



*Marrying*  
*the* **DON**  
**OF FURY**

**A S H L I E   S I L A S**

*Marrying the Don of Fury*

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# CHAPTER 1

## *Daniella*

I'm getting married in a few months. And I just found out five minutes ago.

My mouth is agape as I stare at my parents. Forty-eight hours ago, I had just closed an extremely important chapter in my life. I graduated college, completing four years of training and transformation into the adult I'm supposed to be. And now they're laying this mind-blowing news on me?

"Hold up. Pause," I say, inhaling deeply before exhaling again. "Daddy, I'm not sure I understand what you're trying to say. Who's getting married?"

The lines on my father's face are much more pronounced as he stares at me. Or, more accurately, he stares at the wall above my head. He hasn't looked me in the eye once since he and Mom called me into his office and sat me down for a 'serious conversation.' This isn't a serious conversation, this is fucking crazy. This is life-changing.

"Sweetheart," my dad starts, "you have no idea how sorry I am. This match has been years in the making, from the moment you were born."

My jaw tightens. "Then why haven't you told me? Why didn't you prepare me for it from the moment I was born? Or better yet, why didn't you stow me far the hell away from a man whose name I don't even know and I'm supposed to fucking marry?"

My voice goes up an octave and I don't even need to look at my mom's face to see the disapproving frown, either because of my swearing or my yelling. She raised me to be polite, prim, and proper. Her lessons never really stuck, but when I'm around them, I try to pretend they did. Not today, though. Today, it would seem my parents have fucked up astronomically. Which means I don't owe them a proper attitude or nice words.

"I didn't think the agreement still stood, my sweet."

I scoff. "This is ridiculous," I tell them, getting to my feet.

"Sit down, Daniella," my mom orders, looking at me under dark eyelashes. Her lips are pursed and there's a don't-fuck-with-me-because-I'm-hurting-more-than-you expression on her face. Like I'm not the one who should be upset here.

My dad might be the head of the family, but he's always treated me like his little girl—spoiled me, even. My mom, however, is the parent you don't cross. I hesitate for just one second before falling back into my chair across from them.

Even now, my dad is seated while my mom stands behind him. But despite her position on her feet, my dad doesn't have all the power. I would say it's evenly shared, they're equal partners. I've always admired that, always admired their relationship. That isn't to say there aren't any flaws.

The most glaring one being promising their one-year-old daughter to marry some man she doesn't know.

"You haven't even heard who the man you'll marry is," my mom says. Her voice is soft, light.

Her hand brushes over her pearl necklace. She's like every other wife of the *ton*. The *ton* being the elite members of the city of New York. Wives from the Upper East Side that carry around expensive bags, wearing tweed suits and blouses, long sophisticated dresses. Their every move is scrutinized by the others, so they all go a long way to ensure their reputation isn't damaged. In a way, the wives protect the families even more than the husbands.

My mom is no different. In fact, she's one of the strongest. But right now her actions are putting one thing into perspective. She's just as nervous as my dad. Which means I should definitely be freaking out more about this situation.

"I'm sure you'll tell me, Mom," I say. "I'm simply buzzing with anticipation."

"Daniella, I want you to know that I regret my actions," my dad begins. You were only one when the business was in a terrible state and in dire need of help. It was about to go bankrupt..."

I tune him out as my stomach churns. He's not answering the question. Why won't they just tell me who it is? With every second they withhold the information, I grow more nervous.

*Is he ugly?*

I shake my head at the thought. I have much bigger things to be worried about. Forget ugly—the man could be in his sixties or worse. I don't even want to think about worse. I'm only 22 years old, for fuck's sake, I shouldn't have to deal with something like this. Arranged marriages aren't uncommon in my world, but an arranged marriage since birth certainly is. They're rare and it's a pretty outdated custom. Which is why I'm so shocked that my parents agreed in the first place. It makes me feel a little ill.

"Daniella!" My dad's voice calls me back to the present. "Are you listening to me?"

I nod. I tend to get lost in my head a lot; it's a habit they've always disapproved of. Actually, they've disapproved of a lot of my habits. But my parents gave me a lot more leeway than other kids in my situation. I think they regret it a lot now.

"I heard you, Father—the company was in trouble and you needed money, so you went to meet some rich aristocratic family and they offered you the help you need in exchange for your daughter's hand in marriage to their eldest son. Am I right?"

That's usually how those arranged marriage stories go. But when my dad shakes his head, I tilt my head to the side.

"So what's the story?"

"Just tell her, Lucas!" my mom snaps.

I look up at her uneasy expression. Her blue eyes, extremely similar to mine, are a little cold and unfeeling.

"Okay then, sweetheart. Have you ever heard of the D'Angelo family?" my dad questions.

I feel my complexion pale. Suddenly, the room is too small, and there's not enough oxygen to breathe. Several seconds pass while I'm as still as a corpse, struggling to move and remind the world that a woman called Daniella Evans even exists. Maybe then it'll move on and this cruel joke will find some other unsuspecting person.

My parents look at me, their expressions both guilty and sympathetic.

"Please tell me that's a joke, Dad," I say, finally finding my voice. "Of course I know the D'Angelo family. Are you hoping to strike some sort of deal with them? Because there's no way *I'm* that deal. Right? You wouldn't have sold your only child to a crime syndicate!"

My father flinches, and my mom looks away. I feel like I'm drowning. This time when I get to my feet, neither of them tries to stop me.

"Which one?" I ask, my voice sounding unlike mine. "Which of them do I have to marry?"

"The new Don, my sweet. Christian D'Angelo," my father replies.

I laugh hysterically, throwing my hands up in the air. So they not only sold me to the mafia, they sold me to the worst of them all.

"Daniella, baby," my mom begins, but I shake my head.

“I need to go and process this information somewhere else, Mom. Please!”

She nods, giving me permission to leave. And leave I do. In fact, I run, through the hallways of my family house, down the spiral staircase, and out of the door. I don't pause to breathe until I'm inside my red Mercedes.

As I make my exit from my home, there's only one thought ringing in my head.

*Run.*

## CHAPTER 2

**F** *eared and respected.*

The words that the D'Angelo empire was built on. It follows me everywhere, on every wall, every clear surface. It lives and breathes inside of me. A constant noose, wrapping tighter around my neck with each breath. Some people are forced unto responsibility, but me? I was born for it, raised for it, and despite not knowing until a few years ago that I would be the next Don of our family, it's always been clear that I was the only one who had what it takes.

“Yo, Chris. How's it going?”

I glare both at the name and the person walking inside the room. Only members of my immediate family can call me that without getting a bullet wound to the head. And right now, my immediate family includes my two brothers and my mother.

Very slowly, I unwrap the boxing gloves in my hand, wondering for a second if I just might have to use them. Christopher D'Angelo, although we all call him Topher. He's my younger brother; anyone looking at the two of us side by side would see that clearly. Long dark hair and brown eyes, the telltale signs of a D'Angelo man. But our similarities stop at our facial attributes. Topher's in a rumpled shirt and his dark hair is in even worse disarray. He couldn't look less put together if he tried. It's all an act, an intentional way of saying fuck you to the rules of propriety. My younger brother's the opposite of me in every way. And yet, I would die for him. He's my brother.

“Did you fuck up?” I ask, finally taking off the boxing gloves and placing them on the table beside me.

My brother raises a thick, dark eyebrow. “Really? You haven’t seen me in two weeks and that’s the first thing you want to ask?”

“Yes, Topher. Because I haven’t seen your ass in two weeks. Who knows what kind of trouble you’ve gotten into since then.”

He smirks. “Surprisingly, I haven’t gotten into any trouble this time. I just came to check up on my big bro.”

I’m not sure what disbelieving look I throw his way, but he rolls his eyes.

“Seriously, Chris. You’ve got to learn to trust me.”

“Two months ago, you went to Ibiza and got so fucking trashed that you woke up in front of a police station with coke under your nose and no memory of how you got there. I’ll trust you when the sun stops shining every day.”

“That wasn’t my finest moment,” Topher admits with a shrug.

“I’m about to wring your neck if you don’t tell me what debauchery you’ve gotten into this time,” I warn.

“I told you I didn’t do anything,” Topher says defensively. “I just came here to check up on you.”

“Check up on me? Why in the hell would you think I need checking up on?”

Topher follows me as I head out of the gym.

“Well, I just spoke to Ma, and according to her, you’re getting married in a few months. Imagine my surprise when I heard that, bro. Because I haven’t seen you with one woman more than once, talk less of one you would propose to or even willingly get married to.”

He’s fishing for information, which means Mom didn’t tell him more than he needs to know. Which suits me perfectly,

because the mafia world doesn't need to know about the intricacies of this arrangement until I want them to. And Topher is notorious for spreading important information about our family. He does it to cause chaos. It used to drive our father nuts, and I'm not about to walk the same path.

My jaw clenches at the thought of our father. Carman D'Angelo passed away a year ago and his absence still feels like an empty hole in the middle of my chest. I'll never admit it to anyone, but I miss my old man. I miss his hard gaze and perpetual frowns, but most of all, I miss his unflinching presence and the reassurance that as long as he was around, everything would be okay. We don't have that anymore. All we've got is me.

"Are you going to answer me or not?" Topher demands once we're in my bedroom.

He takes a seat in my chair, flipping through the pages of a book I had been reading last night. His mouth curves upward as he takes in the contents of the book.

"You're starting to piss me off," I state.

"I'm always pissing you off." He puts the book back down on the table before looking at me. "You need to tell me what's going on."

"In case you aren't aware, little brother, I'm the Don. I don't need to tell you anything."

Topher smirks. "Your new title is certainly doing wonders for your already over-inflated ego."

If it were anyone else saying something like that to me, they would be dead. Topher likes to take advantage of the privilege he has with my blood running through his veins. I keep my gaze trained on his face, making sure to convey just how thin the ice he's on is right now. I might not be able to kill Topher, but I could make him regret his actions. He used to be on the unforgiving end of Father's stick—he doesn't want to be on mine.

His throat bobs with a hard swallow as he stares at me.

“Hey, I’m sorry, Christian. I’m just worried, alright? This whole thing seems out of the blue. I just wanted to know a little about my new sister-in-law.”

I let out a quick breath before looking away from him. “Her name is Daniella Evans.”

“Ooh, I’ve heard of her. She’s the heiress to the Evans Industries, right? Damn, bro. I’ve seen her around and you could have done much worse. So, how did you meet her?”

Out of all three brothers, Topher’s the one with the least inclination about what our world entails. He spends his days partying, having fun, traveling the globe and I think even running from the truth of our lives. He’s naïve when it comes to the inner workings of the family. I blame my parents for keeping him away from who we are, but there’s no use crying over that. He’s not in it, never will be, but he’s still a D’Angelo. There are certain things he needs to understand.

“I haven’t met her,” I reply, taking off the black tank top I had on and putting on a white shirt.

Topher is silent as I get dressed in a crisp black suit, sans tie, of course. As the Don, I’m supposed to dress formal, put together, but a tie is constricting and only adds to the sense of restriction my new title already brings me.

“What do you mean, you haven’t met her?” my brother questions.

“Since you’re an idiot who can’t read between the lines, I’ll spell it out for you,” I say, keeping my face a mask of calm despite my growing irritation. “My wedding to Ms. Evans is a business arrangement I can’t get out of. Mom told me about it two months ago, after the dust settled and I had gathered the stronghold that came with my new position.”

“Business arrangement?” my brother asks, confused. “This doesn’t make any sense. If this is about your marriage, then why hadn’t you heard about it before?”

“Because, Christopher, the deal was apparently stuck about twenty-one years ago when I was only a child. The terms were

that the Evans' daughter would marry the next Don of the family after Father. Until Father died, there was no need to mention it to me as I wasn't the Don yet, but now that he's gone, the deal is in full effect. Our grandfather made it with Lucas Evans. He owes us a debt, and the D'Angelos never forget to collect on a debt."

Those last words have been ringing in my head for the past two months. Ever since I found out about the marriage deal. At first, I told my mother point-blank that I couldn't do it. But then she sat me down and, in that infuriatingly calm way, she explained what it would mean for our family and how proud Father would be if I went through with it. Those are the magic words: tell me my father would be proud and I'll do literally fucking anything.

I arranged a meeting with Lucas Evans immediately, asking to meet his daughter, but he asked for some time. According to him, Daniella's still in college. He wants to tell her about her impending marriage after she's done.

She graduated two weeks ago.

Christopher's expression is grim. "The debt you're talking about is an innocent woman."

"Her father made a deal that sold her to me. And don't refer to her as 'innocent' when you don't know a thing about her," I say.

"I told you, Chris, I've seen her around. Talked to her a few times. Daniella's a sweetheart. I mean, she can be fucking crazy, but she's also nice and, like, the opposite of you. This is a match made in hell."

It grates on my nerves that he's had contact with the woman I'm supposed to marry before I've had a chance to. I can barely summon a vivid memory of how she looks, despite also having run into her at one or two social functions. She has never appealed to me and I've never found the need to seek her out, considering how dull most heiresses can be. Now I have to marry her and I don't know a thing about her.

I could have found out, but I'm suppressing the need to lean into the idea of this marriage until I absolutely have to. There's no way out of it and I've made my peace with that. But that doesn't mean I'm ready to let her take up even one inch of my headspace right now. As long as she fits seamlessly into my world without causing any turmoil or trouble. She's a society heiress, which means she'll probably be boring and compliant.

And that suits me perfectly. But Topher's description sounds like trouble.

"What do you mean, she's fucking crazy?" I ask, facing my brother.

Topher opens his mouth to reply but the entrance of Carlo D'Angelo cuts him short. We both turn to look at our elder brother. He raises an eyebrow at Topher's presence before turning to me.

"We have a problem," Carlo states, his voice crisp, straight to the point.

He's all hard edges and jagged lines, always serious and loyal to a fault. The moment I knew Carlo would take a bullet was me when he was the first to pledge his loyalty to me after I was named Don of our family. There was no complaint, no denials—my elder brother accepted our father's decision no questions asked. If I'm being honest, almost everyone knew it would be me for a while, but I had also been expecting to fight for it. Carlo hadn't.

"Which is?" I ask, fixing the cuffs of my suit jacket.

"Runaway bride," Carlo replies. I can hear faint amusement in his voice.

I look up at him, my eyebrows raised in question. He can only be talking about one person. Two months ago, when I found out I was going to marry her, I had Carlo put some men on Daniella's tail. They were to follow her at all times, inconspicuously, and report to me if she tried anything out of the ordinary.

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“I’m saying, your wife-to-be is currently trying to escape on a plane to an island in Comoros. She’s planning to leave the country. With a fake identity.”

I curse softly while Topher laughs behind me.

“See? I told you she’s fucking crazy. Shit, Chris, I think I’ll stick around for a bit. This place just got a lot more interesting,” he drawls.

My jaw is clenched as I head out the door to my bedroom, hating just how complicated my life just became.

Was it too much to hope she would be boring and compliant?

## CHAPTER 3

*Daniella*

“That’s crazy, Dany. So, what, you have to get married to this dude?”

I make a face before dropping my phone on my bed and placing it on speaker.

“This dude is the head of a mafia organization. As in a crime syndicate, Sky. He has probably murdered people.” I shake my head. “What am I saying? He *has* murdered people! This man is really infamous. He’s a murderer, a thug, a ruffian, an asshole—he’s basically the devil.”

Sky scoffs. “Don’t you think you’re being a little dramatic?”

“Sweetie,” I say, heading over to my dresser and grabbing some of my underwear, “I know I have a tendency to exaggerate, but Christian D’Angelo is the absolute last person I want anywhere near me. I’ve never even met the man and I’m terrified. And now I have to marry him?”

“Okay, okay, I get it. This whole thing is nuts.”

“Thank you,” I say to my best friend.

“But what choice do you really have?”

I smile. “It’s good that you asked that. Because I’ve got an amazing plan,” I announce with a flourish.

“Uh-oh, that does *not* sound good. What are you planning, Dany?”

“Nothing crazy,” I tell her. “I’m just going to sneak out of the country.”

“Sneak out of the country...” Sky takes a moment to process that. “Bitch, what the hell are you talking about?”

I head into my closet and grab some of my clothes. My packing has no organization, order, or system but I just need some of my shit while I bust out of here.

“Okay, remember how we were talking about going on a little trip to the Bahamas after graduation? You, me, and Zoey?”

“Vividly,” Sky replies.

“Well, I was thinking I’d head out a little earlier than you guys. On a plane today. I’ve got business class tickets to Comoros under the name Skylar Cameron.”

“Wait, slow down. You’re going where?”

I can’t see Sky right now, but I’m guessing the expression on her face is absolutely dumbfounded. I can’t say I blame her. This is out of the blue for me, too. Technically, I’ve been planning to do this for a week. I left home two weeks ago, after my parents dropped that insane bomb on me, and only came once after to hear the full story. After that, I told them I would need a couple of days to process.

“Process” meant finding a way out of this colossal mess. Eventually, I settled for running away. The D’Angelo family is powerful enough to track me, hence the acquisition of the fake name and identity.

“To Comoros, Skylar. Keep up,” I tell her.

“No, no, *no*. This is insane, Daniella. You’re going to Africa? To do what? And see who?”

“I’ll figure it out. At least I’ve got the plane ticket,” I state.

“This is crazy!”

“You’ve said that, Sky.”

“Because it is! Can’t you just take a minute to think about this? I mean, where did you even get a fake identity?”

It’s in both our interests if I ignore the last question.

“I have thought about it. And right now, I’m in my room at my parents’ house, trying to pack as much of my shit as I can before they come back home and realize what I’m about to do.”

“Dany, you graduated college two weeks ago. You’re not ready to move to another continent all on your own.”

“But you think I’m ready to be married? This is the last thing I want!”

“I know, honey. But if you don’t want it then no one can force you to. Right?”

With a sigh, I fall onto my bed and roll on my back. Skylar doesn’t understand. She’s from Brooklyn, born and raised, her parents own a pizzeria. Her roots are absolutely normal and there’s absolutely nothing wrong with her life. I just wish she had a little more insight into *my* life and the responsibilities that come with it.

Even now that I’m planning to run away, deep down I know it’s not a permanent solution. Because somewhere, a contract exists between my father and the Don of a crime syndicate, and it’s unbreakable. It’s a promise—my family owes them a debt and it has to be collected. And we can’t cross the D’Angelo family. It would lead to disastrous consequences. My dad worked hard to build Evans Industries and I refuse to be the reason it’s destroyed.

That being said, I also refuse to get married until I want to.

“Hello! Earth to Dany,” my friend calls.

“Hmm?” I mumble.

“Sweetie, talk to me,” Sky says softly.

I roll over and face the ceiling of my room.

“It’s not that I don’t want to, Sky. Honestly, marriage has always been a political or business arrangement in my world. Eventually, I might have had to marry in the same way. Or not, but right now, we don’t really have much of a choice. I have to do it. My only issue right now is the fact that I’m only twenty-two years old and nowhere near ready to tie myself down to some man who probably shoots rabbits as a hobby.”

“Okay, I understand where you’re coming from,” Sky says.

“Thank you for understanding.”

“And I support whatever you want to do. Just... be careful, okay, Daniella? You’re notoriously good at making bad, impulsive decisions.”

“Oh, this is definitely impulsive,” I tell her. “But that doesn’t necessarily mean it’s bad.”

“True,” Sky says. “Alright. I’ll tell Zoey. You need to finish packing. Bye, love you. Don’t miss your flight.”

“Love you, too.”

“And I’m so not okay with you using my name for international travel fraud,” she mentions.

I laugh softly. “Only your first name, though. I used Zoey’s last name.”

“Uh-huh. Not cool, Dany.”

“Bye, Sky.”

She hangs up and I stand to finish packing. Thirty minutes later, I’m driving out of our neighborhood and heading to the airport for my 3 p.m. flight.

*Hello, freedom!*

---

I’M of the firm belief that everything happens for a reason. Every move, every action is primed to cater to the whims of whoever’s up there dangling all our lives on a rope, like we’re

puppets. Call it fate, destiny, coincidence, it doesn't matter. Even coincidences lead to something, therefore they happen for a reason.

Following that reasoning, I'm almost sure there's a reason behind the fact that my flight has not only been delayed but I've also been disallowed from checking in. They're claiming it's a security issue, but that doesn't make any sense. I'm not a fucking terrorist.

Unless.... what if they found out about my fake identity?

But the person who made it for me assured me it was legit. *Shit. Fuck my life.*

I'm about to make a run for it or call my dad to bail me out when the security guard in front of me snaps to attention. I turn to see what he's looking at and my mouth drops open. With wide eyes, I take in the four impeccably dressed men in suits walking over. And the man standing right in the middle.

My breaths come out faster and I start to feel a little light-headed. It's not just because I'm pretty sure each of the men is armed with a gun right now. It's the fact that I recognize them. I know exactly who they are. And I know the tall, black-haired Adonis standing in the middle is none other than my darling fiancé.

Christian D'Angelo strides over to me like he's got all the time in the world. His eyes are behind dark sunglasses, and usually, something like this would be corny as fuck. It's like a scene straight out of an action movie where the feds show up and take down the bad guy, looking cool in black suits and glasses. But the man walking toward me isn't a lawman by any stretch of the imagination. And there's nothing corny about the way he looks right now. He looks like he was meant to be here. He exudes confidence, male dominance. I swallow softly, trying to work up the nerve to face him.

He could be here to kill me and my only other option is to beg and plead for mercy.

“Hi, Christian, right? I don’t think we’ve met,” I say, with a nervous laugh.

I can’t be sure since he’s wearing shades, but I’m pretty sure there’s cold indifference lurking in his eyes. He barely spares me a glance before turning to the security guard beside me. Christian doesn’t even say a word. He simply stretches out a hand and the guard hands him my passport, visa, and all my documents. My mouth drops open as Christian starts to look through them while I stand in front of him looking like an idiot.

Still, it gives me time to study him. His dark hair is shaved short on the sides, and he has a strong, angular jaw. His suit is molded onto his toned, broad body, and apart from the confidence, he’s also exuding precision.

My heart leaps when he looks back at me, his expression colder than before.

“Skylar Cameron,” he says. It’s not a question.

His indifferent tone runs down my spine with a strange thrill following in its wake. I clear my throat and straighten to my full height. But even then, and despite the three-inch heels I’m currently wearing, I barely come up to his chin. The man is freakishly huge. He looks like he could throw me across the airport terminal with barely any effort.

“I understand how this looks,” I begin but he cuts me off.

“Save it. You’re coming with me,” he says.

Again, my mouth drops open. Is this how this is going to be?

“Yeah, that’s not happening. Let’s start this again. Hi, I’m Daniella, and obviously, I wish we were meeting under better circumstances. But if you’d just let me explain and not shoot me...”

He doesn’t say a word for several seconds. The air is tinged with tension and dry amusement.

