxton, Jace, Liu, and Harold come here to enter into marriage without coercion, freely and wholeheartedly?”

“We have.”

“Are you prepared as you follow the path of marriage, to love and honor each other for as long as you all shall live?”

“We do.”

Von rushed up to help me as I put rings on all the guys before switching places with Domenico who offered the wedding band to Atticus. It took everything in me not to just demand we skip to the end, so I could scream to the mountains that I was the lucky bitch who just married seven of the most amazing men. Yet, I managed to contain myself as the second band slid onto my finger fitting perfectly together.

“Now then, I believe it’s best if we do this at once for the men unless you want them to recite their vows to you

individually,” the priest asked in a low whisper, to which I shook my head emphatically, making the old man smile.

“Do you men standing before me take Astin to be your wife? Do you promise to be faithful to her in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, to love her and to honor her all the days of your life?

“We do.”

“Astin, do you take these seven men to be your husbands? Do you promise to be faithful to them in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, to love them and to honor them all the days of your life?

“Abso-fucking-lutely, I do,” I announced.

“Then I pronounce you husbands and wife,” the priest declared, clapping his hands in excitement. “May the Lord smile upon this union.”

Before I could even blink, I was swept up and showered with kisses by my *husbands*. A term I planned on using as often as humanly possible.

When they allowed me to come up for air, I was soon tackled by Von, shrieking her excitement. “Oh my God, Queenie, you lucky bitch. I’m so happy for you.”

Bear had to practically pry her off me so everyone else could have the chance to congratulate us. Ivy gave me a quick hug and a kiss on both cheeks before grinning at me. “I knew that suit would look killer on you, and it was too perfect for today. I couldn’t help myself.”

“It’s funny... I always wanted a sister, and now I somehow ended up with two,” I shared, pulling her into another hug. “I truly hope you find your happy ending, Ivy. You deserve it.”

Brushing away a tear, she smiled and nodded before slipping away.

Gramps was next to envelop me in a hug. “I can’t tell you how much it means to have been a part of this. I feared I’d never get the chance after screwing things up with my relationship with your mother. No matter what, Astin, we are family, and I will always be there for you. So when you leave here to go on your honeymoon, I don’t want you to worry about anything. I will make sure you come home to a well-oiled machine.”

“Thank you, Gramps,” I whispered while fighting back the tears.

“Love you, my girl,” he said, releasing me to shake hands with the guys.

My gaze settled on Ralph standing by himself, holding the edge of the pew to keep himself upright. I hadn’t seen him since I left the estate two weeks ago. Our plan had been for Ralph to get on the jet, fly to Dosal, then we’d all fly back home, but I was so fucking happy to see him.

I hurried down the steps and didn’t stop until I could rest my head against his chest. I knew his skin was still super sensitive, and most of the damage was on his back, so hugging was out of the question. “I’ve missed you, Ralph,” I croaked out. “It

means the world to have you here for this moment because without you, this never would have been able to happen.”

“Lady—”

“Don’t even go there with that shit.” I growled. “You have more than earned the right to call me Astin.”

“Not going to happen,” he stated. “You’ve earned my respect, loyalty, and love for whatever time I have left on this earth. However, there will never be a moment that I let anyone, including yourself, forget who you are, Lady Astin. It is my job to protect you—”

“Even if it’s from myself,” I cut in, finishing his sentence as I looked up at him. “I remember.”

He grimaced as he placed a hand on my shoulder, but I refused to insult him by asking if he was okay. “Do you know who told me that?” Frowning, I shook my head.

“It was your father,” Ralph revealed. “I told him I wanted to be your personal security, that there was something about you I needed to protect. He told me that you were the future of the Caprioni Family and would become everything he failed to be. But you’d need help. He’d found lieutenants he believed would be your council, a shield, and maybe something more. What he hadn’t found for you was a safe haven. A person to trust with anything and would look after you and only you.”

He paused and took a breath, almost as if he was getting emotional, which was unlike the stoic man. “The night Colmazio died, he called me to his office and made me

promise that no matter what happened, I would be your person. I don't know if he had a bad feeling about that meeting or if it was pure coincidence. Either way, he didn't need to ask me that since you'd already picked me to be your safe haven, and I always will be. Anyway, I wanted you to know today, of all days, how much your father loved you. Everything he did, right or wrong, was from love."

I failed to keep the tears at bay hearing Ralph, who truly was my safe haven, as he reminded me how I got to where I am today. My father, Colmazio Caprioni, the first of the Caprionis and a man who fought for change, losing his life in the process. Turning, I found my husbands talking and laughing with the rest of our ragtag family.

"You're right, Ralph... love can be a powerful and dangerous thing," I agreed. "Another thing I know... heaven help anyone who dares to ignore my warning and fuck with the people I love. There will be no mercy from the Caprioni Queen."

The End

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About Author

Elizabeth is originally from Illinois but is now living in sunny Phoenix, Arizona. Though she is newer to publishing, Elizabeth has been writing for nine years. She started in YA Fiction but recently found herself loving the Reverse Harem genre. Like her favorite books, Elizabeth loves to write about strong women of all varieties. Not all strength is flashy or apparent at first glance—some lie just under the surface.

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