“I don’t really care for an explanation,” is all Christian says before turning around and facing his bodyguards slash fellow mafia men, I’m guessing.

I’m pretty sure one of them is his brother. I’ve seen him once or twice at a function or two, always five paces behind Christian. I’m not sure what his name is, though.

“Escort Ms. Evans and her belongings to the car,” he orders, his voice crisp. “I’ll take care of the situation here.”

I’m barely able to get a word in before two of the men step forward and grab each of my elbows, both giving me looks that say not to test them. So, I go quietly. I’m not about to make a scene in the middle of the airport. Christian and his brother stay back, probably to deal with the consequences of my trying to board an international flight with a fake identity.

The men deposit me inside a silver and blue Range Rover, with clear instructions to wait till their boss returns.

My hands intertwine as I try to take even breaths. They might very well be my last ones on this earth. Because I’m pretty sure that cold-hearted bastard is going to kill me for this.

## CHAPTER 4

“I hate to be the person to point this out, *fratello*,” Carlo says, “but you’ve got a problem on your hands.”

My jaw clenches as I look toward my car, the three men standing around it, and the infuriating woman sitting in the passenger seat.

“She showed up wearing a fucking blonde wig,” I mutter. “Topher was right. She’s fucking crazy.”

I might not have had an accurate description of my fiancée in my head, but I could conjure up enough of an image to remember that Daniella Evans is a redhead. The woman I had my men escort to my car was wearing an ashy blonde wig. I’m guessing the wig was a part of her disguise, but I can’t for the life of me understand how she thought she would ever pull off leaving the United States borders with a fake identity.

“She’s young,” Carlo offers. “I’m sure she’ll eventually learn to fall in line.”

I sigh softly. Judging by the five minutes I spent in her presence earlier, I highly doubt that. Carlo walks behind me as we head over to the car. I nod once, directing them to the other car while I drive mine. The guards disperse immediately while I open my car door.

She’s glaring at me. The action seems almost impossible and wrong. No one has had the balls to glare at me since I was twenty years old. It just doesn’t happen. I force myself to remain calm as I enter the car. She doesn’t say a word to me

and neither do I. We continue the drive in silence. I glance at her occasionally. Judging by the glimpses of her personality I've gotten so far, she doesn't seem like the quiet type.

Her arms are folded on her lap and she's staring forward without moving an inch. I'll admit I hadn't been expecting her to be so beautiful—intelligent ocean-blue eyes and a bone structure that no amount of money could buy. She's wearing black leggings and a cream sweater, a comfortable outfit except for the three-inch heels at her feet.

Under normal circumstances, I might have been intrigued by Daniella. It's pretty clear she's not a normal society heiress. And she's incredibly gorgeous, but no amount of beauty is erasing her stunt today—or the fact that we'll have to spend the rest of our lives together.

Ten minutes pass before she finally speaks up.

“Are you taking me home?”

“No.”

Her stare burns a hole into my cheek as I keep my gaze straight forward and on the road.

“What do you mean, no?”

“I'm taking you to my home, Ms. Evans. You've made it abundantly clear that you require a lot more supervision than your father provides.”

She scoffs lightly. “You realize I'm not five years old, right?”

I glance over at her, my eyes trailing over her face and down to her body before returning to her face.

“Trust me, Ms. Evans. I'm aware,” I state.

Her blue eyes narrow. “Why are you talking so properly? It's the opposite of how I expected you to talk to me.”

“How did you expect me to talk?”

“Aren't you the head of a gang?”

My head tilts a little to the side, my attention returned to the road.

“No. I’m the Don of a mafia organization,” I tell her.

“You sure do sound proud of that,” she mutters. I raise my eyebrow in question but she’s already moving on. “Regardless, you’re acting extremely formal and a little stuck-up. I was expecting crass words and rude manners.”

“That’s not me.”

I understand what she’s trying to say, but the Angelo family isn’t a typical mafia organization. Our words, “feared and respected,” connote that we do everything possible to ensure that we remain feared and respected in society. Which means carrying out business in a manner that gives off the appearance that we’re a legitimate organization and not a crime syndicate.

“So, you’re not going to kill me?” Daniella asks hopefully.

A ghost of a smile flickers over my mouth. I would never hurt her, but the fact that she thinks I could might be beneficial to me. Maybe it would even coerce her into good behavior.

“Let’s be honest here, Ms. Evans. Your behavior today does deserve a bullet to the head.”

She shrinks back out of fear and I watch the color bleed out of her face, making me immediately regret my words. My goal isn’t to terrify her.

“Relax, I won’t hurt you.”

I have a code, and that includes not laying my hands on any woman, ever. My parents raised me better than that. She still looks a little hesitant, so I offer her a little smile right as we pull into the driveway of my house.

“Maybe we should start over,” I say. “Hello, Ms. Evans. I’m Christian.”

I’m going to be married to the woman, the least I could do is act civil. Despite the hiccups. She eyes my outstretched

hand warily for two beats before leaning closer and placing her small, delicate hand in mine. Her hand is warm and soft and I find myself wanting to hold on longer than I should.

“I’m Daniella. Dany to my friends,” she states, before adding, “You’re not my friend.”

I nod. “Of course.”

We’re still seated in the car and she hasn’t made any moves to get out. She continues to stare at my home like it’s some kind of prison or a containment facility. I’m not so sure that’s wrong.

“Please, take me home.”

I cock my head to the side. “I’m afraid I can’t do that, Ms. Evans.”

“Of course you can. It’s as simple as starting this vehicle and driving me back to a place where I’m comfortable living.”

“Why wouldn’t you be comfortable here?” I question.

“That, for one,” she says, pointing at one of my men parading the area with a gun slung over his shoulder.

“Ah,” I say, realizing her point.

“Ah? That’s all you can say?”

My mom always used to say every relationship requires some concessions. Although I’m not planning on building any form of relationship with Daniella, I can at least help her feel a little more comfortable.

“Would you prefer it if I sent all the guards away?”

“I would prefer it if you drove me back home.”

“That’s not on the table, Daniella.”

She stares at me, I stare back, my expression hard. The sooner she understands that this isn’t her daddy’s home and she can’t do whatever the hell she wants, the sooner we can move on from all this nonsense. She nods once and I quickly grab my phone to send a text to Carlo.

Five minutes later, every single guard has pulled out of the compound.

“Now, are you satisfied?” I question.

“I would be satisfied if you would let me go home,” she mumbles.

I give her a look of disbelief, and she rolls her eyes before finally stepping out of the car. One of the help appears immediately to carry her stuff from the back of the car.

“Will it be okay, though? Sending your guards away?” Daniella questions.

“Don’t worry. No one is stupid enough to try to cross the D’Angelo family.”

She rolls her eyes again and my jaw clenches. It’s clear we’re going to need to have a serious conversation about what good manners entails and exactly how she’s supposed to behave when talking to me.

“Let’s go in,” I tell her, placing my hand on the small of her back to guide her into the home.

Daniella immediately wiggles out of my grip, however, acting like my touch is some form of contamination. Another thing we’re going to have to work on. She walks ahead, taking in every aspect of my home, and I stand still for a moment, taking her in. She’s not what I expected or needed. Especially not at this point in my life.

I just took over as the Don. I don’t need women with terrible manners and blonde wigs fucking that up for me.

“Come on, big guy. Give me a house tour,” Daniella calls, turning around while walking. My eyes latch onto her feet as she walks backward, making sure she’s not about to trip or fall. “You can start with your torture room, or kinky sex room. You may as well lay it all out there, I’m screwed anyways.”

She winks at me and a low growl sounds at the back of my throat. Carlo was right. I’m fucked.

As soon as we step inside the house, we run into Christopher, who has clearly been waiting eagerly for my return. His gaze is on the redhead by my side, his smile spreading by the second.

“Hi, beautiful,” he greets, grinning wide enough that the two dimples on his cheeks make an appearance. “Nice wig.”

“Hey, Topher. It’s been a minute,” Daniella says amicably.

I can see in her eyes that she’s relieved to see him. Good, he can keep her company.

“The last time I saw you, you were worried about a paper you had to submit—and now here you are, engaged to my brother.”

“We’re not engaged,” Daniella states, her words like ice.

“Yet,” I add. My eyes are drawn to the watch on my arm and I clear my throat to get their attention. “I have to leave. Topher, show her around. You can start with the torture room.”

Topher raises an eyebrow in question while Daniella simply smirks as I make my way out of the house.

## CHAPTER 5

## *Daniella*

**H**is eyes are golden brown, so light they should rightly be considered amber.

And they're the most beautiful part of his already incredibly handsome face. It's a little off-putting how good-looking Christian is. But his beauty isn't a fragile, soft thing. It's hard and intimidating, so much so that it almost hurts to stare at him for too long.

I'm glad he left. I can finally breathe easier without having to look at my future in the face. Literally, the thought of having to marry him and spend forever with him, leaving me gasping for air. My mind flashes back to the airport and his brash orders.

We are definitely going to have a fucking problem if he thinks I'm just going to roll over and take whatever he wants to dish out.

Topher waves a hand in front of my face. "You've been staring at the spot my brother just walked away from for two minutes," he says, amused.

I look up at him. Christopher D'Angelo is probably the only member of his family that I'm not scared to be around. Mostly because the guy's a sweetheart. If it wasn't for his last name, you wouldn't know he has any affiliations with the mafia. He's the guy that spreads light wherever he goes, and he definitely knows how to party. The man's a joy to have

around and the few times I've spoken to him in the past, I actually liked it.

Why couldn't they have promised me to the nicer brother?

Honestly, it would solve all my problems and then I can go back to being a happy college graduate with no special plans for her life, except to paint and see art.

"I was contemplating killing him," I say calmly.

He chuckles. "My brother does tend to bring out our worst impulses and desires."

That statement feels a little weird, but before I can decipher it, Topher's leading me toward a glass door.

"Come on. He said to take you to the torture room."

I feel the blood leave my face. "That doesn't actually exist, does it?"

Topher laughs. "No, it doesn't. Chill out. Let me show you around the house, though, since I'm sure you'll be spending a lot of your time here for a while."

"Yeah, what's up with that? Why won't he let me go to my own house? We're not married yet," I say angrily.

Topher's expression is thoughtful as he stares at me. "You want my honest opinion?" I nod and he continues. "I'm pretty sure you just got grounded."

My mouth falls open "What?"

"I'm guessing it's your punishment for the stunt today. Christian's good at underhanded plays. I once saw him cheat a guy out of a hundred bucks and the man didn't realize it until he walked away."

"Wait, so I can't leave?"

"I guarantee if you tried to walk out of this house, one of the capos would be there to stop you. Sorry, *cognata*, but you're stuck here. I believe the right word is confinement."

“He told me he sent all the guards away,” I say through gritted teeth.

“He probably did,” Topher muses. “But I’m sure there’s a one or two at the gate. He wouldn’t leave unless he was sure you were under protection. He’s probably had a few men following you around the past two months, as well. The minute Christian found out he was going to marry you, you became someone he had to protect.”

“You mean his property,” I spit out.

“Take it however you want to take it. But you don’t have any choice in this matter. Christian never breaks. If he wants to keep you here, he’ll do it. Don’t worry, I’ll keep you company,” Topher says with a wink.

“This is insane,” I say, blood thumping in my chest.

“Welcome to the family.”

---

“TWO WEEKS, MOTHER!” I grit out. “I’ve been stuck in this place for two weeks!”

Two fucking weeks since I’ve seen the bastard that locked me up in here. He hasn’t returned to see me, not once. It took me exactly one day to realize Topher was right. I was bored out of my mind and tried to leave the house, but one of the guards was at the gate, barring my way. Despite my attempts to persuade him with promises that I would return and even a subtle bribe, he refused to let me pass. Boss’s orders.

I returned to the house with my arms crossed and a desire to find their fucking boss and dig my nails into his eyes. No one has ever evoked such violent thoughts from me, before but Christian does and I’ve only met him once.

A part of me will grudgingly admit that he’s good at this whole punishment thing. After two weeks, I’m ready to kneel at his feet, begging for escape. I’m going crazy in here and my

plight isn't helped by the fact that I don't have any of my art stuff with me. I haven't done any painting in two weeks, and that more than anything is driving me insane.

"I know, sweetheart. We understand how infuriating it must be," my mom says softly. Her incredibly calm voice grates on my nerves.

"Are you and Dad doing anything to get me out of this situation?"

"There's no getting out of it, Daniella. I just wish you hadn't tried to run from the Don. It put your father in a difficult position."

The laugh that bubbles out of me is dry and bitter. "*He's* in a difficult position? I'm the one that's locked up in a murderer's home!"

"Don't raise your voice at me, young lady."

I roll my eyes at her tone. Sometimes, I swear she thinks I'm five and not twenty-two.

"Mom, I can't take this anymore," I say, my voice coming out desperate.

"We're doing the best we can, my darling. Your father's meeting with him to convince him to at least let you come home and pick up your art materials and paintings. I'm sure he'll understand that they're necessities."

They could always send them to me, but I'm fussy about people touching my art. My parents never really enter my studio and that suits me just fine.

"Okay," I say, taking a deep breath. "Thank you."

"You're welcome, honey. And Daniella," she adds. "It would save us all a lot of heartache if you stopped thinking of your husband-to-be as a murderer."

I almost laugh. A murderer is a murderer, what the hell else am I supposed to think of him as? Before I can say that, though, my mom hangs up. I get to my feet, brushing off some

imaginary dust from my conservative blue dress, with long sleeves and a turtleneck. According to the housekeeper, Christian picked out all the clothes made available to me. At least I have a few of my clothes so I don't have to conform to his horrible taste all the time.

I press down on a small button beside the door of my room and a few seconds later, one of the maids is pushing her way in, ready to cater to my needs. This is my life now—being waited on and prevented from lifting a finger. I wasn't even allowed to cook. I tried to and was immediately shut down. Apparently, the wife of the Don doesn't spend any time in the kitchen. I thought Italians liked home-cooked meals made by their family, but I guess I was wrong. The cook makes all the meals. While I'm relegated to the duty of smiling and looking pretty on my husband's arm.

If he ever bothers to show up.

---

I'M FLIPPING through a book I found in the library when my door opens. I don't look up, thinking it's one of the maids wanting to clean. They never talk to me or acknowledge me and I've resolved to do the same to them.

“My only love sprung from my only hate,” a deep voice recites. “I didn't think you'd be a fan of Shakespeare.”

My heart hitches, stopping my breath. I don't look up at him yet. I continue to flip through the copy of *Romeo and Juliet*, reading the words but not taking them in, not with his presence in front of me. He fills the room, dominating it. His presence is like a vise against my anger, choking it, transforming it until it's such a visceral thing, it's all I can feel.

He sighs softly. “Daniella...”

“Two weeks, twenty-six hours and five minutes,” I say under my breath.

“What?”

I finally look up at him. A part of me had been hoping he would be less painful to look at, but he's not. Hard edges and sharp beauty. Standing before me right now, he barely even looks real. But he does look a little tired. There's some stubble on his chin and his hair is slightly overgrown. He's like a painting that looks wrong and yet so very right.

Slamming my book onto the table, I get to my feet, offering him my full attention.

"That's how long you've been gone. Two weeks, twenty-six hours, and five minutes."

He watches me through narrowed eyes. "I didn't realize you missed me."

And that's when I erupt.

"Are you fucking kidding me!" I yell. "You left me here in this goddamn house for weeks, no calls, no texts, nothing. You wouldn't let me receive any guests and you wouldn't let me leave. You made me a fucking prisoner!"

He cocks his head to the side. "Prisoners aren't treated like queens and don't get waited on hand and foot."

Before I can blink, my hand is on his chest. I shove him backward but he barely moves an inch.

"Daniella..." His voice is a warning, a threat, low and dangerous.

A smarter woman would have heeded it.

"You can't treat people like this! You can't lock me up like this!" My anger is a raw, visceral thing. Christian doesn't even flinch at the sight of it.

He slips his hands into the pockets of his pants, his stare boring into my face. He looks calm, unbothered, and that only serves to infuriate me all the more. I try to quell the growing rage inside me.

"Don't you have anything to say?" I demand.

“I asked Topher to keep you company,” he says after several breaths of silence.

A wry chuckle escapes me. “We both know your brother is as unreliable as an ashtray on a fucking motorcycle.”

Topher ditched me after the third day. According to him, he had an important social call to make, and he promised to be back later that day. I haven’t seen him since.

If I didn’t know any better, I would say Christian is amused. In this moment, when I’m about to lose my shit. I open my mouth to say something scathing but he shuts me up with his next words.

“Do you want to go home or not?”

My mouth clamps shut. He raises an eyebrow, letting me know he needs a verbal reply to his question. So I force myself to say the words.

“Yes, I want to go home.”

“Alright, good. A driver will arrive to take you to your home in exactly one hour. You’ll collect all the necessities your parents seem to think are important to you and then you’ll return here.”

My mouth falls open. I can’t help it, surprise is a constant state of being whenever this man is around.

“You just said I could go home.” My voice comes out low and weak.

He nods. “I did say that. But I didn’t say you could go permanently.”

My anger bubbles up again. “Listen, you narcissistic, controlling, asshole! I’m not staying here. I refuse to stay here with you, and you can’t keep me here against my will. This is basically kidnapping.”

He gives me a look that suggests my outburst is a mere tantrum and not something he gives a fuck about. Then something in his gaze shifts and he’s walking closer to me. I

should move, take a step back, but I stand my ground, refusing to let him see me scared.

Christian's hand comes up to my face and his thumb caresses my cheek, the motion almost reverent. My eyes meet his, amber on blue, ice on fire.

"In case you didn't realize, Ms. Evans, the two of us are to be married." He says the words slowly, like he's talking to a preschooler. "We're going to be living with each other eventually, why not start now?"

The tension in the room goes up several degrees, shortening my breath.

"I don't want to live with you. And considering you disappeared for two weeks, I'm not sure you want to live with me, either."

He smirks. "I was busy. Being a narcissistic, controlling asshole is a lot of work."

My gaze narrows. "You don't own me, Christian D'Angelo."

"Oh, but I do," he says, just as he takes a step back from me. He takes his heat with him. "The minute your father signed that contract with your grandfather, you became mine, Daniella."

His words are like a vicious bite against my skin. My eyes follow him the entire way to the door. Before he turns the knob and opens it, he looks back at me.

"And remember, *wife*," his tone is mocking, grating, "if you ever try to run from me again, two weeks of confinement will be the least of your problems."

Then he's walking out the door. It slams behind him and the noise reverberates in my head. And in my soul—because for the first time, I realize just how hopeless my situation really is.

## CHAPTER 6

## *Christian*

**M**y fist slams into my brother's stomach, hard and precise. Adrenaline buzzes through me as Carlo groans, but it's short-lived when he counters with a hit to my lower ribs. It's a punch that knocks the wind out of me. I pause for a few seconds to catch my breath before shaking it off.

"You alright, *fratello*?" Carlo asks. "You seem a little distracted."

Sweat drops down my forehead, and with a groan, I wipe it all away. Carlo and I have been in here for an hour, trying to land punch after punch. It's how we work through our frustrations. I've been sparring with my brothers since I was five.

"I'm fine," I grit out.

Carlo gives me a look that says he doesn't believe me. Then he runs a hand through his hair and nods at me, a clear sign that he's done. I raise an eyebrow.

"You punching me isn't going to solve whatever it is that's bothering you, Chris," he says.

I rub my jaw, which is still sore from the punch he landed earlier. I always tell him not to go for my face but he never fucking listens.

"She's on a fucking hunger strike," I mutter.

Carlo's brown eyes brighten. "I'm sorry, repeat that?" he asks, amused.

"Daniella hasn't eaten anything since yesterday," I grumble. "She's pissing me the hell off."

My teeth clench as Carlo's amusement grows. The fucker's really enjoying this new impossible situation I've found myself in. A lot of my men are, in fact. I've walked in a few conversations about "the Don's pretty fiancée." It's maddening.

"So what are you going to do about it?" he asks. "You can't let her starve to death. It'll make you look bad."

"You think I don't know that?" I growl.

Carlo smiles before reaching over and clapping my shoulder.

"You'll figure it out. You're Christian D'Angelo. Don of the D'Angelos. You haven't met a problem you couldn't solve. A woman isn't going to be the first one."

My neck snaps to the side, once, twice, as I let his words settle over me. My brother's right. I thought letting her get some of her things would appease her, but it seems the woman's harder to please than I thought. Still, there are several reasons I'm the head of one of the biggest mafia organizations in New York. And one of those is my fucking resilience.

I'll break Daniella Evans eventually.

---

WHEN I OPEN the door to Daniella's room later that evening, she's in the middle of her bed, eyes closed and body so still I'm sure she's sleeping. Then she cracks one eyelid open, takes one look at me, sighs before closing it again.

"Go away," she mutters.

“That’s not very nice,” I tell her. “Aren’t you curious about what I’ve got to say?”

“Not really. Now leave, I’m trying to conserve what energy I’ve got left in my body and I’d rather not deplete it talking to you.”

I don’t go anywhere, and after several seconds, she opens her eyes and sits up with a resigned expression.

“What the hell do you want?” she questions. “And why do you keep coming into my room without an invitation?”

I raise an eyebrow. “We’re going to be married.”

“Doesn’t mean you can just barge in here. What if I had been naked? Playing with a sex toy?”

Sometimes I have to pause, stare, and make sense of the words that come out of her mouth. The woman is a fucking enigma. And yet, heat sings in my blood as my mind tries to paint the picture of what she just mentioned. I dispel those thoughts, choosing to focus on the situation at hand.

“I’ll knock next time,” I tell her.

“Much appreciated,” she says dryly. “Now, if you could just leave..”

“I’m not walking out of this room until you explain to me why you’ve decided to act like a two-year-old. A hunger strike? Really, Daniella, you’re twenty-two years old. Tactics like this are beneath you.”

Her eyes darken, blue depths iced over by rage.

“What? You’re trying to control what I can and can’t eat now? When I should and shouldn’t eat?”

“I’m trying to make sure you don’t die under my fucking roof.”

Whenever I’m with her, I can feel my control start to slip away, and I hate it. So damn much.

“Careful, Christian. You almost sound like you care.”

My eyes narrow. “What do I have to do to make you stop with your childish antics?”

“Consider the contract null and void and let me go free?” she suggests, a hopeful lilt to her voice.

I quash it immediately. “Never going to happen, Ms. Evans.”

She rolls her eyes. “Fine, then at least let me go out. Not permanently, but just to see my friends. Maybe grab a cup of coffee or some lunch. And if you’d let me attend a party or two, that’d be nice.”

“It’s cute you think I’m letting you go to any parties. Ever,” I state. “But yes to the first request. You can leave the house, as long as you do so with your bodyguards. I’ll introduce them to you tomorrow. From now on, they’ll shadow you. Everywhere you go, they go.”

Her fists tighten around the comforter in her hands. She wants to fight it, I can see it in her tense shoulders and the look of defiance in her eyes. But in the end, she must see that this is the best she’s going to get from me.

“Fine,” she says. “Make sure the bodyguards are at least pretty to look at.”

With those words, she gets to her feet and presses down on the button to call the help. I’m completely silent as a maid arrives and Daniella asks her to get some food. I wait until she has scarfed down a sizable amount before letting myself out of the room.

That night, when I assign her bodyguards, I make sure they’re the least attractive men I’ve got.

---

THE CLACK of the keyboard fills my ear as I press down letter after letter, my hands moving in a smooth motion and a rhythm only I am accustomed to. My gaze is fixed on the

screen, trying to catch just one slip-up from the man I'm watching.

His name is Lorenzo Grus. As of last night, he's a fucking enemy to the D'Angelos. He wanted what he shouldn't have and now he's going to pay the price. Carlo steps forward to lean against my chair behind me, watching the screen just as intently.

"He still at the hotel?" my brother asks.

"The fucker's taking forever to blow his load," I mutter in irritation.

"Can't really blame him, Don," Nico, one of my cousins, calls. "The woman he took in there was smoking hot."

It's 7 p.m. and we're inside a van, parked in a dark alleyway, waiting for Lorenzo to arrive. The man walks by here every night on his way to his favorite gambling den and we're determined to get him tonight.

"I don't give a fuck if the woman was burning hot. If he doesn't come outside in ten minutes, we're going in there," I state.

Nico gives me a look. "Chill out, boss. We're on Santos territory, remember that."

I rub the back of my neck. I do remember, and although the last thing I want to start is a fucking gang war, I also really hate betrayals. Why couldn't Lorenzo have just done the shit he was ordered to do?

"What are you going to do with him?" Carlo asks me.

"What do you think?" I say under my breath. "I'm going to fuck him up. That way, no one ever even thinks of messing with us again."

Fortunately, Lorenzo steps outside the hotel five minutes later. I watch through the CCTV camera I hacked into as he staggers on his feet. The man has clearly had too much to drink and isn't in the right state of mind. My mouth curves into a smile.

“Nico, Brut,” I start. Both men are immediately attentive, waiting to hear their orders. “Bring him here. Quietly.”

When they leave, I grab my gun, a silver '45 my father gave me and the only gun I treasure. Carlo hands me a silencer so the gunshot doesn't make any noise, alerting people to our location. Although, judging by the neighborhood, gunshots are probably the least worrying things to be heard.

By the time we're done prepping and grabbing our weapons, the sound of a scuffle is emanating from outside the van. Carlo and I step out.

“Lorenzo. It's been a long time,” I greet, a sardonic smile on my face.

The man pales as he looks at me and his hands start to visibly shake. I never handle these matters on my own. A Don personally doling out punishment means you fucked up in a way that will leave you begging for your mother. Lorenzo sinks down to his knees, his green eyes wide and fearful.

“Boss,” he cries. “I know I fucked up.”

I lean against the van, as I wait for him to finish his plea.

“You've got to understand, my mama's sick. Really sick, and I've got three other siblings to take care of. I didn't have much of a choice.”

My jaw tightens. “You had every choice, except to steal some of our dope, Lorenzo.”

He was our man on the inside with Desantos, sending us information if they were trying to make a move against us. And ensuring trade relations between us remained tight. Desantos provide us with guns, we provide them with drugs. That's the way it works. But those relations are fragile now thanks to him. Desantos didn't get their complete order yesterday and they're not happy about it. I've got to broker a new peace.

“Did you really think we weren't going to find out? We've got other men on the inside, Lorenzo. Not just you,” I tell him.

“And you should be glad I’m taking care of this myself. If Desantos found out, a bullet would be the least of your worries.”

He nods in understanding, and I watch as a single tear rolls down his face. The man knows he’s reached the end of the road.

“I just... I had to take care of my mama.”

I get on my haunches and look straight into his eyes. “You could have come to me, told me your mama was sick and needed extra cash. And I would have helped you. You know that. Instead, you stole. We don’t condone stealing.”

He looks down at the ground. “I know, boss.”

“Good,” I tell him, standing up again and pointing the gun at him. “Head or heart?”

His eyes flutter close. “Shoot me in the head.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll make sure your mama and siblings are well taken care of. They’re D’Angelos now.”

“Thanks, Don,” the man says on a harsh exhale.

I count it in my head. One second, two seconds. But on the third one, I hesitate, the uncorrupted part of my soul wanting to stop, to show mercy, to let him go. But mercy’s a privilege that doesn’t apply in my world. Mercy’s a sign of weakness. And as the top dog, I can’t afford to demonstrate any form of weakness. So I let the bullet fly and it hits him right in the middle of his head.

Barely a sound or cry, and Lorenzo Grus falls down, dead.

My breath comes out pained. I turn to my brother.

“Bury him properly,” I order. “And make sure to check on his mama and siblings. Take care of it all quietly, Carlo. We don’t want Desantos finding out about all this.”

My brother nods. I let out another harsh exhale before heading to my car that’s parked a few feet away. I breathe easier once I’m far away from it all. Once I’m sure the soul I

just reaped has gone straight to hell or heaven, wherever he was meant to go.

## CHAPTER 7

## *Daniella*

I don't understand Christian D'Angelo. Which shouldn't come as a surprise, considering I barely know the man.

This morning, he sent one of the maids to call me downstairs, claiming it was time we had our first meal together.

We've lived under the same roof for three weeks and we haven't eaten together once. In fact I've barely seen him, with him coming and going at odd hours of the night. It has suited me perfectly since every interaction ends with my blood boiling. Him insisting we share a meal together was weird enough. Even weirder was his refusal to acknowledge my presence or even say a single word to me.

I make an attempt to fill the silence. "You got home late last night," I say, cutting a piece of my pancake with my fork before chewing it slowly.

Christian finally looks up at me. As always, he looks completely put together, formal, gentlemanly. Black suit, sans tie—I've noticed he doesn't wear those. There's not a single dark hair out of place. He looks just as he does all the time. But there's a darkness in his eyes that makes my breath hitch.

"I got home around eleven. What were you doing awake?" he asks, taking a sip of his orange juice.

My teeth clench but I swallow my irritation. "I was painting. I hope you don't mind but I'm using one of the extra rooms since there isn't an art studio in this house." He nods

once, and I continue. “I was in the room when I heard you come in.”

“Sneak in” is more accurate, though. I watched from the top of the stairs as he entered, his footsteps light and quiet, like he was trying not to draw any attention to himself.

“It was late and I didn’t want to wake anyone,” he says, accurately guessing the direction of my thoughts.

“Oh, okay,” I say awkwardly because I’m not sure how to say what I really want to say. But I noticed the tension in his jaw and the look on his face when he arrived in the night. Putting it simply, he looked awful.

Christian cocks an eyebrow at me. “Do you want something?”

“No, why do you ask?”

He shrugs. “It just seems like you’re fishing for something.”

“I’m just trying to make conversation because this is one of the most awkward breakfasts I’ve ever had. And it’s with a man I’m supposed to spend the rest of my life with.”

“Fine, what would you like to talk about?” he asks, staring straight at me.

Being the subject of his attention sends a flush of heat through me. I blink, unable to hold his gaze for too long. So I look down at my breakfast, pushing the bacon around on my plate.

“Where were you last night?”

His jaw tenses and he looks away. I watch as his hand tightens around the cutlery in it.

“Business,” is his curt reply.

“Really? That’s all I get?”

Christian drops his fork and knife. They hit the table with a clang, his expression suddenly impatient. “I’m trying here,

Daniella.”

“No, you’re not. You ask me to breakfast and then you spend the entire time not speaking.”

“Because every time I talk to you, it somehow ends up in an argument. You’re incapable of being civil.”

My jaw drops opens. “I-I’m incapable of being civil? Me?” I ask on a short, bitter laugh. “You’re the one acting like a weirdo after I asked a simple question about last night.”

“It’s none of your business,” he says under his breath.

My eyes narrow. “Contrary to what you may believe, functional couples make a point of getting involved in their significant other’s life. That’s how relationships work.”

“Then it’s a good thing we’re not a functional couple and this isn’t a real relationship,” Christian says, getting to his feet. He fixes the button of his suit jacket.

“So you’re keeping me in this house and the only other person that’s allowed to actually talk to me refuses to talk to me?” I ask bitterly.

“Yes, Daniella. That’s your life now, and it would be in both our best interests if you just got used to it,” he says, before walking out of the room.

My chest burns with indignation and I’m filled with the sudden urge to stab someone. My hands shake. I haven’t cried once since finding out about this marriage and I’m not about to start now. But I’m scared that if I don’t find an outlet for all the feelings raging inside of me, I’ll go crazy.

And the worst part? I’m sure Christian wouldn’t care. He seems to fit right at home with damaged things. Probably because he’s just as damaged.

“Should I clear the table, miss?” one of the maids asks, stepping forward.

A wry laugh escapes me. “Do whatever you want.”

I get to my feet and head to my room. Christian and I couldn't even survive an entire meal together. How are we going to survive the rest of our lives?

---

“HEY, HONEY,” Zoey greets, sitting down beside me and giving me a hug. “You good?”

Even as she asks, her eyes drift toward the two imposing men standing behind our booth and drawing way too much unnecessary attention. I stare at my green-eyed friend, trying to convey just how miserable I am with one look.

“Of course I'm not good, Zoe,” I say dryly.

She sighs softly. “I know, sweetie. I can't believe your parents are just letting this happen. Can't your dad negotiate some other terms of the arrangement that wouldn't end with you marrying him?”

Unlike Sky, Zoey understands my world a little better. Her parents are diplomats from England that live in the U.S. She's British with strawberry-blonde hair, green eyes, and a heart of gold. She's also one of my best friends. I met her and Sky during our first year of college when we were assigned to the same room. The friendship blossomed from there.

“That might have worked if we were talking about normal people here, Zoe. But we're not. These aren't just some aristocrats or people with old family money, it's the mafia. They're ruled by codes of violence and ruthlessness. They won't listen to reason.”

Even as I say that, a part of me knows it's not exactly true. Despite how infuriating he can be, Christian hasn't been in any way violent or rude to me. In fact, he's been a perfect gentleman: calm, composed—reasonable might be pushing it, but he's not a total ruffian.

“So you don't have a choice?”

I shake my head. “In a couple of months, you’ll be calling me, Mrs. D’Angelo. Wife to the Don.”

“It has a nice ring to it,” Zoey says with a smile.

I glare at her. “Not funny.”

Sky finally makes an appearance twenty minutes later. I swear she makes a point of showing up late everywhere she goes. She’s always claiming that punctuality is a spectrum that varies from person to person. I’m always claiming it’s bullshit.

She takes a seat opposite us on the booth, slipping off her sunglasses and black jacket.

“Geez, Dany, if your husband-to-be was going to assign bodyguards to you, couldn’t they have at least been nice to look at?” Sky asks.

I laugh while Zoey panics, looking behind us at the large imposing men standing as still as statues.

“I’m pretty sure they heard that!” Zoey whisper-shouts.

“While a part of me agrees with you,” I say to Sky, “be nice to Zack and Brody.”

“Right, sorry. Hi, Zack, Brody,” Sky greets, raising her hand to them in acknowledgment.

They nod once but don’t say a word. Like the rest of the people Christian hires, they seem to have sworn an oath to act mute around me. It’s annoying.

“Speaking of your husband-to-be,” Sky starts, “how’s he treating you now? Still an asshole?”

I roll my eyes. “I haven’t seen him in three days.”

Zoey frowns. “That’s not healthy. Aren’t you two supposed to be trying to work through your issues?”

“That’s the thing, I don’t think he particularly cares. He’s intent on ignoring my existence except when it’s beneficial to him. While living at his house, I’m at his every whim, and quite honestly, I’m sick of it.”

“So, confront him,” Sky says.

“I’ve tried, Sky.”

She crosses her arms and levels me with a reproving stare. “No, you haven’t. You’re Daniella freaking Evans. You once missed a test because you went kayaking and instead of letting it go, you followed the professor around for days, begging him to let you take a make-up test. You never quit. Ever.”

“You have a point,” I admit. “But Christian’s not the easiest person to talk to.”

Zoey scoffs. “And you are?”

I give her a look. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I’m saying I know you, honey. You can be a little hot-headed.”

My eyes narrow. “Please tell me you’re not actually on his side! You’ve never even met him.”

“There aren’t any sides in this situation, Dany. We’re talking about what’s best for both of you. Plus, I have met him, once. And he was a perfect gentleman—handsome, too,” Zoey adds.

A daughter of a diplomat and a mob boss in a room? Sounds like the beginning of a bad joke.

I cross my arms. “Really? So, just because he has a pretty face, I’m supposed to ignore all his red flags?”

“I didn’t say that,” Zoey states.

“Uh... pretty sure I heard you, Zoe,” Sky says with a grin. “But that doesn’t really matter.” She faces me. “You called your husband pretty.”

“Because he’s annoyingly good-looking,” I grumble.

Sky leans back into the booth with a smug expression on her face. “Well, at least you’re attracted to him. There’s that. I was so sure you were doomed to failure.”

I make sure my face conveys enough irritation at her assumption. “When did I say I was attracted to him? He has a nice face, but his personality makes me want to chew nails and swallow them.”

She smirks. “You’ll be alright, Dany.”

“No, stop making that face.”

“What face?”

“That face you make when you’re planning something devious.”

Our friend’s brown eyes are practically twinkling. Of the three of us, Sky’s the most cynical and the most likely to end up in jail before the age of thirty. She’s always getting into dangerous shit. She’s strong, confident, and never takes shit from anyone. Which is why it’s really pissing me off that neither her or Zoey are on my side on this issue.

If it was Sky in my shoes and Christian had her locked up, she would have poured cleaner fluid down his mouth while he slept. Not that I have any confirmation that he actually sleeps. For all I know, he could be a vampire hoping to suck my blood on our wedding night.

“All I’ll say is that I’m really interested in how Daniella’s situation plays out.”

“I’ll tell you how it plays out,” I state. “With one of us in a body bag.”

“You’ve talked about murder more times in the past thirty minutes than you have in the four years I’ve known you,” Zoey mentions.

I groan. “See, Christian’s already rubbing off on me in the wrong way.”

Sky grins. “You might just end up liking him.”

“And if you don’t, I wouldn’t mind a go at him.”

I stare at Zoey, horrified by that suggestion.

“What?” she says, oblivious to the way my insides are turning. “You clearly haven’t seen the man, Sky. He’s gorgeous.”

“He would eat you alive!”

“I’d probably say thank you,” Zoey says with a wink.

My mouth falls open. “Gross, Zoe. Gross.” I point at Sky. “The two of you are so not helping my situation.”

“That’s because there’s nothing we can do. Either make up with your soon-to-be husband or break up,” Sky says.

“But you can’t break up, so…” Zoey trails off.

I’m so screwed, but I also take their point. Zoey’s weird proposition aside, Christian and I don’t really have any other options in this scenario. Well, he has an option, and it’s as simple as terminating the contract. But he won’t do that, so we don’t have any choice. If this relationship is going to work, then we’re both going to have to try harder. But to do that, one of us has to take a step first.

It’s pretty clear he has no plans to do so. Therefore, I have to be the mature one.

## CHAPTER 8

## *Christian*

The first thing I see when I return home later that night is Daniella, fast asleep and seated at the bottom of the stairs. For several seconds, I stare at her. She looks so peaceful in her sleep. I sweep my gaze over her face, long lashes, smooth cheekbones, pouty mouth. There's a small birthmark on the corner of her mouth. It's unfair how ridiculously beautiful she is. Makes it that much harder to not think about her. Our situation is already complicated enough. And I'm too busy to think about any fantasies involving her.

"Daniella," I call.

She slowly stirs, lifting her head to look at me through sleepy, half-lidded eyes. A protective urge wells in my chest. It's both a blessing and a curse that I've always been irrational protective of the things I own. Unfortunately for Daniella, she's unwillingly become one of those things.

She groans softly before crossing her arms and closing her eyes to go back to sleep. With a sigh, I reach over and tap her shoulder. This time when she groans, it's louder and heavy with frustration.

"What are you doing here?" I question.

One of her eyes pops open to look at me. "A gentleman would have thrown a jacket over me, lifted me into his arms, and carried me to my bed."

"You read too many novels. I never claimed to be a gentleman, Daniella."

Both her eyes are open now, her gaze fixed on me. “You are,” she says softly. “Underneath the title and bravado, I think there’s an actual human heart in there. Maybe you’re a good person.”

Tension coils in my chest, icy cold spreading through me.

“I’m not. You had the right idea the first time, Evans.”

“My idea of you is that you’re a cold-hearted murderer,” she states.

“Like I said. It’s the right one.”

Our gazes meet, and while a part of me had been expecting fear, all I see in her eyes is grudging acceptance and resignation. It’s not ideal, but it’s better than nothing.

“What are you doing here instead of your bed?” I ask again.

“I was waiting for you,” she replies, getting to her feet. She yawns softly, a manicured hand reaching up to cover her mouth. My eyes narrow at her words.

“Whatever fight you’re planning to pick, can’t it wait till morning? It’s 12 a.m.,” I tell her, stepping on the staircase to head to my room.

She blocks my path. “I don’t want to pick a fight. I stayed up to talk to you, can’t you just listen?”

“You were snoring on the steps five minutes ago, Daniella. You’re tired, go to sleep.”

She lets out an indignant gasp. “I don’t snore!”

I give her a dry look. “Could you leave me alone, please?”

“No,” she insists.

I decide to ignore her, heading up the stairs.

“Why are you following me?” I grumble a few seconds later.

“Maybe I want to see what it looks like in your man cave,” she says from behind me.

It's clear there's no shaking her. When I open the door to my room, she follows me in.

There's not much to see. I don't spend a lot of time here, so it's basically just a room that houses all my clothes and a bed I rarely sleep in. Daniella's drawn to the table, however, and the books on it. My jaw clenches when she grabs one from the middle of the neat pile, thereby collapsing the stack I made.

Her eyes brighten as she pores over them. "Oh, I see. You're the one that reads too much."

"I don't," I mutter.

"John Grisham, self-help books, cookbooks. Dude, you're a total nerd," she says brightly.

"Don't touch those," I tell her, moving closer and collecting one of the books from her hand.

She's completely silent as I redo the stack, making sure there's not a single book out of place.

"So you're not only an asshole, you're an asshole with OCD?" Daniella questions.

There's a smirk on her face when I look back at her.

"I don't have OCD. I just like my shit in the right place."

"Whatever you say."

"Are you ever going to tell me what you want from me?"

"Right. We need to make some progress with our relationship. It's been a month. We got through the awkward talking stage, minus the talking in our case. Now it's time for dates and couples outings."

I tilt my head in confusion, trying to make sense of the words coming out of her mouth. "Am I supposed to understand what you just said?"

"What I'm trying to say is that this no talking, no seeing each other situation isn't working out for me anymore."

According to you, we're getting married in a few months. And if we are, then we might as well try to work toward a civil relationship."

"And how are we supposed to do that?" I ask, taking off my suit jacket.

"You could start with not being so stuck up all the time. We can talk to each other. About our interests, hobbies, that sort of thing. Basically, I'm saying we get to know each other."

I'm pretty sure she doesn't want to know anything about my hobbies or interests.

"Uh-huh. And what brought this on?" Unconsciously, I start to undo the buttons of my shirt. Daniella's eyes widen and she clears her throat. I look up at her. "If it bothers you, you can leave."

She smiles sweetly. "It doesn't bother me in the slightest. Continue." She motions with her fingers.

As soon as my shirt is off, her eyes zero in on my chest. I catch an appreciative glint in her eyes, right before she notices something on my arm. She lets out a soft gasp, pointing at the area.

"Is that a bullet wound?"

I almost smile. Sometimes I think the woman has a clear grasp on what it means to be in my world, and then she goes on to say shit like this and I realize she has no fucking clue. She's naïve. It's kind of cute and refreshing.

"Never seen one before, Evans?"

She shakes her head. "How badly did it hurt?" she breathes.

That wasn't the question I was expecting her to ask. I hesitate before replying. "Like hell. It hurt a fucking lot."

"Is it bad that I'm curious about how painful a bullet wound could be? Like, realistically, do you think it hurts

worse than period cramps?”

Her face is so fucking serious right now, I’m not sure whether to laugh or not.

“How the hell would I know what period cramps feel like?” I ask, flabbergasted. “Is that a real question?”

“What?” She shrugs. “Period cramps can be pretty painful. Every month, I’m on my knees begging for some relief. Now that I think about it, I’m probably getting my period next week,” she muses.

My eyes drift over her face, wondering what I’m going to do with this woman that definitely has no fucking filter.

“Do you always say whatever’s on your mind?”

“Usually,” she says with a smile. “So, breakfast tomorrow? And you’ll leave your stuck-up, annoying attitude in your bed, where it belongs.”

I’ll say anything to get her out of my room at this point.

“Yes, now please leave. *Buona notte.*”

She stares at me blankly.

“You don’t speak Italian.”

“Nope.”

I sigh softly. “That might need some rectification. Good night, Evans.”

After successfully seeing her out of the room, I head to my bed. I haven’t had a good night’s rest in a year. Not since my father died and I took over as Don. And even before then, my nights were haunted by the faces of the people whose lives I stole.

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DANIELLA’S already waiting for me in the dining room when I arrive downstairs. It’s pretty clear she just woke up. Her red

hair's in a messy bun on top of her head, she's wearing pajama shorts and a black T-shirt, and she has yawned three times since I walked in. I give her a look.

"You could have slept in," I tell her, taking a seat at the head of the table.

She shakes her head. "And miss you before you left for work? We have an arrangement, Christian, and I plan to hold up my end of the bargain."

"Alright, then."

I'm still not sure why she's so interested in making our relationship work, but she's trying. The least I can do is reciprocate.

"The answer is no, by the way," I say in response to the question she asked last night.

Daniella blinks in confusion. "What?"

"The bullet wound question. Getting shot is significantly more painful than cramps. Although that might vary from person to person, considering you mentioned something about having painful periods. Childbearing, however, seems to be more painful than a gunshot. I'm sure it was definitely more painful than mine. I barely felt it in the moment, but it hurt like a bitch afterward—"

"Christian," she calls, stopping my explanation. "How is the talk of bullet wounds normal breakfast conversation?"

"You asked," I say on a shrug.

She's silent for a beat, an expression I can't discern flitting over her face.

"How do you even know all that?"

"I did some research after you left," I tell her off-handedly, leaning forward to dish some of the food onto my plate. I ask the maid to send my compliments to the chef. Daniella's a little silent, although her eyes are fixed on my face.

“So you researched period cramps, childbirth, and gunshots after I left last night? Because I asked?” she questions.

“No, I did it because I was curious.”

“Oh, okay. That’s weird.”

I lean back in my chair and shoot her a look. “You don’t get to judge considering you’re the reason I fell down the rabbit hole in the first place. I now know more than I needed to know about the female reproductive system.”

“Dude, I didn’t ask you to do that.”

“Yes, but you put the idea in my head, and I had to figure out an answer to your question.”

Daniella smiles. “You have OCD.”

“Did I miss the part where you have a degree in psychology and are able to diagnose mental disorders?”

“I took a class sophomore year. I know a little.”

“I’m not obsessive, Daniella. I do not have OCD.”

“Not even a little bit?”

I grit my teeth. “Are you incapable of not pissing me off?”

Her eyes flash. “That depends, are you incapable of not being a dick? You know what? Forget this.” She gets to her feet, the movement so sudden her chair falls to the floor. “I’m not losing any more sleep for this.”

My jaw tightens as I stare at her. “Sit down, Evans.”

“Make me.”

My lips curl into a smile. “You really don’t want to test me right now, *tesoro*.”

Her gaze flares with annoyance. “No, you don’t want to test me! I’m done with this bullshit, Christian.”

“You’re the one trying to make sure this relationship works out. Have a little more patience. Eat your food.”

“Don’t patronize me,” she retorts.

“Sit down. We’ll give this getting-to-know-each-other thing another go,” I tell her.

Finally, she grabs her chair from the floor, placing it upright before taking her seat. I lean forward.

At the risk of pissing her off again, I have to say, “You know you’re a little immature right?”

“You know you’re an asshole, right?”

“Yes.”

“Then yes to your question as well,” she agrees. “Can we move on to the getting-to-know-each-other bit?”

“What do you want to know?” I ask her.

“Something easy. Tell me what a normal day looks like for you. You can leave out all the murder bits since they’re so sensitive.”

I almost smile. “Alright, a normal day for me starts at 6 a.m. I get out of bed, get dressed, head down here for breakfast, and I leave before 8 a.m.”

“To where?”

“The D’Angelos have a pub on Bleeker Street. I mostly run the business from there.”

“A pub,” Daniella muses. “Can I go with you sometime?”

“Women aren’t allowed, Evans. Especially not women in the family.”

“But I’m not in the family yet,” she counters. “And women aren’t allowed? What kind of outdated, misogynistic rule is that? Bullshit.”

I raise an eyebrow. “While I didn’t make the rule, it’s one that’s strictly followed by D’Angelos. You aren’t going anywhere near that pub.”

“I’ll do whatever I want to do.”

I inwardly sigh. She's so fucking stubborn. And it seems she hasn't learned her lesson yet. The minute I found out about the agreement between her father and my family, she lost all autonomy when it comes to making her decisions. "Keep telling yourself that."

"So, you spend all your time in your pub conducting *business*. That's it?"

I shrug. "I head to the gym sometimes. There's one close to the pub and one at home."

"This house?" she questions in surprise.

"Of course, Evans. It's in the basement. I'm surprised you haven't been down there."

"I'm not a fan of exercise," she informs me.

"Honestly, that doesn't surprise me. You're lazy."

Her eyes narrow. "I'm not lazy!"

"You literally do nothing except sit on your ass all day, scrolling on your phone. Then you pick up the occasional book."

"I would have more of a social life but a certain misogynistic asshole is trying to restrict my movements!"

"I'm trying to keep you safe."

"It's not like you have much of a life, either. All you do is read, work, work out, and kill people! You're in no position to judge me."

"I didn't judge you. I called you lazy."

"Same thing!" she bursts out.

For some reason, I laugh. "Are we really sure we can make this work?"

"Either we do or one of us ends up in a body bag," Daniella says under her breath.

I give her a look. "Stop talking about getting killed or killing anyone. I'd never let anyone hurt you. Least of all me."

“But you’d marry me against my will?” she asks softly.

Her words give me pause. Is that really what this is? If she’s so opposed to the idea of marrying me, am I really ready to force her? It hits me that I could so easily release her. We haven’t been made any public appearances together, no one knows about the arrangement. It would be so easy to end it. But I would be dishonoring my father.

“Do you want me to end it?” I voice out my question.

She stares at me, not comprehending the question for several seconds. When she finally does, she lets out a tiny gasp of surprise. “You would do that?”

“I’m not sure. But, I don’t want to force you into a marriage, Daniella. If you say no, then... this is over.”

She hesitates, her expression thoughtful, “I-I don’t know.”

I nod once before getting to my feet, “Think about it, Evans. If you don’t want this, then you’re free.”

Even as I say the word, I feel a sharp twinge of regret. Because if it’s not Daniella, it’ll have to be some other woman. As the Don, I have a responsibility to marry, and not just anyone. I have to marry well, and marrying into the Evans family would give our family access to some resources and connections we wouldn’t have otherwise.

Also, now that I’m faced with the possibility of an end, I realize I don’t mind marrying her. She drives me nuts, but she also keeps things interesting. My own personal enigma.

“Christian,” she says, looking up at me, her voice soft and vulnerable. “Thank you.”

## CHAPTER 9

## *Daniella*

“Sweetie, I’m only going to say this once and I need you to understand. You can’t say no.”

My eyes widen as I stare at my mother. When I called her over here, I had been hoping she would give me some advice on what to do. Christian left this morning after giving me a choice regarding this marriage. And after spending the entire morning unsure of what to do, I called her. I half-expected Christian not to authorize her visit, but since she’s family, I guess he decided to be lenient.

“What do you mean, I can’t say no?” I’m unable to mask my irritation. “This would be the best time to say no. The news isn’t out yet, we haven’t made any public appearances. Hell, he hasn’t even proposed. I’ve only been living here, trying to get to know him, but now that he’s given me a chance, why wouldn’t I agree?”

Her expression is calm as she looks at me. “Daniella, your father and I love you very much. We want what’s best for you. And right now, Christian D’Angelo is exactly that.”

I stare at her confused. “What does that even mean? He’s the head of a crime syndicate. In what world is he what’s best for me?”

“From where I’m sitting, the only hiccup you seem to have with Christian is his job. Tell me, in the month since you’ve been here, has he in any way treated you wrongly?”

“Are you kidding? I’m practically a prisoner here and when he’s around, we’re constantly at each other’s throats.”

“That sounds like petty arguments to me. And knowing you, you’re probably pushing that young man.”

“Young man?” I laugh wryly. Is my mother insane? “Mom, he has killed people. He literally admitted it to me.”

“Everyone does terrible things when they have to.”

“Not fucking murder,” I say, dumbfounded. “What’s going on? As my mother, you should be telling me to accept Christian’s offer and get out while I still can. Do you want me to end up dead!”

The words come out shriller than I intended.

“I love you, Dany. And I’m always trying to do what’s right for you. I wouldn’t willingly push you into a situation that wouldn’t be beneficial to you.”

“No, but you’d push me into the mafia,” I say dryly.

“You’d be well protected. Sweetheart, there is more to this life than you know and we are only doing what we think is best,” she counters. “Christian seems like an honorable man. And he holds a lot of power in New York. I know you’d be safe, comfortable, maybe even happy.”

“You want me to marry someone I don’t have any feelings for?”

She leans forward to take my hand in hers. “Finding love before marriage is a privilege that doesn’t exist in our world, my sweet.”

“Why don’t you come out and say it?” I ask, my chest growing hot. “You want me to do this for Daddy. Because despite how it would affect me, in the end, this marriage would be beneficial to Evans Industries. He’s selling me to build his empire.”

Tears well up in my eyes as I say the words. I berate myself for feeling hurt in the first place. I should have

expected this, anticipated it. If it isn't Christian now, eventually, I'd find myself in an arranged marriage with some other man with money and connections.

"Your father loves you. I love you. And this arrangement was made so long ago but we thought it was the best arrangement possible. I know it's not what you wanted but you will learn to be happy. You have a duty to your family," my mom says softly.

"Mom, can you go?" I ask, my voice low and cold.

"What?"

"I need you to leave, okay? I can't even look at you right now."

Her features are drawn tight as she looks at me. Her mouth is pulled into a frown.

"Look around you, baby. You'll be treated like a princess in here. He may be a little rough around the edges but Christian is a very handsome young man. Make the right choice, Daniella."

She picks up her bag and, after one last look at me, she makes her way out. I fall back onto my bed, curling into a fetal position and staring into nothingness. In the end, my mother left me with more questions than before and no answers.

Eventually, I get to my feet and head down the hallway for a door I've declared off-limits to everyone but me. It opens with a click, granting me access into my personal sanctuary. I inhale softly, the scent of paint and toxic chemicals wafting into my nose. My gaze is drawn to the blank canvas on the easel. I haven't been able to paint anything good since I moved here.

It's because I haven't felt comfortable or relaxed. I haven't accepted this place as my home. Instead of staring my indecision in the face, I turn to my other finished works. I once painted for six hours straight without stopping for a bathroom break or to eat. It resulted in something so chaotic and genuinely me, it chills me to my very core anytime I stare at it.

In my opinion, the painting is genius. But I've been so scared to show it to anyone else because they might not see it the same way. It's mine to look at, mine to admire, and I don't need people's opinions to solidify what I know deep within me.

A cloudy afternoon in the city, with a cyclone right in the middle. And it's heading straight for me. A psychologist would probably have a few words to say about the significance of the painting.

All I know is that it embodies my true feelings.

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“WHAT ARE YOU DOING?”

I almost jump in fright at the sound of the voice behind me. Which would not have been ideal considering I'm currently on a treadmill.

“Isn't it obvious?” I ask breathlessly.

Christian moves until he's standing in front of the treadmill, his gaze narrowing on my face.

“You said you didn't exercise,” he states.

“I don't, but sometimes it's good to sweat out all your frustrations and confusions,” I say, panting.

He arches an eyebrow in question. After a few more seconds of running, I switch off the machine and step down. Christian watches as I grab a small towel, wiping off the sweat. I hadn't planned on coming down here. But after hitting a mental block when I tried to paint, I decided a new coping mechanism was in order.

That was awful, though. My insides are in upheaval. I'm never getting on that thing again.

“Drink some water,” Christian orders. I give him a look for the tone, despite still reaching for the water bottle and taking a

substantial gulp. “Now, are you going to tell me what pushed you to exercise considering you hate it so much?”

“You. And your dumb question from this morning.”

“You mean the dumb question that could very well decide your fate and future?” he asks, amused.

“Yeah, that. Why did you have to give me a choice? This was so much easier when I didn’t have one. All I had to do was go along with it—unwillingly, but at least I wasn’t the one making any decisions. Now this is all on me and it’s so infuriating my head hurts.”

Christian raises a hand to stroke his jaw. The action causes his muscles to flex and tighten under the material of his suit jacket. I’ll admit, I’m getting tired of seeing him in a suit all the time. Then I remember that I’ve seen him in much less. The image of his naked chest rises unbidden in my head, causing my mouth to dry. The man does not have to be this sexy.

“It’s not that hard a decision, Evans. If you don’t want this, say no and it’s done.”

I frown. “We both know it’s not that easy. That’s not how this works.”

“Ah,” Christian says, his eyes brightening with recognition. “Your family, your father’s company.”

“Exactly. I feel like I have to do this, for my family.” Christian nods in understanding, and I suddenly realize I haven’t asked a very important question. “What about you? Do you want to do this?”

Christian shrugs. “I don’t mind.”

I blink before laughing softly. “I just asked you if you wanted to marry me and that’s your response. Wow, Christian, that was so romantic.”

“I’m just being honest, *tesoro*. Marriage with you wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world. I wouldn’t mind it.”

“I don’t know if I should feel insulted or not.”

“What you should do is make a decision. The offer’s not on the table forever.”

“It’s just so hard,” I say, groaning in frustration.

Christian crosses his arms. “Do you want to know about the first time I killed someone?”

My eyes widen. I hadn’t been expecting such a turn in the conversation. I swallow softly and nod. Call it morbid fascination, but a part of me is curious about this man standing in front of me and the moments that drove him to become the person he is today.

“I was only sixteen years old,” Christian says, letting out a harsh breath. He doesn’t hold my gaze as he recounts the story. “My father came into my room, I think I was playing some video game, I can’t remember. Anyway, he walked in and gave me a gun. Then he told me that to be a real man, I had to learn how to use it.”

His gaze is unfocused, like he’s stuck in the memory.

“Before then, I had had target practice, of course. I always knew I would have to use a gun one day. I guess I hadn’t been expecting it to be so soon. His name was Morelli Knox, forty years old. He had a daughter who was only thirteen at the time. He used to be in charge of one of our casinos. Until the day he got a little too trigger-happy and shot one of my cousins dead. My dad asked me to take revenge for all of us.”

My chest goes cold at the sheer awfulness of the situation. Putting him through that at sixteen was awful.

“I could have walked away,” Christian continues. “I had a choice, but I stood there, looking him in the eye and then at my father standing beside me. I knew I had to go through it. For the family, for the D’Angelos, I had to prove I was strong enough. Do you know why I’m telling you this?”

I shake my head slowly, feeling a little numb.

“Because when it comes to my family, Daniella, I would sacrifice anything. I already have.”

I let out a shaky breath. “What happened to his daughter?”

Christian’s lips curve into a grimace. “My family put her through high school and college. Right now, she’s at Harvard Law.”

My chest heaves in relief. At least they took care of her. Tense silence descends, I’m not sure what to say.

“I also told you that story because if you say yes, I want you to know exactly what you would be getting yourself into. This isn’t some fairytale story. My life comes with a lot of danger and blood. I wouldn’t blame you if you chose not to get involved in that.”

“I-I need to sit down,” I tell him. My back is already against the wall, so I slide down the floor and raise my knees to my head.

“Do you want me to give you some time?” Christian asks.

I look up at him. He feels so solid, unbreakable, unmovable. “No.”

He raises an eyebrow.

“I’ve made my decision,” I say softly. “I’ll marry you.”

His eyes flicker with some unknown emotion that I think might be relief.

“Why?” he questions.

“Because my parents raised me. They took care of me for twenty-two years of my life. Now it’s my turn to reciprocate. I want to be a person that sacrifices everything for my family.”

“Those people are often unhappy.”

“I guess we’d make a good pair then.”

He smiles. “So that’s it? You’re marrying me because of familial duty?”

“Not just that.” I raise my hand, gesturing for him to pull me to my feet. His hand encloses over mine, his grip strong as he lifts me up. He doesn’t let go immediately and neither do I. “You were honest with me, Christian. I liked that you were honest with me.”

He nods, his gaze soft. “Let’s hope you don’t regret it.”

“Oh, I have a feeling I will. But at least then I won’t have a choice.”

# CHAPTER 10

*Christian*

“**W**here the hell are you?” I growl over the phone.

I haven’t seen Christopher in a month and a long absence usually means he has gotten himself into some kind of mess that he likely needs help getting out of.

“Chris, it’s 7 a.m. where I’m at. As in, it’s too early in the morning for you to be yelling at me.”

“Where are you?”

He rattles off his location and I immediately transfer the information to Carlo.

“Stay there. Two of our men will come to get you.”

“No,” he groans. “But I’m having so much fun.”

“Topher, you’re hungover—from alcohol, drugs, I have no fucking idea. And frankly, I don’t give a damn. But you will get your ass back to the U.S. right now. And while you’re at it, maybe screw your head on straight,” I add with gritted teeth.

“You’re such a killjoy,” Topher mutters. “How’s Dany? You manage to scare her off yet?”

I haven’t, and that is itself a relief and a complete mystery. I was so sure she would say no to the marriage proposal, cut her losses, and move on. But she surprised me.

“She’s alright” is my clipped reply to his question.

Topher makes a hum of amusement. “So she stuck with you for a month and still hasn’t run for the hills. Damn. I

would praise her survival skills, but I can't. Girl's got none."

My jaw tightens. Everything my brother is saying is exactly what I've said to myself several times over the past hour. She told me why she didn't leave, and while I understand why, a part of me wishes she had saved us both the trouble. Because deep down, I can't shake the sense that we're doomed for failure.

"Carlo wants to speak to you," I say, ignoring his statement.

My older brother collects the phone. I lean my back into my chair, twirling a pen between my fingers. I had been in the middle of signing some documents when Carlo walked in asking me to find out where Christopher is. For some reason, I'm the only one he ever listens to.

Although listening to his conversation with our brother, it's pretty clear I'm the only one who ever handles him with a firm hand. Both Carlo and Mother are so fucking soft with him. No wonder he escaped life in the mafia. No one forced him to put a bullet into a man's head when he was sixteen.

I dispel the petty thought, turning my attention to the papers in front of me. Later that night, I return to the mansion only to find Daniella in the exact same position I found her in a few days again—fast asleep on the steps.

"You have got to stop sleeping here," I announce.

She opens her eyes and takes one look at me before scrambling to her feet.

"I can't help it," she says, yawning. "You never come home early and my body is primed to sleep by 10 p.m."

I give her a dry look. "You're a grown-ass woman with a bedtime of 10 p.m.? That's just sad."

She glares at me. "Excuse you, whose fault is that? In college, I would have spent my nights at clubs or bars, dancing and partying, but I can't do that anymore."

“Yes, you can’t. Because you’re not in fucking college anymore.”

“And because I’m supposed to get married to a misogynistic asshole.”

“I’m not misogynistic,” I tell her, climbing up the steps.

“Really? Because it’s hard to believe that when you act like a jerk all the time.”

With a sigh, I push open the door of my bedroom.

“Would you stop following me in here?” I ask her. Anytime she walks into my bedroom, she manages to disrupt something I’ve painstakingly arranged. “For the love of God, you’re like a fucking *cuciollo!*”

“Did you just call me a damn puppy!”

I pause, hesitate, rubbing my hand over my face. “I thought you didn’t know any Italian.”

“Obviously I lied. I know enough to know you just insulted me.”

My heart warms a little at the fact that she understands Italian. Although I’m also pissed she tricked me like that. And glad I didn’t slip up in front of her, saying something worse in Italian and thinking she wouldn’t understand.

“I called you a damn puppy. Grow up, I’m sure you’ve been called worse.”

“Oh, really? Like what? Come on, Chris, enlighten me on the type of things I’ve probably being called!”

“I don’t know. I’m pretty sure someone has called you fucking crazy before! You’re unhinged, woman,” I say in exasperation.

She goes quiet. “I’m just trying to talk to you, Christian. There aren’t a lot of options available to us, considering you’re out of the house at the crack of dawn and you only return when it’s late at night.”

Fuck. Now I feel bad. She seems to be the only one trying right now and I'd hate for her efforts to be singularly one-sided.

"I'm sorry, *tesoro*. I'm ready to talk. What do you need?"

"Where's your mother?" she asks immediately.

I almost smile. "That's a question that's coming only one month too late."

She shrugs. "I've always been curious but I didn't want to ask in case you weren't comfortable with answering."

"There's no secret. My mom's in Venice. She left two months ago to recuperate."

"She was sick?"

"No, grieving," I correct. "The death of my dad hit her hard. Really hard."

"Oh," Daniella says. Her face shifts into that expression she makes when she has something to say.

"Spit it out, Evans," I prod.

"Your parents loved each other?"

"Their love was disgustingly obvious. I can't count the number of times I walked in on them swapping spit." I grimace.

Daniella laughs softly, although there's some sadness in her eyes. "My parents are co-habituating partners at best. I don't know if either of them has ever been unfaithful, but their marriage is basically a partnership."

*Just like ours will be.* She doesn't say the words, but the silence at the end of her sentence pretty much insinuates it.

"Don't worry. I guarantee our marriage won't be a partnership. I'm the Don, I outrank you."

She rolls her eyes. "You're so full of it."

I chuckle. "My mother will be back soon, though. Enjoy your days without her while you still can. She has... a large

presence.”

Daniella’s blue eyes twinkle. “She sounds intriguing. Now I can’t wait to meet her.”

“Whatever you say, Evans,” I tell her. “I’m glad you came in here.”

She gives me a look. “After you made such a fuss about me following you.”

“First off, you need to head over to a store and buy something tomorrow. A driver will take you,” I inform her. Reaching into my wallet, I pull out my credit card and hand it over to her.

“What am I buying?” she questions excitedly.

“Your engagement ring. Money is no object.”

Her mouth drops open. She closes it only to shoot me an icy glare.

“You’re joking,” she says dryly.

“Is there a problem?” I question uncomprehending.

“No, but...” She pauses, taking a deep breath. “You want me to buy my engagement ring myself. Most women are receiving romantic proposals with men going down on their knees.”

“I’m not doing that,” I state point-blank.

A muscle ticks in her jaw. “I didn’t expect you to. But I also wasn’t expecting you to hand me a fucking card to shop for my own ring. It’s cold! Do you not have feelings?”

I blink. “What do you want from me, Evans?!”

She fists her red hair while glaring. “God, you’re hopeless.”

“Do you want me to go with you to buy the ring? I can clear my schedule,” I suggest, although I really don’t see what the problem is with my earlier suggestion.

“I don’t want to buy my engagement ring myself!”

“That’s ridiculous, what if I get you something you don’t like? Or something that doesn’t fit?”

“That’s...” she splutters. “Men have been buying their girlfriends rings since, like, the dawn of time. You can’t manage that simple task?”

“You’re not my girlfriend, Daniella.”

“No, I’m not. I’m just a woman my family sold into a life with you!”

With those words, she turns and walks out of the room. I sigh softly, rubbing the back of my neck. That was a totally unnecessary and confusing fight. I wait thirty minutes before deciding to go in search of her. When I finally do so, she’s standing on the porch on the second floor, staring at the clear night sky. I move to stand beside her.

“Do you feel calm now?”

She looks at me for a second. “I might have been a little dramatic,” she admits.

“A little?”

“Shut up. You’re so oblivious to the feelings of the people around you.”

“I’m not oblivious... just practical,” I tell her. “I really can’t buy you a ring on my own, Evans. I wouldn’t know where to start.”

She sighs softly. “I know.”

“I’ll come with you, though. If you’d like.”

“It’s fine. I’ll go with Zoey and Sky. I’m sure they’ll love it.”

I don’t say anything to counter that. We’re quiet for several seconds until she speaks up.

“Why do you want me to get an engagement ring, anyway?” she questions.

“We have a charity event tomorrow night.”

“A charity event? Like a party? I thought you said I couldn’t go to any parties. Honestly, I was beginning to feel like Rapunzel, except she got a tower and I got a fucking mansion.”

“I said you couldn’t go to any parties but I never mentioned what would happen if I went with you. Plus, it’s a societal function, Daniella. Our first appearance together as a couple. It’s been a month, and now that we’re on the same page, we can step out in public together.”

She pauses, her expression thoughtful. “Will it be dangerous?”

I like that she asked that—it shows that on some level, she has some preservation skills. My eyes meet hers while my hand reaches up to her face. Her lip are tinged in red, so much like blood.

“Everywhere’s dangerous when you’re married to a Don, *tesoro*.”

She swallows softly and nods once to show she understands.

“I’d give my life to protect you, though.”

My words are a promise, a vow. She’s mine and I won’t let anyone harm her. Ever.

# CHAPTER 11

## *Daniella*

“You’re probably the first woman in history that’s had to buy her engagement ring herself,” Zoey says with a small smile.

I groan, my eyes latching onto a pretty blue and gold ring on display, but it doesn’t feel right.

“Please, I guarantee 70 percent of those proposals we see everywhere are planned,” Sky, the forever cynic, states. “The woman probably picks the ring, their outfits, and the exact time the man’s supposed to propose. Then, when it’s showtime, she fake-cries for the cameras and collects her ring. All these traditional marriage rites are unrealistic as hell.”

Zoey and I stare at each other for a second before looking at Sky and laughing.

“You’re just a bright ray of sunshine, aren’t you?” I question sarcastically.

She rolls her eyes. “Nobody appreciates my wisdom.”

“We appreciate you, honey,” I tell her, linking my arms through hers. “But less talk about unrealistic marriages while we’re picking a ring for my very realistic one.”

“I can’t believe you said yes,” Sky says.

I shrug. “If I’m going to get married to someone, it might as well be him. To be honest, I don’t know what this “deal” is that my parents made with his family but I don’t want me or my parents to end up on the mafia’s hit list. Besides, I already

got to know him a little over the past month, and although I still want to take a sledgehammer to his head 90 percent of the time, I don't hate him anymore."

Mine and Christian's relationship has softened into one of uneasy friendship and mutual respect.

"He's even letting me leave the house without bodyguards now," I mention. "We're in a good place."

Zoey makes a noise of protest. "I hate you burst your bubble, Dany, but there's no way in hell that six-foot-three, dark-haired, protective-as-hell Italian man let you leave without some form of protection."

I frown. "He assured me that Zack and Brody wouldn't come with me today."

"Doesn't mean they're not following you secretly."

I give her a look. "Have you seen those two? They're built like sumo wrestlers. No way in hell they're able to stay hidden."

Sky doesn't reply to that, closing the conversation. Our shopping comes to an end when a ring at the far corner of the show glass catches my eye.

"It's perfect," I say with a small smile.

I pay for it and since my fiancé refused to get on his knees and propose, Zoey graciously offers to do so for me. And just like that, I'm engaged.

It's both exciting and terrifying. We're exiting the store and I'm so distracted by my thoughts, I don't look in front of me until I'm running into someone.

"Whoa," he calls, and his voice is so painfully familiar my throat hurts.

The voice is rich and deep, the kind of voice that makes you feel like the owner has seen you naked just from the way the word leaves his mouth. And unfortunately, in this case, the owner *has* seen me naked. My eyes lift to meet brown ones.

“Dany?” he says in surprise, his eyes wide.

“Joshua,” I say, my voice containing much less enthusiasm.

I take a step back from him. Zoey and Sky are still at my side, staring at him with just as much shock.

“Dude, when did you get back into town?” Sky questions.

“Nice to see you too, Cloud,” he teases. Sky rolls her eyes, letting out an annoyed breath. They never did have the best relationship.

Zoey, though, is another issue. She steps forward and gives Josh a hug. I continue to stare like an idiot.

“Welcome back, Josh,” she greets.

“Thanks. It’s nice to see you. All of you.”

His gaze lands on me and the encounter is immediately awkward. Sky clears her throat.

“Zoey and I are going to get some ice cream,” she says, reaching for Zoey’s arm and pulling her away before I can get a word in.

I really wish they hadn’t left me alone.

“So...” Josh trails off. “You look amazing, Dany. Really good.”

“Thanks,” I mutter. “You don’t look too bad yourself.”

I haven’t seen Joshua Hart in two years. Not since he disappeared in my junior year of college, one month after we broke up. Last I heard, he was managing a branch of his parents’ media company in England. It seems he’s back.

He hasn’t changed a bit. Light scruff covers his jaw. His hair is as dark as his shirt, intentionally styled in a messy way that used to make me swoon. My pulse flutters in my throat.

“Listen, I’ve been meaning to talk to you,” Josh starts. “I’ve been hearing some rumors in relation to you and Christian D’Angelo.”

“He’s my fiancé,” I say. Better to rip the Band-aid off fast.

Josh’s brown eyes widen. “When the hell did that happen?”

“I don’t really owe you an explanation, Joshua,” I say on a shrug.

“But he’s dangerous. He’s in the fucking mafia.”

“I’m aware. Anything else you’d like to tell me about the man I’m going to marry?”

My tone is defensive, a little harsh. When Joshua and I broke up, I was left in a terrible state. I can’t blame him for the breakup, since it was a mutual decision, but I’m allowed to feel bitter about it, dammit. And he really has no right to weigh in on my current relationship.

“You’re right, I’m sorry, Dany,” he groans, rubbing the back of his neck. “It’s just... nice to see you. I missed you.”

I smile softly. “It’s nice to see you too, Joshua.”

The conversation switches to small talk, just us catching up until Sky and Zoey return. Josh leaves soon after, but he makes us promise to keep in touch. My friends and I have barely moved when my phone dings with an incoming text. It’s from an unknown number but the contents of the text make it clear exactly who it is.

Unknown: Who the hell was that?

I ignore the text, although I feel my complexion go slightly pale. Sky takes one look at me and her eyes widen.

“He knows,” she guesses accurately. “I told you there was no way in hell he let you go anywhere unsupervised, Dany.”

“That’s not the issue,” Zoey says quietly. “Christian’s the head of a mafia organization. They’re notoriously known for having zero tolerance when it comes to other men hanging around their women.”

I want to tell Zoey she's being ridiculous but I can't. I'm worried—about Josh, about what Christian's reaction will be to this. Because as much as he tries to cover it up with a suit and good manners, he's just as bad as the rumors I've heard about him.

We disperse immediately after that; my friends head home and I head back to the mansion I'm struggling to accept as home. Especially not when I have no freedom both in and out of it.

"You promised I wouldn't be followed!" I say angrily, barging into Christian's bedroom.

He pauses in his actions, which included pulling his pants on. My cheeks heat for a fraction of a second before I quell the emotion in favor of anger. Christian barely acknowledges my presence before he goes back to dressing up. My anger rises with each moment he takes putting on his clothes.

I stay silent, watching as he buttons his shirt. When he finishes, he turns to face me calmly. But there's a dark undercurrent in his expression that tells me he's trying hard to repress his feelings as well.

"Who was he?"

"None of your business."

"In case it skipped your mind, Evans, the second you agreed to marry me, everything you do became my business. That includes the people you meet."

"He's no one," I say, switching tactics. "No one you need to bother with."

"You spent thirty minutes talking to him, Daniella. Don't tell me he's fucking no one!" A muscle ticks in his jaw.

"Dammit, Christian. At least let me have some privacy. You can't have people following me about without my knowledge."

His gaze hardens. "That's not what this conversation is about. I could find out, you know. Give me an hour and I'll

know everything about him, from his place of work to his social security number. Don't test me, Daniella—tell me who he fucking is to you.”

My breath comes out in a sharp exhale. “He’s my ex-boyfriend.”

“I thought so,” Christian mutters. “Go get dressed, *tesoro*. We’re going to be late.”

The change in the pace of the conversation is so surprising, it makes me feel a little lightheaded.

“What?” I whisper. “That’s it?”

“The charity gala, Daniella. I hate being late.”

“No, tell me what you’re going to do to him.”

Christian looks me dead in the eye as he says, “I could put a bullet in his head.”

My heart drops down to my toes. Instinctively, I take a step back, clenching my fists. “You can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because.” I have no idea what to say. Tears well in my eyes. This is the first time I’ve been confronted by the part of him he likes to keep hidden. The part of him that scares me, although I’ll never admit it.

Christian curses under his breath. “For the love of God, Evans. I’m not going to fucking kill the man!”

“You just said—”

“I wasn’t being serious. I won’t harm a single piece of hair on his head. All he did today was speak to you. I’m not unreasonable.”

“What if—” I pause and lick my dry lips. “What if he does more than speak to me?”

Christian’s gaze flashes with something downright terrifying. I start to walk backward and he follows, taking step after step with me, until my back hits the wall.

“That’s a dangerous question, Evans.” He presses his hands against the wall on either side of me.

My pulse leaps. “Answer me. Tell me you’re not going to kill him. Promise me.”

Christian smiles. For the first time, I catch a glimpse of the whisper of darkness swirling in the depths of his amber eyes. “I don’t make promises I can’t keep. If he so much as touches you, it’ll most certainly be his last day on Earth.”

The rasp of his voice sends the hair on my arms on end. Despite the threat of violence, my body responds to his closeness. I swallow as a shiver rolls through me.

“You won’t kill him,” I say, trying to stand my ground.

“What I do to him is entirely up to you.” He leans closer and does something completely unexpected. He kisses my forehead. “Go get dressed. We leave in thirty minutes.”

I blink in confusion, the haze in my brain clearing when he pushes off the wall and away from me.

“And Evans,” he calls, as I make my way towards the door. “Nice ring.”

My gaze moves to the emerald diamond on my finger. It seems like forever ago that I purchased it, but it’s only been an hour. My eyes meet Christian’s once more, and then I’m high-tailing out of his room and into mine, my heart pounding with each step.

I have no idea what just happened.

Thirty minutes later, I step outside my room, dressed and ready to go. I’m not entirely sure how I got dressed, considering the riot in my head. But I did. Carefully, I move down the stairs to Christian, who’s already waiting for me in his silver and blue Range Rover. As soon as I step outside, his gaze finds mine. Like he didn’t have a choice in the matter. Like he could feel me and he was drawn to me.

He doesn’t say a word for several seconds as he takes me in. He barely even moves. He just stares. I’m wearing a long,

sleeveless red gown with a slit on the side that reveals my leg and six-inch silver stiletto heels. I would have gone for something much more ostentatious considering what's on the agenda for tonight, but after everything that's happened today, I want nothing more than to get the night over with and return home.

Christian finally walks over, his arms outstretched to let me into the car. "*Sei bellissima,*" he says, his voice a little gruff.

I beam at the compliment. And then I frown because I really shouldn't be smiling at him right now. We didn't finish our conversation from earlier, but it's clear Christian considers it done. I step into the car, my eyes fixed out the windshield. I don't say a word the entire way to the event. And once we arrive, I step out on his arm and do exactly what he needs me to do.

Smile and look pretty on his arm.

## CHAPTER 12

## *Christian*

I've always liked the concept of fear. It's like the human brain secretes some kind of chemical that holds so much power over that person in the moment. Fear defies all logic and reason. As soon as it's there, we lose the ability to think about anything other than the causation of the feeling. The way it feels. Some people get the sense to flee, some to survive, some to fight. But at the end of the day, it's right there. Always ready to trigger that flight-or-fight response.

Almost everyone in this room has something to fear. And what's even more thrilling is the fact that I hold the key to those fears. Which means when it all comes down to it, everyone in this room fears me.

Feared and respected. Father would be proud.

Although there's one person in here I'm sure doesn't fear me. I don't want nor need her to, though. Daniella's upset. I can't say I blame her. Objectively, I may have caused some of her ire, but ultimately I'm the person who has something to be fucking upset about. She can't go about the streets of New York talking to the past men in her life.

The thought of her meeting with Joshua Hart today, sends me into a fresh wave of fury that I manage to tamp down. It took Carlo thirty minutes to find out basic information about the man. Heir to the Hart Media industry. His family's old-money rich and Joshua is just as generic as the rest of them. A typical man with generational wealth just waiting to fall into his lap. He went to NYU for two years, where I'm sure he met

Daniella, before he transferred to a college abroad. His record's spotless. And he's on a fast-track to becoming the youngest CEO of his parents' company. On paper, Joshua Hart is perfect.

I need more, though, his dirty little secrets. Something I could use to tip the scales of power. Something that would make him fear me.

Daniella's arm brushes my side and my attention is immediately drawn to her.

I sigh softly, deciding to end the silence. "This is probably the longest you've ever gone without saying a word."

Her eyes meet mine. "You never make a promise you can't keep."

"I don't," I say in agreement.

"But this morning, you told me Brock and Zack wouldn't go with me when I went shopping for the ring."

"Told being the key word, *tesoro*. Plus, it wasn't Brock or Zack."

"So you had one of your other goons follow me about all day," she says dryly.

I give her a look. "We've talked about this, Daniella. You're associated with me now. Which means my enemies are your enemies. I'm just trying to keep you safe."

"Or you're trying to spy on me."

Weirdly enough, my blood thrums in approval of her fury. I love seeing her angry and worked up; it only adds to her beauty. Especially when I take in her dress. The sight of her in it sent a rush of heat straight to my groin. I've lost count of the number of men I've had to glare at tonight, a reminder that she's mine.

"You can't go anywhere without protection, Daniella. End of story."

Her eyes flash with hurt, which sends an odd tightness to my chest. I'm doing this for her sake. I wish she would just understand that.

"Do you want to head over to the donation table and hand in our check?" I ask her, knowing she needs some space at the moment.

She nods once, her jaw tight. I hand over the check and she immediately walks away. I grab a glass of champagne from a passing waiter, wishing I had something stronger. I don't usually imbibe but Daniella could push a saint to murder. As if I conjured him, my brother appears in front of me, collecting my glass of champagne and placing it on the table.

"You don't drink, *fratello*. Especially not champagne," he murmurs, his eyes flickering with amusement.

I pull at the tie on my neck. It would be poor fashion not to wear a tie to a black-tie event, which is the only reason it's around my neck right now. But I feel like I can scarcely breathe with it on. It's fucking pissing me off.

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?" I say in irritation.

Carlo's eyes roam the hall, before settling on Daniella on the other side. She's talking to the socialite in charge of the donations. There's a warm smile on her face. Her first this night.

"I can't say it isn't fun watching her rile you up. You need someone to help with that serious personality, Chris."

I roll my eyes. "You realize you're worse than me, right?"

"Yes, but I'm not the one that's planning to get married in a couple of months," he states. "Giovanni's here."

I raise an eyebrow at that announcement. He gestures to the open bar where the man is seated, nursing a beer in silence. "I thought he was in China for a couple more weeks."

"He came back early. You need to go talk to him."

My breath comes out in a sharp exhale as I nod. Daniella chooses that moment to return. Her eyes are much lighter now and she's calmer.

"Hi, Carlo," she greets my brother.

He offers her a half-smile.

"I need to go take care of some business, *tesoro*. Talk to Carlo for a bit, okay?" I ask her.

I move to leave, but she grabs my arm. "I don't know what to say to your brother," she whisper-shouts. "We literally have nothing in common and he's scary."

I smile. "You'll figure it out, Evans."

My conversation with Giovanni is short and unproductive. He's a stubborn, hard-hearted man that refuses to see reason. I'm running out of methods to strong-arm him into giving in to our demands. When I return to my fiancée and brother, they're standing awkwardly side by side. Daniella's sipping some champagne while Carlo's gaze moves across the room like he's searching for imminent danger. He's always on edge. I might be bad but my brother doesn't know the meaning of the word "relax." When he notices me approaching, he nods once before stepping away and heading out of the ballroom.

Daniella's staring at the couples dancing in the middle of the room and I smile when I catch some wistfulness in her eyes.

"Do you want to dance?" I ask once I reach her side.

"With you? Pass."

I offer her a disarming smile. "Considering you have no other options, I'd reconsider that, *tesoro*."

"Stop doing that. You can't just look at me like that and call me *tesoro* and expect me to just fall over and suck your cock."

My eyes flutter shut as I swallow a groan. "Be very careful what you say to me, Daniella."

The word “cock” shouldn’t be a part of the woman’s vocabulary. In fact, I’m going to have to ban it.

I’m not sure what expression is on my face, but her eyes widen when she sees the look in my eyes. Then her expression grows mischievous.

“Is this because I talked about sucking your cock? We’re going to have this conversation eventually, considering we’re getting married. What are we going to do about sex?”

I stare at her, incredulous. “I’m not doing this with you here.”

She shrugs. “I just thought we should be on the same page.”

“The same page?” I ask dryly. “Don’t worry, Evans. I won’t fuck you unless you’re begging for it. I won’t touch you, either.”

Now it’s her turn to get flustered. Her cheeks heat up, her face matching the color of her hair.

“Do you want to dance or not?” I ask again.

“No, I’ll dance with someone else.”

My gaze narrows. “Really? In case I haven’t made it clear, you touch another man and he’s dead.”

“Has anyone ever told you you’re a sociopath?” she questions.

“Has anyone ever told you you’re annoying?”

“Yes,” she replies. “You?”

“Yes,” I say in agreement to her earlier question.

Finally, she smiles. “I guess one dance wouldn’t hurt. On one condition.”

“Nothing’s ever simple with you, *tesoro*,” I say on a sigh. “What is it?”

“There’s something I’m curious about. And you have to answer me honestly.”

I rub my jaw for a minute. Knowing her, the question will probably veer far into the realm of discomfort for me. But after the high tensions of the day, I feel obliged to at least let her win once.

“Come on, *tesoro*.” I beckon, gesturing for her to take my arm. She nods once as I lead her to the dance floor, right when the song switches to something slow.

My arms curl around her back, tugging her against me. A smile graces her lips as she leans forward, intertwining her hands around my neck. We’re impossibly close, her scent is intoxicating, and what’s even more maddening is the feel of her in my arms. We begin to sway softly. I can feel several pairs of eyes on us—waiting, watching, curious.

“What do you want to ask, Evans?”

She blinks up at me. In six-inch heels, she barely comes up to my chin, but she’s still taller than most women standing in front of me. It feels perfect.

“Oh, uh...” she bites her bottom lip. “You remember when you told me that you’d always be honest with me? The bodyguard situation today aside.”

I roll my eyes. “I never told you there wouldn’t be anyone following you. But yes, I remember promising to be honest. What do you want to know?”

“Your business. What does it entail, exactly?”

I smirk. “Having second thoughts?”

“I just want to know what I’m getting myself into,” she mutters.

“It’s the mafia, *tesoro*. What we do isn’t legal, not by any stretch of the imagination.”

“Of course, I know that. But what exactly is it?”

I begin listing the nefarious activities. “We’re in the drug business, firearms acquisition, smuggling, gambling, the occasional kidnap.”

“Murder,” she continues on a harsh breath. “Trafficking?”

That one’s a question, and I can see in her eyes that it’s something she wouldn’t be comfortable with.

“We don’t traffic people, Daniella. My father outlawed that. Anything to do with the sale of the human body—for example, prostitution—isn’t something we engage in.”

She nods. “Okay, I guess I can live with that.”

I smirk, leaning away to twirl her around once before pulling her closer. “It’s not like you have a choice.”

She had one and she turned it down. Now, nothing on this earth is keeping her away from me.

Her gaze flicks over to two women standing next to the dessert table. Unease darkens her eyes and the sight of it unsettles me.

“What it is?” I ask her.

She sighs. “I heard them talking about us. People are so sure this wedding is a sham. They said something about how the D’Angelos would never tie themselves to Evans Industries.”

My jaw tightens. “They can go fuck themselves.”

“I agree, but can we blame them? We just showed up like this, engaged, with no prior appearances together. Of course they’re suspicious. I feel like we should do something to quell their doubts.”

“Something like what?”

Her cheeks are tinged with red as her eyes meet mine. “Maybe you could kiss me. Just once, a really quick peck or something.”

“A quick peck,” I say dryly even as my body heats at the suggestion.

“Yes, on my lips.”

My hand leaves her waist as I reach over to thumb her cheek softly.

“Careful what you ask for, *tesoro*. If I kiss you, it’s not going to be a fucking peck.”

Her eyes are wide, and I grin at the obvious display of nerves on her face.

“Do it.”

I shouldn’t give in to her demand. But I’m interested in seeing if a kiss will be the answer to the question that I keep turning over in my head at night. The answer to the maddening connection I feel to her and the electricity I can’t escape in her presence. I pull her even closer, angling her head toward mine. Her lips part and her eyes shut as I lean forward.

Sparks break out across my skin as our lips touch, and blood pounds in my ear as the air between us grows hotter. Her arms are wrapped around my neck, pulling me flush against her. A low moan vibrates against my mouth when I stroke my tongue against the seam of her lips, demanding entrance.

She tastes like strawberries and desire and maddening lust. I cup the back of her neck, tilting her head to deepen the kiss, but Daniella pulls away. I grit my teeth at the sudden crash. She’s breathing heavily, we both are.

Finally, she says. “I think we quelled their doubts.”

And that’s when I remember we’re in public, in a room filled with business partners, socialites, and some of the most dangerous people in New York. I can’t believe I lost control like that. All that kiss did was confirm what I already knew from the beginning.

Daniella Evans is bad for my sanity.

## CHAPTER 13

## *Daniella*

Liquid heat, golden eyes, and dirty words whispered in my ear at night.

It's terrifying and amazing all at once. But it's all a dream, a wish. Christian hasn't touched me since the night of the charity gala. And I'm not sure I want him to. It's been two days and if I didn't know better, I'd say he's ignoring me. But I'm pretty sure I've been working hard to avoid him as well, therefore we cancel each other out. This is a stalemate, and until one of us takes a step forward, our relationship will be reduced to backward glances and greetings in the form of grunts.

And all because of one little kiss.

An earth-shattering, mind-numbing one, for sure. But that's irrelevant.

Of course, coupled with my already shitty, annoyingly confusing week, my body decides to betray me when I wake up in the morning to my period. I curse softly under my breath, rolling to the side and covering my head with the comforter.

I guess I'm not getting out of bed today.

By the time night rolls around, I'm practically a hermit—shut windows, dim lights, and silence surround me. I haven't eaten anything all day but I can barely summon an appetite. My body's working against me.

“What's wrong with you, Evans?”

I turn around to stare at him. Black suit, black shadows, piercing gaze.

“Hey, babe,” I greet, my tone dry. “You’re home early.”

“You look like you’re on your deathbed.”

“Trust me, I feel like I’m on my deathbed.”

“Period cramps?” he questions with a frown.

Christian is so perceptive he might as well be a mind reader. Sometimes I’m worried he can tell exactly what I’m thinking just by the look on my face. It’s annoying.

“My uterus is punishing me for not getting knocked up this month,” I moan, curling into a fetal position as I’m hit with a painful wave of pain that rips through me like a serrated blade, forcing me to double over.

I think Christian wants to smile at my words. My pulse roars in my ears and I whimper in pain, causing his amber eyes to darken.

“You’re in pain,” he says softly.

“Yes, that’s what the term ‘cramps’ connotes.”

He shakes his head. “Even now you can’t help being a smartass can you?”

“Stop talking to me. I can’t deal with your voice right now.”

To my surprise, he actually falls silent. I shut my eyes to deal with the pain and by the time I open them again, the door is closing behind him.

*Please tell me he didn’t just leave me when I’m about to die.*

A part of me was a little bit glad he came to check up on me. It means he cares, and maybe, just maybe, I occupy more of his headspace than he’s letting on. Christian doesn’t seem to care about much else but his family, the D’Angelos, and work.

But once in a while, I get a sneak peek into the person lying underneath all the duty and I somewhat like that person.

With a sniff, I bury myself under the comforter again, prepared to go to sleep. Let's be real, though, there's no way in hell I'm getting any sleep tonight. Not when my insides are being torn apart.

*Gotta love being a woman.*

Christian returns an hour later. I pop open an eyelid to watch him as he walks into my room, holding two grocery bags. My eyes widen and I force myself to sit up while he dumps the bags on the table. I arch an eyebrow in question.

“What's all that?” I ask when he faces me.

He lets out a breath. “Care package. I wasn't sure what you use but I talked to a doctor and he suggested some ibuprofen to deal with the pain. So I got you some.”

My heart warms as he opens one of the bags. He pulls out a water bottle and a bottle of pills. He walks over and hands it to me. I collect them gingerly.

“You didn't have to do this,” I say warily, accepting the pills and water.

His gaze is on my face as I use the drugs before returning the bottle to him.

“I wanted to,” he replies gruffly. “What's your favorite chocolate?”

“What?” I ask, dumbfounded.

“I read that some women enjoy eating chocolate to help with their periods.”

I stare at him for several uncomfortable seconds. “You did research and you called a doctor...” I trail off. “Why?”

“Because you're in pain. I wasn't just going to sit back and watch you in agony. I wanted to help you feel better.”

“But why? Why do you want to help me feel better?”

“Seriously, *tesoro*, this line of questioning is tedious. Do you want some chocolates or not? I’ve got two bags full of it.”

My mouth curls into a smile. “A Snickers would be nice.”

He grabs a bar and hands it to me. I tear the wrapper and bite into it with a soft moan. Christian continues to watch me as I scarf down the entire bar. When I’m done, he collects the wrapper. There’s no warning when he presses the back of his hand to my damp forehead.

“You have a fever,” he says in accusation.

“It’ll be fine. I’m sure the ibuprofen will help.”

“Lie down,” he orders.

I frown. “You know, you don’t have to be so bossy.”

“Daniella.”

With a sigh, I fall onto my back, staring up at him. He seems so intimidating, larger than life. In the low evening light, his eyes are darkened as he assesses me almost clinically. He reaches over to smooth his hand over my forehead, not to check my temperature this time. I appreciate the touch, the heat wafting from his body distracts me from the pain.

“Are you going to leave now?” I ask with a yawn, feeling sleep starting to pull me under.

“No, *tesoro*. I’ll stay.”

When I fall asleep, I dream again. Liquid heat, golden eyes, and dirty words whispered into my ear at night.

By the time morning rolls around, he’s gone. But I know he stayed. There’s a blanket on the chair, right next to my bed. A smile graces my lips as I get to my feet. I feel much better. Then my gaze latches onto the bowl and wet cloth on the bedside table. Christian must have tried to lower my fever while I slept.

The first thing I do is shower, then I stray downstairs in search of food. My steps are halted when I enter the living

room, because he's still here. It's 10 a.m. and Christian hasn't gone to work. That's practically unheard of.

"Why are you still home?"

He looks at me, eyes drifting over my face and down my body like he's searching for some sign that I'm alright. My cramps usually only last one day, thank God. So I should be okay.

"I had to make sure you were alright," he says gruffly before returning his attention to his phone. I swear, that device is glued to his hand.

I continue to stand at the entryway, unsure of what to do. Last night he acted in the most un-Christian-like manner and I'm not sure what to make of it.

"Hello to you too, Dany. It's so nice that you acknowledged me," Topher says dryly, interrupting my thoughts.

My gaze drifts over to him. He's seated to the left of Christian, dark hair grown past his shoulders, brown eyes gleaming with mischief.

"Nice mustache," I say, stepping forward and taking a seat opposite him.

Topher traces the hair around his mouth with a smile. "I'm glad you like it."

"That was sarcasm. I hate it."

He frowns. "When it comes to my level of attractiveness, *cognata*, you don't count. Especially since you're climbing into bed with my brother."

My cheeks heat. Christian ignores the comment, pretending neither his brother nor I are in the dining room with him. I don't bother to correct Christopher's notion that I'm having sex with his brother.

"Where have you been, anyway?" I question, changing the subject.

“Argentina,” he replies. “It was a hell of a lot of fun.”

“Must be nice traveling from place to place and spending all the money you want without a job,” I muse.

His eyes narrow at the jab while Christian rolls his eyes.

“You don’t really have a job either, *tesoro*.”

“Yes, and whose fault is that? I got a degree and then got shackled with a marriage immediately. Also, if I told you now that I wanted to get a job, would you even let me?”

He ponders that for a moment before rubbing his jaw. “No.”

“Exactly my point.”

“Eat your breakfast,” he commands. “You haven’t had anything since yesterday.”

Very grudgingly, I comply. But only because I’m fucking starving. Christopher looks from his brother to me then back at his brother again. He smirks.

“*Ci tieni a lei*,” he says to his brother.

Christian’s eyes flash in irritation, “She understands Italian, *lo stupido*.”

“Actually,” I say, “I have no idea what Topher just said. I took a few lessons but my Italian’s not that great.”

He shoots me a look. “Why do I have a feeling you’re lying, *tesoro*? It’s good enough that you understood what *cuciollo* means.”

“Yes, because that word stuck for some reason, but I swear I don’t know a lot. I plan to learn, though,” I say placatingly.

His eyes narrow but he doesn’t push it.

“So, what did Topher say?”

“He asked if I care about you,” he relents.

“Technically, I didn’t ask,” his brother cuts in.

“So, do you?”

Our gazes meet, the air in the room heating up a few degrees. Christian looks away first, his eyes moving to his phone.

“Eat your breakfast, Evans,” he drawls.

I sigh softly. Christopher’s eyes are practically twinkling in excitement. He’s the one that should be compared to a damn *cuciollo*.

“I had a thought,” he begins.

“Not interested,” his brother states.

“Come on, *fratello*, hear me out.”

Christian sighs before finally looking up at him.

“The two of you should have an engagement party,” he says.

Even before he replies, I already know Christian is going to shut that idea down.

“Not happening, Toph.”

“Come on, Chris, hear me out. Daniella’s cooped up in here, probably bored out of her mind. Throwing a party would be nice.”

“You just want an excuse to party.”

“No, I’m suggesting this because it’s in both your best interests. Dany can invite her parents and friends here, and we can call some members of the family. A formal event signifying the partnership between the families.”

He does have a point, but Christian doesn’t like having people in the house. It’s the OCD, and I’m sure he would be extremely uncomfortable with so many bodies in here.

“We don’t have to throw a party,” I state.

Topher frowns. “Oh, come on, *cognata*. I promise it’ll be fun. I’ll handle all the arrangements.”

“Is that supposed to convince me?” I ask dryly.

He shoots me a glare. Christian clears his throat before saying simply, “You can have the party.”

My eyebrows rise. “What?”

“I said a party’s fine, Daniella,” he repeats, his tone clipped.

My eyes meet his. “Are you sure? Because if you don’t want to have a party, I’m fine without it.”

Christian raises an eyebrow. “Do you want to have the party?”

“Yes.”

“Then we’re having the party,” he states. “But you’re in charge, not Toph.”

“Harsh, *fratello*,” his brother says with a pout.

“Mom’s coming back in a few weeks,” Christian announces moments later.

Christopher grins. “She finally got tired of Venice? I miss that old woman.”

“That would make one of you. She’s always in my shit,” Christian grumbles.

“That’s how she shows she cares.”

Christian’s lips curl into a smile. “You’re such a mama’s boy.”

“If I’m a mama’s boy, I guess that makes you a papa’s boy, then,” Toph draws.

As soon as he says it, I wish he hadn’t. Toph might not notice it, but the smallest hint of tension crawls into Christian’s posture. Toph got lucky—by being a mama’s boy, he was able to escape. Being a papa’s boy probably led to Christian losing parts of his soul he’ll never get back.

He gets to his feet, “I’ll see you later, *tesoro*.”

I nod, watching him leave with a sigh. Toph turns to me.

“What’s a guy got to do to receive acknowledgment in here?”

His words make me smile. “Be less of an annoying little brother?” I suggest.

He rolls his eyes before continuing with his breakfast. Christian’s on my mind for the longest time after that. It’s become a problem. He’s like a virus I can’t shake, crawling through the edges of my brain.

When he returns home later that night, I’m on the stairs waiting for him. But this time, I’m not asleep.

“It’s after midnight, Daniella,” he comments, noting my position.

I couldn’t sleep. Every time I tried to close my eyes, a restlessness played beneath my skin.

“I really hate unresolved conversations,” I tell him. “It eats at me.”

“What conversation is unresolved?” he asks curiously.

I stare straight into his eyes, my heartbeat shaking. He stands in front of me, a formidable shadow cloaked in black. Sometimes I wonder what it would be like to be his enemy. The word “unpleasant” flickers in my mind, but I know it wouldn’t be so easy.

“You kissed me,” I state.

“Because you asked me to,” he drawls. “What is it, *tesoro*? Thinking about it often?”

My cheeks heat up and I shake my head. Christian’s dark gaze runs down to my bare thighs and suddenly the air between us is charged with a tingling of heat. I get to my feet, letting the large T-shirt I’m wearing fall over my shorts.

“You wish I was,” I retort.

He gives me a dry look. “Nice, Evans. That was real mature.”

“What do you want me to say?”

He leans against the banister of the staircase. “You’re the one that started this conversation. What do you have to say?”

“I’m just...” I trail off. “I’m confused, okay? One day, you’re kissing me, and then I don’t see you for days. After which you’re taking care of me and acting like you care.”

“I’m marrying you, Daniella. Of course I fucking care!”

“That’s not the point,” I say harshly, feeling the tension inside of me build up.

He cocks his head to the side. “What’s the point?”

“I just want to know what this arrangement means.”

“What this arrangement means?” he echoes.

My eyes narrow. “You know, you’re acting really slow right now.”

Christian lets out a dark chuckle. “You’re the one trying to find out if I’m going to fuck you.”

My mouth falls open. “That was—that was so not what I fucking meant.”

“Really, Daniella?”

Christian may look like a gentleman and sound like a gentleman, but it’s moments like this that I get to see who he truly is. I should be offended by his crass, blunt words, but all it serves to do is cause heat to settle down my spine.

“Never mind,” I say like the coward I am. I move to go up to my room but he reaches over and grabs my wrist.

“You don’t run.”

I’m not sure if he means that generally or if he’s saying I don’t run from him. Regardless, the feeling of his hand on mine holds me in place.

“This is confusing for me too, Evans,” he mutters.

“But you can feel it, right? This insane attraction?”

“Insane,” he whispers softly. “Maddening’s more like it, *tesoro*.”

When my eyes meet his, they’re two dark pools. The look on his face is searing, hot and cold like the burn of an ice cube on skin.

“We could do it,” he says. “Put us both of our misery.”

My stomach burns with the question.

“But I won’t,” Christian goes on. “You being my fiancée makes things a lot more complicated than two people infatuated with each other.”

He’s right. I know he’s right. Sure, I want to sleep with him, but doing so will blur the lines of our already confusing situation.

“Okay,” I finally say.

“Okay?” he asks, relief shining in his eyes.

“Yeah. Forget I said anything. Good night.”

This time when I try to leave, he doesn’t stop me. But I feel his eyes trailing after me, and it doesn’t help that every fiber of my being wants to run back to him.

We’re definitely so fucked.

## CHAPTER 14

## *Christian*

**M**y jaw hardens as I look my brother in the face. It seems Topher's visit to Argentina wasn't as innocent as he made it seem. Currently, he's oblivious to the storm brewing beneath my calm.

I retrieve a file from my table and open it, handing him some pictures. He arches an eyebrow in question but eventually starts looking through them. When he looks back at me, his eyes are wide, his face a little paler than when he walked in here. Carlo's standing to the side, his own face carefully blank. He's leaving me to handle our little brother.

"Christian," Topher starts but that's as far as I let him go. "You fucked a connected married woman."

His hands fist. "It was an accident. I was fucking drunk. I didn't know who she was or that she was even married until the next morning."

Topher shrinks back when I get to my feet, rounding the table and standing in front of him.

"A married woman? Dad would have been pissed, Topher!"

"I said I didn't know!" he retorts.

"Shut the fuck up! I know you're immature but I didn't think you were stupid as well. And of all the married women to fuck, you had to pick one whose husband has ties to Desantos. Your stupid fucking mistake could lead to a war. Do you understand that?"

“Can’t I just apologize?” he asks.

I don’t even think about it; I rear my hand back and deliver a punch to his jaw. He stumbles backward before righting himself, rubbing the area that’s definitely going to swell in a few hours.

A vein throbs in my temple when he continues to look unperturbed.

“Don’t you have something to say?”

His gaze meets mine, hard and unflinching. It’s moments like this that he looks like a true D’Angelo.

“I’m sure you’ll handle it, Chris. Just like you handle all the other shit that goes wrong in our lives.”

I’m about to hit him again but a slight shake of Carlo’s head stops me. A terrible calm descends over me as I stare at him.

“You’re cut off. As of today, you have no access to funds from the family.”

Topher’s mouth drops open. Now that he’s looking at the consequences of his actions, he definitely doesn’t like them.

“How the hell am I supposed to survive?”

“Get a job.” I shrug.

“I’m not fucking working for you!” he snaps.

An explosive rage rolls through me. “I never fucking asked you to. You would be useless to me anyway!”

Topher likes to walk around acting like he’s better than me or Carlo just because he doesn’t have blood on his hands, and while it’s fucking unfair, I’ve tried not to give a fuck. I was placed here to be responsible for him, not to corrupt him. If he’s not interested, I won’t force him.

He falls silent, his expression mutinous as he looks at me.

“You’re going to put that nice engineering degree you got a few years ago to good use and get a job. I’m sure Carlo will

help you out. Now, get out.”

After a long silence passes, he presses his mouth into a thin line and turns to leave. But before that, he turns to look at me.

“You like to act like you’re judge, jury, and executioner, but one day, that’s going to bite you in the ass, Chris. I can’t say I won’t enjoy watching that.”

Deadly rage pulses through me. Carlo steps forward then, leveling Topher with a hard look.

“Apologize. You don’t speak to the Don that way.”

My younger brother chuckles. “This is the reason he’s like that. He’s grown a fucking God complex because you keep eating out of his ass.”

Carlo’s brown eyes narrow, and quicker than I can blink, he tries throwing a punch of his own at Topher’s face but he dodged it.

“You’ll show the Don respect.”

“The Don’s my fucking brother!” Topher explodes.

I blow out a breath at the scene. I never meant for it to escalate like this.

“You think *Mamma* would be proud to see us like this,” he questions, looking from me to Carlo.

“*Mamma* wouldn’t be proud if she found out you fucked that married woman,” I state.

Silence descends. Topher’s face goes white at my words. At the end of the day, he did something wrong. And him acting like this over his punishment is a clear sign of his immaturity. I fix my suit jacket, rounding my desk and taking a seat.

“Get out, Toph,” I mutter.

He doesn’t need to be told twice. He bursts out of my office, slamming the door behind him.

*Jesus, he's a fucking child.*

“Put someone on his tail,” I tell Carlo. “Before he does something even more stupid than what got us in this mess.”

“I’ll go after him,” my brother says, stalking out.

I manage to stay in my office for thirty more minutes, despite my raging headache. Deciding to head home instead, I find myself running into yet another problem once I step outside into the pub.

“Boss,” Loretta purrs, running her long nails along my shirt. “I’ve missed you.”

I take her in. Long dark hair, lips painted crimson. She’s wearing tiny shorts and a shirt that’s definitely not appropriate for this weather. Her tits are quite literally in my face right now. Loretta used to work here, serving drinks to the men, until one drunken night when I made the mistake of climbing into bed with her

. It was out of character for me, and considering I didn’t shit where I ate, I decided to fire her. And then, because the sex was so good and she kept coming back for more, I decided to continue indulging her.

Regret’s a bitch, though. And it’s staring me right in the face.

“Loretta,” I drawl. “It’s been a minute.”

“My thoughts exactly,” she says with a smirk. “You want to head over to my apartment and get reacquainted?”

My eyes narrow. The girl has balls. She has definitely heard about my engagement but is still propositioning me in clear sight of all my men. With a growl, I grab her arm and lead her back into my office.

“You seem angry,” she says with a pout.

“Do you really need me to spell it out for you?”

“Is this about that woman you’ve got in your house? You got a new woman and shoved me aside, is that it?”

“Yes,” I say bluntly.

Her green eyes flash with hurt. I really shouldn't have let her get so attached. I usually don't make that mistake, but the girl's tenacious. She just wouldn't fucking quit.

“Are you trying to hurt my feelings?” she cries.

I sigh, running my hands through my hair.

“Does she suck cock better than I do? Is that it?”

My jaw clenches when my cock hardens slightly at that. I must be really sexually frustrated if that's all it takes. Or maybe it's the imagery of Daniella getting on her knees in front of me. Knowing her, it would take a fight before she ever willingly did that. Not that I want her to. Fuck, I don't know.

Last night, I was talking out of my ass, taking sex off the table. But she surprised me. I could have kissed her then, taken her to my room, and fucked her like I've wanted to for a while, but Daniella's forever. And forever's a really long time. I can't mess things up so early.

“Don't talk about my fiancée like that,” I state, my voice harsh.

“You're being mean, Christian,” she whines.

*Fucking hell, what does this woman think of me?*

“I'm always mean to you.”

“Yes, but that's in bed,” she says, fluttering her eyelashes. She takes a step forward, placing her hand on my neck. “Remember how much fun we used to have?”

I run a thumb across my jaw. “That's history, Loretta.”

Her gaze flares, right before she starts kissing the side of my neck. Usually, this would get me going, but I feel cold. Empty. She's not the woman I want.

“It doesn't have to be,” Loretta whispers, close to my lips.

I push her off, “Listen, Loretta. We had a fun time, really. But this is fucking over. Considering you don't work at this

pub anymore, I don't want to see you within a ten-mile radius again. You understand?"

She wants to say something in retort but she must see something in my face because she nods jerkily, looking down at her feet. I'm about to walk out of the room but think better of it, stopping to whisper in her ear.

"And if you ever talk about Daniella or disrespect her in any way again, you'll regret it."

Her eyes are wide and fearful as they meet mine.

"I would hate to mess up that pretty face of yours."

She walks out, and after a few minutes, so do I. Thinking about Daniella so much is messing with my head, and now I want to see her. So I head home, despite it being the middle of the day.

She's not in her room when I arrive. I check the basement gym but she's not there, either. A maid passes by me and I tell her to stop.

"Where is she?" I question, no need to clarify who I'm talking about.

"She's in her art room, sir."

My head cocks to the side. According to the help, Daniella doesn't allow anyone in the room, and I'll admit I've been curious about what she gets up to in there.

"Which room?" I question.

She directs me there and right when I'm about to open the door, Daniella steps out. Her eyes widen when she takes me in.

"Did something happen?" she questions. "You're home at an ungodly hour."

"It's three o'clock, Evans."

"I meant ungodly for you. Most normal people are fine with showing their faces in the afternoon. I only ever get to see

you at night or in the mornings. Are you sure you're good, though? What if you melt?"

Amusement fills me. "Melt?"

"Vampires don't like the sun."

"So you're comparing me to a vampire now?"

"I've yet to see any evidence to the contrary."

"Vampires have fangs, right? But I don't bite, *tesoro*."

"Liar."

A smile tugs at my lips. "I won't bite you unless you ask for it."

Her eyes narrow, although the blush on her cheeks is a dead giveaway that my words affect her.

"Really, though, what's going on? Topher and Carlo came over a few minutes ago. Topher was yelling and left with his suitcase."

I shrug. "I didn't ask him to move out but I guess the punishment will be more effective that way."

"What are you talking about?"

"Nothing," I say, exhaling sharply. My eyes snag onto some yellow paint on the side of her face and I smile, reaching over to clean it. "Are you ever going to let me in there?"

"Doubtful," she drawls. "No one gets to see my paintings."

"You went to college to learn, didn't you? I'm sure you had to show your paintings then."

"True, but not these particular paintings."

That's just making me all the more curious. "Why not these ones?"

"Because they're special to me. They're..." She trails off, her gaze moving to my shirt. "You've got some bitch on you," she says, her voice deadly calm.

She points at the collar of my shirt and my eyes are drawn to the red smudge. Lipstick.

*Fucking Loretta.*

“Daniella,” I start to explain but she doesn’t even hear me.

“You know what, Christian? Just go fuck yourself.”

She brushes past me, walking away and heading to her room. Frustration mounts in my chest.

Today is just not my fucking day.

# CHAPTER 15

## *Daniella*

I swear, before I moved in with Christian, I was a much calmer person.

But every time I'm around him, it feels like I'm in a losing battle with my sanity. When the door to my room opens, I whirl around on him.

"I understand we never had the conversation about monogamy, but I thought you made it pretty clear when you blew up on me for talking to my ex!" I yell.

His gaze hardens at the mention of Joshua. "You do not want to be talking about him right now."

"Shut the fuck up, Christian."

His jaw clenches. "And you definitely don't talk to me that way."

I cross my arms over my chest as I look at him. "If you aren't going to be faithful, then I'm not either."

He crosses the room toward me. Faster than I can blink, he has me against the wall, his eyes bright and murderous. I swallow thickly, my heart racing in my chest.

"Careful, Daniella. Saying things like that can lead you to situations you wouldn't be comfortable with. If you touch anyone but me, they're dead."

I laugh bitterly. "That's your gut reaction to everything. Guns, murder!"

“How else would you prefer I reacted?”

“I don’t give a fuck! I just wish the man I was planning to marry wasn’t fucking around behind my back. Lipstick, Christian. Talk about a cliché. I thought you were smarter than that!”

He releases me, taking a step back. I watch as he fixes the cuffs of his shirt.

“I haven’t been fucking anyone behind your back.”

“Liar!”

He lets out a frustrated breath. “I don’t know how I’m supposed to prove this to you, Evans.”

“That’s probably because you’re a lying, cheating bastard!”

“I never fucking cheated on you!” Christian yells.

For a moment, I’m stunned into silence. He never raises his voice. He never has to; he’s terrifying enough without having to shout. I blink once, twice, before sighing.

“You know what? It’s fine. I guess I can’t really blame you. We never said anything about being exclusive.”

His eyes burn darker. “We’re fucking exclusive, *tesoro*. The lipstick’s from a woman called Loretta.”

I really didn’t need to know her name.

“Not one word until I’m done explaining,” he warns darkly. I swallow my retort and stare at him blankly.

“She ambushed me at the pub today—”

I have to interrupt, “The same pub women aren’t allowed at?”

“She used to work there. Fuck, Evans. It’s a long story.”

“I’m listening.”

He launches into a detailed explanation about Loretta and their relationship. Unfortunately, by the time he’s done, I’m

not in any way pleased.

“So you slept with her several times and today she came over to proposition you and you turned her down,” I state.

“That’s exactly what I said.”

“Yeah, sorry, I don’t believe you. No man turns down sex.”

He chuckles dryly. “Trust me, it was fucking hard.”

My gaze narrows.

“I’m not talking about Loretta, Evans. I’m talking about you, last night.”

*Oh.* “But you acted like sleeping with me was the worst thing you could possibly do.”

“Because the alternative was letting you see just how much you get under my skin! Of course I want to sleep with you, Daniella. It’s the only thing I can think about these days.”

The air between us is charged with electricity. His gaze pins me down and I swallow the knot in my throat.

“You didn’t sleep with Loretta.”

“And I’m not going to. The only woman I want to sleep with is you.”

“How romantic,” I say dryly.

“Shut up,” he mutters, right before he grabs me by the back of my neck, pulling my mouth to his.

I gasp, the heat erupting like fire between my legs and licking at every cell in my body. I melt into his hold, getting lost in the hot glide of his tongue against mine. My nipples tighten as they brush his chest, sending sparks lower. I moan against his mouth and Christian groans low in his throat, pulling my bottom lip between his teeth.

I’m shaking with need, burning up with each press of his lips.

He pulls back to whisper against my mouth, “We’re exclusive, Daniella. No one touches you but me. Say it!”

I'm breathing heavily, staring at him, hazy with lust. "As long as you're not touching anyone else," I pant. "No one touches me but you."

Christian chuckles darkly. "I look forward to fucking all that sass out of your mouth."

"I'd like to see you try," I state.

"Do you always have to have the last word?"

"Christian, focus," I say, clapping my hands in front of his face. "You were about to fuck me."

His eyes light up and there's a gleam in them that causes me to swallow nervously. I've never been the shy type, but now, faced with the eventuality of the lust building around us, I can't bear to look at him. My gaze drops down to the floor. Christian lets out a harsh breath. His thumb reaches to my chin, lifting my face up.

"Look at me, Daniella. Always look at me," he orders softly.

His fingers tighten on my face and the look in his eyes turns turbulent when I grab a fistful of his hair and drag his mouth to mine, sliding my tongue between his lips. Christian hisses, lifting me up so I can wrap my legs around his hips. He presses my back against the wall and licks my lips. A fire starts to brew inside me, searing desire running through my body. I grind against him, desperate for more, unable to find the friction I need.

"You taste so devastating, *tesoro*. You taste like mine," he whispers between kisses.

Something hot and fierce flashes in my chest. "I'm not yours," I say stubbornly.

He laughs softly. "You'll regret that." He pulls back and I moan at the loss of his heat.

"What are you doing?" I demand harshly.

"What do you want me to be doing?"

“I already said it! I want you to fuck me! I want you to get me off.”

He tries to slide me down his body, but my legs tighten around him. I can feel how hard he is under the material of his pants, how much he wants me. I don't care how much control he has; he won't be able to walk away from this. And neither can I.

Christian leans over to whisper in my ear. “Beg for it, Daniella.”

I fight back a smile. If he thinks I'm going to submit so easily, then he doesn't know me well at all.

“No,” I murmur, bringing my lips to his neck and sucking softly. I drag my lips to his, and after a second of kissing his tepid lips, he kisses me back, gliding his tongue against mine. An empty ache pulses between my legs as I grind against him.

He's able to slide me back down to my feet, pressing his body against mine. My body grows taut when he pushes his leg between my knees, nudging them apart. Christian trails his fingers up my thigh in a lazy caress. My teeth sink into his bottom lip, lust and defiance waging a war inside me. I can see the promise in Christian's eyes. The self-assuredness, the confidence. It's irritating, but right now, I'm powerless to do anything about it.

His fingers brush against the drenched material of my panties. I grasp his shoulder, my nails digging into his back as he slides my underwear aside and rubs his thumb over my swollen clit. My body jerks, trembles running through me as Christian kisses me harder.

“You're dripping all over my hand, *tesoro*,” Christian says, his voice rough and dark like sin. “Are you sure you're not going to beg?”

I pant softly. “Go to hell.”

He slips a finger inside me and my eyes flutter shut of their own accord. The finger fills me, stretching me, stroking and curling, and just when I think I can't handle the pressure, he

adds another one. My body begins to tremble, and sweat beads on my forehead as I fight the urge to plead with him to go faster.

The pressure starts to increase. And then, everything stops.

My eyes fly open and meet his. He's grinning, although there's a transfixed expression in his eyes. His hand is still on my clit, teasing softly, but it's nowhere near enough.

"You want more?" he asks, his fingers lightly pinching my clit.

My thighs clench around his hand.

"All you have to do is say it, baby," he prods as he continues teasing me, lightly circling my clit. He gives and he takes and the movements threaten to drive me out of my mind. When he trails his hand from my clit down to the hole in my center, I gasp softly.

The words are coming out before I can stop them. "Please, Christian!" I moan.

The look he gives me is every bit that of a man who knows he's in total and complete control. His lips and teeth run down my throat, drawing a sigh from me. All uncertainty, all thoughts are forgotten when he gets on his knees and pushes my dress to my waist to press his face between my legs.

There's something completely uplifting and empowering about having a man on his knees in front of you. No guy has ever gone down on me like this before, but seeing Christian and all his raw, masculine energy lower himself in front of me is almost enough to make me climax on the spot.

He pulls my thong to the side and slides his tongue inside me. I groan. My hips arch and my hands find their way into his hair. My legs fall open farther when he licks up my clit, a shudder running through me.

"Oh God," I breathe, my fingers tightening in his hair to hold him in place.

He shakes off my grip, his mouth moving down to my entrance. A moan escapes when he starts to fuck me with his tongue. He pulls back to yank my thong down my legs, tossing the fabric to the floor before pressing his face between my legs again with a sound of satisfaction. When he sucks my clit into his mouth, my eyes roll back into my head.

“How many men have done this to you?” he rasps, pulling back to look up at me.

I barely even hear him. The words are lost in a cloud of lust and desire.

“Daniella!” Christian calls, gripping my thighs and stopping his ministrations.

My eyes widen and I swipe at him with my nails. A silent order for him to continue. He grins.

“Not until you tell me how many men have gone down on you.”

“You want a fucking list?” I snap.

“How many?” he growls.

My jaw tightens, “How many women have you gone down on?”

His eyes darken, but I want to strangle him. Things were going so well. What is wrong with him?

“Christian, I swear to God if you—”

“Tell me how many men have gone down on you,” he insists.

My head falls back against the wall as I think about it. “I don’t know. Ten, fifteen,” I say, throwing out some numbers.

His hands tighten around me and he slips one finger inside me. I smile at the low growl that emanates from him.

“Two,” I finally confess when he adds another finger, thrusting in and out softly. I pant, “Only two men have ever gone down on me. Plus you.”

He seems satisfied by that answer, which is annoying. “Who was the first?”

My first instinct is to yell at him and call him a pompous dick. Then I change my mind, smirking as I look him in the eye.

“Do you really want me to be thinking about my ex right now?”

His eyes glint with something fierce and dangerous. He gets to his feet, pressing a quick kiss to my lips before trailing his lips down my neck and sucking a spot hard enough to leave a hickey behind. I swear, I’ve never met a man more territorial. He’s trying to mark me in every way possible.

“I don’t want you to think of anyone else except me,” he says softly.

My heart aches at the statement because I can catch an undercurrent of emotion beneath the words. It’s a glimpse of Christian that he likes to keep hidden. Something he probably considers a weakness. But the vulnerable look disappears and he’s suddenly Christian again, all rough edges and dark velvety words. His fingers drift toward my pussy. His entire body serves as a cage, keeping me locked inside this maddening heat and lust and desire.

“Tell me who this belongs to,” he murmurs. “Who does this sweet pussy belong to?”

“It’s mine,” I gasp, panting when his thumb reaches my clit.

He slips a finger inside me, swirling around the wetness that’s gathered and pressing his thumb even tighter on my clit.

“If you want to come, *tesoro*, you’re going to have to tell me who this belongs to.”

I wish I could say I have iron will and I refused to give him the satisfaction of bending to his will. But the minute he slips another finger inside me, filling me and touching a spot that makes my eyes roll into the back of my head, I break.

“You. It belongs to you.”

He grins, satisfaction behind his amber eyes. “Come for me, baby.”

His words are a trigger that sends me tumbling toward release. Sparks burn hot behind my eyelids as the pressure explodes. I come so hard, my ears ring, and I struggle to catch my breath. The only thing holding me up is Christian. If he moved away, I’m pretty sure I would fall over.

“*Sei così bella,*” he says softly.

That’s another word I understand in Italian. *Bella*. He just called me beautiful. My heart closes up and the motion is so painful, I shut my eyes for a moment. My eyes flutter open to find his on me. His breathing is uneven and his gaze is filled with something soft and dark, something I’m not sure I want to understand. I look away and the spell is broken and the air is filled with a sudden coldness.

Neither of us moves or makes a sound. Then Christian clears his throat and steps away. Thankfully, my limbs are already functional. I manage to pull my dress down, hoping my cheeks aren’t as red as they feel. I don’t recognize the expression on Christian’s face. His eyes are carefully blank, bypassing all emotion.

But if there’s anything this has taught me, it’s that he cares. Deep down, he cares. And maybe he dislikes that. But I’m not against hoping that it could mean something for us.

“Can I ask you something?” I question softly.

“You’re going to ask regardless of what I say, *tesoro,*” he replies, his voice gravelly.

I swallow softly before speaking. “When I graduated college I had a plan. I realize now that it’s a plan that’s never going to happen. But I had high hopes.”

“What was your plan?”

“Traveling abroad for a year. Going to Venice, Rome, just painting and looking for inspiration. I was going to explore

Europe and when I came back, I was hoping to have painted enough to have my own exhibition.”

“Like you said, that’s not possible anymore. Nice plan, though.”

“But it could be,” I hedge. “You could let me go. One year, Christian. And then I’ll come back to you.”

His eyes are simmering now, heat and anger in their brown depths. “You’re not going anywhere, Daniella. You’re my fiancée. The entire state of New York knows we’re fucking engaged.”

“But I won’t be in New York. I’ll be a thousand miles away on another continent.”

“No! You’ll be a thousand miles away from me as well. I won’t be able to keep you safe.”

“Why are you so scared of relinquishing control?”

His eyes narrow. “I’m not scared of anything.”

“Well, I call bullshit. The only reason you won’t let me leave is because it would drive you crazy that I wouldn’t be anywhere near you and you wouldn’t be able to boss me around as you wish. You don’t own me, Christian.”

He smiles. It’s a sardonic smile, cruel, biting.

“I seem to remember you saying you were mine while my fingers were inside you and you were screaming my name.”

My heart stops. I can’t believe he’s already using what just happened against me. My fists clench as I look at him.

*If you go low, I go lower.*

I take a deep breath, my gaze never leaving his.

“That’s just something I said so you would get me off faster. I had to stroke your ego somehow. After all, nothing we say during sex is real. Just meaningless words in the height of passion.”

And just like that, every single thing we've done, everything that's led up to this moment between us is unraveled. Christian doesn't say a word. He adjusts the cuffs of his shirt, tries to fix the mess I've made of his hair. When he realizes that's impossible, he walks out of my room. And he doesn't look back once.

When he's gone, I take a seat on my bed, staring into nothingness for the longest time. And wondering what the hell just happened.

## CHAPTER 16

*Christian*

“**A** fight broke out near Elm Street last night. Some of our capos got into a brawl with some cops. Shots were fired,” Carlo is saying.

I’m only half-listening to his report. But I do have enough sense to throw out a question.

“Anyone dead?” I ask, pretending my mind is here and not last night with a certain redhead who has a penchant for fucking with me.

Carlo says something in reply but I don’t hear him. My eyes move toward the paintings lining the walls of our house. Fuck, why did Daniella have to tell me about her love of art? Now every time I see a painting, I’ll be reminded of her.

My heart feels like someone took a sledgehammer to it after last night. There are so many conflicting feelings running through me. But most of all, I recognize that we both hurt each other, and if we did that to each other so easily, then what hope do we really have?

“*Fratello*,” Carlo says sharply, drawing my attention. “You’re not listening to me.”

I blink, looking up at him, and immediately feel bad. He woke up at the crack of dawn and came to the house this morning, ambushing me before I even had a chance to have breakfast. We’re in the living room so he can tell me about our newest problem, but I can’t seem to focus.

“I’m listening,” I say slowly.

He gives me a look that says he doesn't buy it, but for my sake, he starts all over again.

“Some capos got injured last night. Thankfully, none of them died and the doctors we've got on hand are already patching them up. But they shot cops, Christian. It's a big issue.”

My jaw clenches. “Who started it?”

“From what I heard, the cops busted them for illegal possession.”

“They're our guys. Weren't the cops aware that they're D'Angelos?”

“I think these particular cops were looking for trouble. I've heard some rumors that a detective's sniffing around us. I think—” Carlo hesitates.

One look at the doorway of the living room and I know why. Daniella walks in with an innocent, unassuming expression on her face.

“Don't mind me,” she says lightly.

I lean back on the couch, a smirk spreading on my lips. “Yes, don't mind her, Carlo. We can talk in front of her. After all, she knew what she was getting herself into.”

“Actually, I didn't know I would be relegated to a slave when I agreed to this.”

“Slaves don't get to walk around like they own the place.”

She glares at me. I ignore it, looking at Carlo, who's staring at us with a bemused expression on his face.

“You two had a fight?” he questions.

“Let it go, Carlo,” I mutter.

In true Carlo fashion, he doesn't press the issue. He clears his throat, apparently about to continue his report, which would not be ideal in front of Daniella. Contrary to what I

said, I wouldn't be comfortable with her hearing all the dirty little details of the business.

I get to my feet, my hand moving to the collar of my shirt to smooth out any ruffles. Carlo follows suit. Daniella's eyes follow our movements, her hands crossed at her chest as she stares us down.

"Where's Topher? I've been worried since he left like that yesterday," she says.

It's clear she's not directing the question to me but my older brother. I look at Carlo too, curious about the whereabouts of our black sheep of a brother. It also reminds me that I have to deal with the issue of Topher's fuck-up as well. Everything's about to implode in my face. Which is why whatever is going on with Daniella can't be at the forefront of my mind right now.

"He's alright," Carlo replies gruffly. "Staying at one of the family condos."

"Will he be safe?"

"Don't worry, *cognata*. I'll keep my brother safe," he tells her with a smile. He walks on ahead, leaving me alone with Daniella.

"Clearly, you're bored," I drawl.

"Because I'm concerned about your brother?" she scoffs.

"No. Because you're concerning yourself with matters that don't concern you. You knew Carlo and I were having a private conversation and you came in here regardless."

She smirks. "If you don't want me poking into your private conversations, find something to keep me occupied."

"Gladly," I tell her, reaching into my jacket pocket.

I drop my card onto the table in front of her. She sighs.

"Again?"

"You have a party to plan, remember? Spare no expense."

“I’m actually going to take you up on that offer.”

The gleam in her blue eyes has me worried about my bank account for a second, but I don’t say a word about it. I take a step back and another, tamping down the feeling in my gut that there’s a conversation due between us and if we continue to ignore it, there’ll be irrevocable damage. Still, I walk away, and judging by the hurt that flashes across Daniella’s eyes as I leave, I know she’s feeling every single thing I am.

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“OFFICER POWERS,” I say, rounding the table to stand in front of the middle-aged man with a penchant for collecting bribes from the D’Angelos. He usually offers us information in return, but today he’s proving difficult.

The man turns up his nose, crossing his arms and looking away. “I told you, Don. There’s nothing I can tell you. The detective on your case is pretty high up. Must have some powerful backing, too. I don’t know who he is or which station he works for.”

Subtly, I throw Carlo a frustrated glance. He takes the cue from me, moving toward the officer and placing a hand on his shoulder. The man’s brown eyes widen as he takes in Carlo’s presence behind him. My brother never gets involved unless torture or any other unseemly means are involved.

“Don’t worry. He won’t hurt you,” I say to calm the man. “He just wants to take you somewhere.”

Carlo leads the officer out to the place housing the four men that were shot last night. Maybe if he takes in the damage on his own, he’ll be more inclined to find out the source. After they’re gone, I get to work on taking some very important, overdue phone calls. One of which involves deciding the fate of my brother.

The boss of Desantos has a crisp, clear voice when he answers the phone. He’s a made man, just like me. But he’s

much older, has held his position for longer.

“There’s no need to waste either of our time on small talk, *Christian.*”

He says my name with scorn, derision. Like I’m below him and not worthy of any respect. It’s because I’m younger, I’m new and I haven’t done anything to deserve his respect. Yet.

“My thoughts exactly, Romano.”

“Turn in your brother. I promise he won’t be killed,” he states.

I let out a low laugh. “If you think I’m just going to throw my brother to the wolves, then you really don’t know me. And you don’t know my family.”

“Your brother defiled the wife of a capo. He’s going to get what’s coming to him. It’s up to you if it’s a bullet in the head or a bullet in the arm.”

My jaw clenches. Both those suggestions sound completely out of the realm of possibility. Topher fucked up. He’s not getting a bullet wound because of it.

“I’m open to negotiations,” I say, leaning back in my chair. “But you’re not going anywhere near Topher. I’m sure you can find something else to soothe your capo’s bruised ego.”

Romano goes quiet for several seconds. When he finally speaks, his voice is low and calculating.

“I hear the D’Angelos are getting a delivery in a month. Some firearms, gold bars—seems like a sweet deal.”

My hand tightens around the phone. “What do you want?”

“Twenty percent of whatever’s on that ship.”

“Five,” I call out roughly.

“You know how to haggle, Little D’Angelo. That’s good. Your father taught you well. But I want fifteen percent.”

One of these days, I'm going to make him regret calling me Little D'Angelo. "Let's be reasonable, Romano."

"Ten percent," he throws out.

"Eight percent or there's no deal."

He knew from the start his request was unreasonable. This is the best he's going to get. Romano's not an idiot.

"Fine," he finally says.

"Tell your capos to stay away from my brother."

"You got it, Christian. You're lucky the capo your brother offended isn't one that's too keen on revenge."

I translate what he's saying. Topher slept with the wife of a man that's barely in the gang so there was never any threat of violence or danger. Romano saw an easy way to make money off us and he took it. I should have called his bluff. My jaw grinds.

"Pleasure doing business with you, Romano," I say.

He hangs up right before the door to my office flies open. I'm about to rail into the person that dared to walk in without any invitation but my eyes meet light brown ones. My mom stands at the door, a mass of curly dark hair and a light blue suitcase behind her. I quickly get to my feet.

"Mom," I say in greeting, walking over to her. "You could have called to say you were coming back."

"My baby," she cries in her overly dramatic way. She reaches over for my face, "*Lascia che ti veda.*"

A sigh escapes me as she runs her hand over my face and my hair. I let her because there's no arguing or stopping Martina D'Angelo when she wants to do something. She's in her fifties but doesn't look a day over thirty-five. She always says the secret to her youth is the love of a good man. And now that Dad's gone, I can actually see how much she has aged in a year.

“Missed you too, Mother,” I say dryly. “You shouldn’t be here.”

She takes a step back, her eyes still continuing their critical assessment. “When your father was alive, I came and went as I pleased. You can’t stop me, *cara*.”

A migraine starts to form in my head. I’m sure with every moment I spend in my mother’s presence, it will increase.

“Did you at least take the back door and not the front?”

The pub has strict rules, one of which is no women allowed, especially not women in the family. The rule is to keep them safe. Business meetings happen at the pub—that, coupled with the number of dangerous men and women flitting in and out of here daily, and it’s no wonder the rule was made. It’s to ensure our women are less recognizable. Of course, my mom likes to pretend she’s above the rules and my dad pretty much let her do anything when he was alive.

“*Non sono stupido*, Christian,” she says with narrowed eyes. I take that to mean she took the necessary precautions. I hope. “Now, where are your brothers?”

I lean against my desk and take her in for a second. I wasn’t kidding when I said I missed her. Topher tends not to act as crazy when Mom is around and even Carlo loosens up around her. She makes everything better, despite the fact that I’m sure Topher inherited most of his infuriating personality from her.

“Your youngest is causing trouble again. Your oldest is probably somewhere spreading terror and doom.”

“And my middle child?” she asks, arching an eyebrow. “How’s my *nuora*?”

“She’s fine,” I reply, my answer clipped.

I look away because my mother has the uncanny ability to tell and understand whatever expression is flitting across my face. She makes a low, humming noise in the back of her throat, her eyes roaming my office.

“*Cara*, see, what I’ve been able to get from what you’ve told me is that Toph needs me. And you apparently need me as well.”

I stiffen. “I don’t need you.”

She groans. “You and your father are one and the same. Always refusing to accept that they need help. So what is it? The problem with you and Daniella?”

She says Daniella’s name fondly, with warmth. They’ve never even met but my mom already likes her. That’s how she always is, ready to give someone a chance without knowing a thing about them. On the other hand, you don’t want to be on the other side of that kindness. It never ends well for the people who cross Martina D’Angelo.

“There’s no problem, *Mamma*. Go meet Toph. He’s at his condo,” I tell her.

She gives me a look before sighing. “Call Carlo here first. I’ll leave after I speak to him.”

The family reunion is one worthy of a few tears, and by the time Carlo and my mother leave, I’m exhausted and more than ready to turn in for the day. But the thought of going home causes something to crawl up my throat.

By kissing Daniella and almost having sex with her, I deviated from the plan. I let my guard down. I was supposed to stay away from her at least until after the wedding. Control was never supposed to slip from my fingers so soon. She was never supposed to burrow her way into my head—hell, into my entire being. Marrying her was meant to be a business transaction, something easy, simple, straightforward. But all those things have been blown out of the water.

One night of passion fueled by lust and now we’re both drowning in a sea of uncertainty. I don’t know what I want and neither does she. We’re both on a crash course for disaster. And I have no idea how to stop us.

## CHAPTER 17

## *Daniella*

“**E**asy with that, it’s really expensive,” I call out to one of the workers.

I hear light footsteps behind me, followed by a scent I’ve come to acquaint with only one person.

“Do we really need a fountain shaped like a dog?” he questions, sounding appalled.

That’s the first thing he has said to me in three days. I whirl around to face him.

“It’s a New York socialite party, Chris,” I state. His eyes narrow at my shortening his name. I ignore it. “Our first of many. We have to step out into society in style.”

Christian’s jaw clenches. He takes a deep breath, visibly trying to control his anger. It makes me wonder what would happen if he actually let go. He’s so uptight all the time. Plus, he’s scary enough when he’s reining in all his anger and emotions. What would a Christian D’Angelo unleashed look like?

“Daniella, I told you to plan a dinner party for friends and family. Not invite the entire state of New York.”

I turn away from him, hiding my smile. “You did?” I ask, feigning innocence. “I must have forgotten. But don’t worry, babe. I’ll try to keep the guest list down to a maximum of five hundred.”

Christian's right eye practically twitches. "Five hundred people?" he asks, exasperated. "Where are you even going to fit all those people?"

"There's a large ballroom in the house. I'm sure it'll work splendidly."

He gives me a look. "You get a kick out of riling me up, don't you?"

"I can't deny it gives me all these warm, fuzzy feelings," I confess.

He sighs. I hear him about to leave so I quickly face him.

"I need your help with the guest list on your side."

Christian arches an eyebrow.

"I mean, I know your brothers will be there, but that's about it," I state, waiting for him to elaborate on who will be coming from his family.

"Other members of the family will be there. The capos, and my mom's back," he says and my eyes widen. "She got back two days ago."

"And you're just telling me now?" I grit out.

He shrugs. He fucking shrugs, like he didn't think it was important to mention that a woman who's supposed to be my mother-in-law is back. Mothers-in-law are notoriously famous for making life hell for their daughters-in-law. I want this woman to like me, dammit. But I know next to nothing about her. I only know what she looks like thanks to the pictures on the walls of the house.

"The opportunity didn't come up," Christian says. "Plus, she's off dealing with Toph so we shouldn't be seeing her for a while."

"Dealing with Toph? And what, pray tell, is the problem with Toph that your mother went straight to him after a long journey instead of coming home?" I ask.

Christian looks me dead in the eye. “That’s need-to-know information, Daniella. And you don’t need to know.”

I wish it didn’t, but my heart thuds painfully at that. I look away.

“Just curious... when is that going to change? I mean, I live here with you, despite your numerous absences. And I spend all my time in this house, getting to know the staff, when I should be getting to know you. I’m wearing an engagement ring that symbolizes the start of a relationship, even though it doesn’t feel like one. When exactly is that going to change? When is it going to feel like one?”

*When are you going to open up to me, Christian?*

I might pretend like I’m patient enough to wait, but that’s not me. I can’t wait for him forever. And the problem in this relationship is that it’s supposed to be forever. We’re signing up for forever, and I really don’t think he understands that.

“You’re being dramatic,” he starts.

Yeah, screw being patient. Those three words are enough to make me blow up in his face.

“Excuse me?” I screech. “I’m being dramatic? You’re the one that can’t be bothered to think that most other people have much more emotional range. Your head is so fucking far up your own ass, you don’t even realize that other people have feelings!”

The most annoying part about getting angry with Christian is that he remains calm the entire time. So now I’m the one looking like a crazy person. He crosses his arms over his chest.

“Well, this is an interesting conversation to walk into,” someone says, drawing both our attention.

Christian turns around to face the speaker while my eyes widen. I know I was just talking about seeing his mother, but now that she’s here, I wish she hadn’t shown up.

She’s shorter than I expected. Martina D’Angelo couldn’t be taller than five-foot-three, with curly dark hair and eyes

similar to Christian's, except his are much lighter. One look at her and I can see exactly where Christian got his good looks from. She is decked head to toe in designer, and the Gucci scarf around her neck is a clear sign that this a woman who knows fashion and indulges in shopping quite often. She stands regal and tall, looking every bit the wife of a Don. I shift uncomfortably. I never would have thought a middle-aged woman would make me self-conscious. But I'm in jean shorts and a crop top while she looks like she just stepped off the cover of *Vogue Italy*.

She looks at both of us underneath her dark eyelashes, lips pursed and the expression on her face the universal you're-in-trouble-with-Mamma look.

I swallow softly, stepping forward to meet her.

"Mrs. D'Angelo. It's lovely to meet you," I say calmly, pretending like I wasn't just yelling at her son a few seconds ago.

She stares at my hand like there are bugs crawling up it, her brown eyes lighting up as they meet my face.

"Don't be ridiculous, *cara*," she snorts, pulling me by the hand and wrapping her arms around me. "I am so excited to meet you."

Her voice is soft and upbeat. She sounds just as excited as she claims. I grin. Maybe I was worried for nothing. Then her gaze sharpens, moving to her son.

"One month, Chris. One month and you're already driving *mi nuora* crazy. Is this how I raised you?"

She says a few other words in Italian I can't follow, but judging by the way Christian's expression sours, I get the gist.

"You don't even know what happened, *Mamma*," Christian snaps.

"I know you're probably acting like a dumbass," his mom retorts. She's still holding my arm, her grip warm and firm. I

can't help the smile that climbs up my face at the sight of Christian being scolded.

“And you?” she says, whirling around to face me. I gulp. The woman is terrifying. “If Christian was bothering you, why didn't you call me? I would have straightened him out for you.”

“Um, I wasn't aware I had the option?” I say the words like a question. “I'll be sure to call you from now on, ma'am.”

She rolls her eyes. “Enough with the ‘ma'am’ nonsense. Either you call me Martina or you call me *Mamma*. Okay?”

Warmth rolls through me and my gaze softens as I look at her. “Okay.” I nod.

“Family meeting in the living room,” Martina suddenly announces.

Christian's eyes narrow. “My brothers aren't here. We can't have a family meeting without them.”

Martina scoffs. “My son is here, and my daughter-in-law as well. Don't tell me what I can and can't do, Christian. You may be the Don but I am still your mother. Now, get your ass in that living room!”

Smug satisfaction rolls through me. I'm pretty sure Martina D'Angelo just became my new favorite person in the entire world.

“She's not your daughter-in-law yet,” Christian mutters as he walks past us on the way to the living room.

My heart freezes over at that. Martina gives me a look and I see worry flicker in her expression for a moment. But she doesn't dwell on it, her signature smile quickly taking over as she leads me over to the living room. She guides me toward the couch right beside Christian.

“Sit,” she orders. I don't waste a second, pressing my butt onto the couch. She places her hands on her hips, looking at each of us in turn. “Now, tell me what the problem is.”

“There’s no problem,” Christian says immediately. “We were having an argument. One that I’ll be sure to resolve as soon as you leave, *Mamma*.”

“Leave?” I ask incredulously. “Why would she leave?”

She can’t leave. I already see her in my future, acting as a buffer between Christian and me for all time. She’s my newest asset. She can’t leave!

“You didn’t think I was going to live here with you, *cara*,” Martina replies. “The two of you are getting married, you need the privacy.”

My mood sours at that. I lean back into the chair and cross my legs. “Great,” I mutter apathetically.

Christian checks the time on his watch, obviously impatient and ready to go.

“You two... haven’t had sex yet. Have you?”

I think I choke on my saliva. Christian gets to his feet. “Mother!” he snaps.

“What?” the older woman says on a shrug, an innocent expression on her face. “You’re grown adults. about to be married, of course I’m curious.”

“No. We’re not doing this with you. Absolutely fucking not.”

Her gaze sharpens. “If you swear in front of me again, Christian, we’ll have a very difficult conversation, *capire?*”

Tension rolls through Christian’s body. “*Si*.”

“Here’s what we’re going to do,” Martina starts, her demeanor switching in an instant. “I’m going to be your relationship therapist.”

I hide my smile. She’s going to do what? Christian takes his seat beside me, obviously done with fighting her.

“Obviously, you both have some issues. I’ll help you walk through it. Talk to me,” she prompts.

Crickets. Neither I nor Christian say a word. Martina sighs softly.

She looks at me. “When I walked in, *mia cara*, you seemed to be talking about how Christian has the, what was it? Ah! ‘Emotional range of a teaspoon.’” She smiles like it’s something funny. “I’m afraid he gets that from his father, honey. D’Angelo men like to pretend they’re so tough all the time. Deep down, he actually cares.”

“I know,” I venture, ignoring the way Christian stiffens beside me. “I know he cares, he has said as much himself. That’s not the problem, Martina.”

“Then what is it?”

“He’s just... cold. Like he’s incapable of feeling anything deeply. He might care about me, but I doubt that care goes beyond anything relating to duty and responsibility,” I say honestly.

I can’t even look at him right now, afraid of what I’ll find in those amber eyes. Probably nothing.

Martina’s eyes are on her son, studying him. “*Figlia mia*, what do you have to say?” she asks softly.

Christian looks at me and I can tell he wants to talk. To finally let me in. Then his brows draw together and he gets to his feet.

“I think this is ridiculous, Mother. You just got back from your trip and then you had to deal with Toph. Take a break. You can stay here for a few days before you go to your apartment. I’m sure Daniella won’t mind the company.”

With those words, he leaves. I’m left staring at Martina D’Angelo, feeling the strangest sense to tell her I told her so. Instead, she settles down beside me, laughing softly.

“Oh, honey, what have you done to my son?” she questions.

My brows knit in confusion. “What?”

“He’s unraveling. Trust me, *cara*. Christian is a man on the brink of cracking. It’s just a matter of when.”

I ponder those words, wondering how she can be so sure. Before I can question her, she turns to me, brown eyes glinting.

“Let’s have the chef make us some martinis. You can tell me all about yourself.”

And that’s how I spend the rest of my day. By the time the day is done, I’m pretty sure I’ve fallen a little bit in love with her.

## CHAPTER 18

## *Christian*

**D**aniella has called me a coward countless times, and I'm starting to realize she might be right. I haven't been home in a week, partly because I've been busy with work but also because I've been avoiding her. The look in her eyes, that fire, that casual unassuming beauty. I haven't wanted to deal with the way she makes me feel. I also haven't been in the mood for an argument. So I've stayed away, and she's been content to let me do so.

I step out into the light rain, walking toward the bright red door of the condo my brother has been living in. I'm under strict orders from our mother to, in her words, "make up with him." She's basically telling me to apologize when he was the start of this entire issue in the first place. My jaw is pulled tight as I knock on the door.

Topher answers wearing nothing but boxer briefs with a print of the ocean with whales swimming across. I sigh softly, crossing my arms over my chest, when he refuses to let me gain entrance.

"Can I help you?" Topher drawls. His dark hair's a mess, overgrown and hanging haphazardly over his head.

"You look like a hobo," I say.

He arches an eyebrow. "Isn't this supposed to be an apology visit?"

*Ah, I see Mamma already told him I was coming.*

“No, idiot. This is an involuntary house check-in,” I say, pushing past him and walking into the house that, as I suspected, is a mess. “I’m here to make sure you’re not keeping any illegal drugs in the house.”

“Don’t be a hypocrite, Chris. Your job is literally selling those *illegal drugs*.”

Facing him, I take in a huge breath. “It was stupid that you slept with that woman.”

He rolls his eyes. “You think everything that everyone else does apart from you is stupid, Christian. You’re a perfectionist and you expect everyone around you to be the same. You don’t get that sometimes people fuck up. Hell, you don’t even understand that, sometimes, fuckups can be necessary.”

I frown. “How and why would a fuckup be necessary?”

“Because then you’d grow from it,” Topher says.

My lips twitch. “Were you watching the Hallmark Channel before I walked in? Because this is some next-level, romantic Yoda shit.”

“*Stronzo*,” he mutters, glaring at me.

“You can call your older brother an asshole, but that doesn’t mean I’m not right, like, ninety-five percent of the time,” I say, leaning against the wall.

“What happened to the other five percent?”

“That’s reserved for those slim situations where I do something like yell at my little brother and send him packing from the house.”

Topher’s eyes narrow. That’s as good as an apology he’s going to get from me. He knows it, I know it, hell even *Mamma* knows it. So when he sighs and heads over to the couch, I follow and sit beside him. He grabs the remote and flips through some channels before settling on the Hallmark Channel. I roll my eyes, giving him a look.

“I’m sorry for trouble I caused the family. In hindsight, my actions were reckless and stupid.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Hindsight?”

“Shut up, *fratello*,” he groans.

“Apology accepted. But I’m not watching some cheesy rom-com with you. Let’s—”

My next words are cut off by my ringtone blaring. I pull my phone out of my suit jacket, my brows furrowing when I see the caller ID. It’s the head of staff back at the house. And they only ever call when it’s an emergency.

“What is it?” I question, picking up.

“It’s Ms. Daniella, sir,” she states.

That’s all it takes for me to get to my feet. I’m pretty sure my heart stops.

“What’s wrong with her?”

“She ran into her art room a few minutes after the rain started. She seemed a little distraught.”

Rain?

I walk over to the window in Topher’s condo, pulling the blinds aside. When I walked in here, it was barely raining. A little drizzle. But it’s starting to look like a full-blown storm out there. I rub the back of my neck, wondering why that would affect Daniella.

“Try and knock and see if she’ll come out,” I say to the woman on the other line.

I hear rustling and the sound of knocking.

“Miss Daniella?” she calls. There’s no reply, complete silence. “She’s not answering sir. And the door’s locked.”

My breath comes out in a huff. “I’m on my way,” I tell her before hanging up.

I turn to my brother, who’s staring at me curiously.

“What?” I question.

“Nothing,” he replies, looking away. “You’ve got somewhere to be, *fratello*. So go.”

I nod, heading for the front door. But Topher’s words before I leave stop me in my tracks.

“And Christian? Don’t forget what I said about it being okay to fuck up once in a while.”

“I’m not taking your dumb Hallmark Channel advice,” I tell him, stepping out of the house and heading to my car.

I make the thirty-minute drive home in twenty, because the more time I spend away from Daniella, the more I worry and wonder about what could be wrong with her. It could be nothing, this could just be her needing some space and the staff blowing it out of proportion but I don’t mind seeing her a little early.

The rain is still pouring by the time I pull up to the driveway. Lightning flashes on the horizon, quickly followed by loud thunder. I’m soaked from the moment I step out of the car. I toss the car keys to one of the capos guarding the house before rushing in. The head of staff immediately walks up to me.

“Good evening, sir.”

“Where is she?” I question, my voice harsher than necessary.

I’m already on edge. She gestures up the stairs toward the art room and hands me a key. I’m guessing it’s the master key to unlock the room. Upon arrival, I hesitate at the door. She once said she didn’t like anyone seeing her paintings. And I would really hate to intrude on something that’s might be special to her.

I knock on the door but she doesn’t answer. I know again, still nothing. I unlock the door and step in. I don’t see her immediately. Instead my eyes roam the various paintings lining the walls. And then land on the one right in the middle.

Something about the painting chills me to my core. It's big, larger than life. The paint is thick and textured on the canvas, nearly three-dimensional. The strokes are rough and visible. It's genius. But that's not what stalls my footsteps.

Daniella's in the painting. She painted herself standing in the middle of a busy road. Her face is turned only slightly in the painting, so I only get to see half of her expression. But her eyes are wide and terrified as she looks at something. Something that's coming right at her, something fast approaching. A cyclone. And even worse than the wide-eyed terrified expression on her face, there's something else that scares me. The satisfaction. Like a part of her feels like she deserves it. The painting almost feels alive.

Some rustling draws my attention and I turn just as Daniella gets to her feet. She was lying on the couch I hadn't even realized was in here. At first glance, she looks perfectly fine, but then I take in the tremors going up her arms. And how pale her face is, and I clench my jaw. I take slow steps toward her while she watches me with a glare.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

"You shouldn't be in here." Her voice shakes on the last word.

When I reach her, I slowly guide her down to the couch. She flinches when I touch her.

"Your hand is cold," Daniella whispers.

I sigh, taking off my jacket and starting to undress, removing my wet clothes as well. Daniella's eyes nearly pop out of her sockets.

"What are you doing?"

My eyes meet hers. "I can't stay in wet clothes forever, *tesoro*," I say, taking a seat on the couch.

I'm still wearing my pants, so she can stop looking at me like I just stripped naked. After a sigh of her own, she lowers herself into the couch beside me. I don't touch her. The two of

us stare at nothing for a little while. Well, I'm still staring at the painting in the middle of the room. There are others here, beautifully well-done paintings, but none of them tug at me the way that one does.

"Stop staring at it," Daniella snaps, interrupting my thoughts.

I look over at her calmly. She has clenched and unclenched her fist ten times in a manner of minutes since I've been here. But I can't very well force her to tell me what's wrong.

"It's beautiful," I say softly.

"It's damaged," she replies, her voice is barely a whisper. "Just like me."

My eyes meet hers sharply.

"You're not damaged," I say with conviction.

Daniella smirks, crossing her arms over her chest. "And how would you know that? At the slightest sign of intimacy or something real between us, you run. You hide."

I rub my bottom lip, looking away from her piercing blue eyes. "We're not doing this today."

"No, we're not," she agrees, leaning back into the couch and closing her eyes. "I'm not mentally capable enough to verbally spar with you right now, Chris."

Something slashes at my chest at her words, my worry increasing.

"What do you want me to do?" I ask.

Her eyes open slightly as she looks at me. "Stay."

That's easy enough. I nod once and she closes her eyes again. The rain is still pouring outside. It's loud and I'm acutely aware of it. So is Daniella. Every flash of lightning at the window, every time thunder booms, her eyelashes shake, and something vulnerable crosses on her face. Her eyes are still shut tight but I know she can feel everything.

I get to my feet and head over to the floor-to-ceiling window, the only one in the room. I close it and draw the blinds. I don't care if she wants them open, it's clearly bothering her. By the time I return to her, her eyes are open again.

"Why did you do that?" she asks.

"You don't like the rain." It's a mere observation, but the way her eyes narrow, one would think I threatened her or something.

"It's rain, Christian. It's fine." she scoffs.

"Don't lie to me, Evans."

She must hear in my voice that I'm not kidding because she sits upright, looking at the painting in the middle of the room with her jaw locked tight. Her next words make me tense.

"I had a panic attack before you walked in," she says casually.

"What?"

"A panic attack, Chris. It's a sudden bout of intense fear and anxiety that could cause a person to be unable to breathe, due to a perceived threat that doesn't even exist."

"I know what it means," I snap.

"Of course you do," she mutters. "Because you know everything."

"No," I let out a breath, rubbing the bridge of my nose. "Daniella, just once, I need you to let your guard down and talk to me."

"I do that all the time! You're the one incapable of it."

"Maybe you're right, but I still want to know what caused you to have a panic attack."

"That's need-to-know information, D'Angelo." Her words are cruel and biting as her eyes find mine. "And you don't

need to know.”

Okay, I deserved that. Completely, one hundred percent.

“What happened?” I ask again, softly this time.

She looks away, her chest heaving out a breath. “I haven’t had one in years. I’m not sure what triggered it.”

“Liar,” I say, calling her out. “We both know it has something to do with the storm.”

“Alright fine. So thunder scares me. You can laugh at how ridiculous that is. I’m a full-grown woman that’s scared of thunder.”

I’m stricken by that comment. “I would never laugh at something that causes you pain.”

“I know,” she breathes without looking at me. “And I’m fine now, so you don’t have to be worried. The panic attack has come and gone. I’ll call my therapist tomorrow morning. You don’t have to worry,” she repeats.

“You have a therapist?”

“You don’t?” she retorts. Then she smiles and I just know what the next words out of her will be. “That’s messed up, Chris. You off all people need a therapist to sort through those damaged thoughts in your head.”

She’s only half-joking and I don’t rise to the bait. My gaze is firm, steely as I stare at the side of her face. Her gaze shifts to mine and immediately softens.

“You know, most times I think to myself that you’ll never really care about me besides out of duty and honor. Then you look at me like that and I’m not sure what to think.”

“I—” I pause, unsure what the next words out of my mouth should be.

She’s right. I shouldn’t care about her more than out of duty and honor, but then there are those cracks, moments where I want to. Where I want to let her in, but that would be

giving her power over me. And I'm not wired to let anyone have that much control over me.

Daniella gives me a half-smile. She's probably enjoying seeing me all riled up. She looks dazzling in the low light of the room, like a shadow I conjured and somehow impossibly like an angel from my dreams.

"Thanks for helping me," she says cryptically.

I blink. "I didn't do anything."

"You came in here and distracted me," Daniella says, getting to her feet. "Plus, I really didn't mind the view."

My gaze goes down to my bare chest. I completely forgot I undressed, and with the way she's looking at me right now, I'm starting to think that was a bad idea.

"You hear that?" Daniella questions. I can't hear anything so I shake my head. "Silence. The rain's stopped, D'Angelo. So you can stop playing hero and leave."

"I'm not playing at anything. And I'm not leaving you."

"I'm about sixty seconds away from mauling you and climbing you like a tree. So if you don't want that. I suggest you walk away, baby," she teases.

A rush of heat begins in my chest and spreads down to my cock, hardening it. One look from this woman and I'm gone. It's maddening.

"You're not like any other woman I know," I say, my gaze dropping to her lips.

She winks. "Of course not. I have to at least be special to drive you wild all the time."

*Who doesn't love a self-aware woman?*

"Seriously, Christian. Go away," she says.

My gaze narrows. "You're not kicking me out or sending me away. You need me."

“I don’t,” she says, but the words coming out of her lips are at war with the tension in her shoulders.

Daniella uses jokes and sarcasm to cope with her pain. When she feels cornered, she says dumb things so no one focuses on what’s beneath the surface. So even if she’s telling me she’s okay now, I know that’s not true.

“Fine, maybe you don’t need me. But I want to help you.”

“You can help me by walking out of here,” she suggests.

“No. I’m not leaving you in here.”

If I leave, I’ll worry all night that’s she’s going to have another panic attack. Plus, it’s getting cold.

“So what do you suggest?” She gasps, her eyes lighting up. “Don’t tell me the all-powerful Don is going to take me to his bed.”

“Yes,” I reply and her eyes widen. “Don’t give me that look, I have no nefarious intentions. I just want to take care of you.”

Her eyes soften. “You’re just full of contradictions, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, I know,” I agree. “Now come on, let’s go.”

I gesture for her to take my hand and, with an eye roll she does, letting me lead her out of the room. We take slow, measured steps toward my room. Daniella’s hand tightens around mine.

“Are you ever going to tell me why thunder scares you?” I ask her.

“I will. When you decide to tell me the truth about how you really feel for me.”

My eyes meet hers momentarily and my breath catches. How can I tell her the truth when I don’t know it either? She takes a step forward, looking around my space.

“Do you want to know the first thing my father said to me after I killed that man?” I ask softly.

She whirls around, her eyes widening when she realizes I’m willingly offering up information about myself. She nods once and I let out a deep breath.

“He told me not to let it in. I was horrified after I did it. I practically ran out of that room, but he followed me. My father looked me in the eyes and told me that all the things I was feeling would only make me weak. I wasn’t a boy from that moment on but a man with blood on my hands. And the man I had to be was one who could look death in the eye and not flinch.”

I run my hand over my jaw. I hate being transported to that night, but it’s the core of who I am. The apex of the Don today.

“I don’t know how to feel, Daniella. For the longest time, I’ve kept my emotions tightly leashed behind closed doors in my mind. I understand what you’re asking me for, but it’s hard to let go when I’ve been conditioned from the start to do anything but.”

She walks over and stands in front of me. Every nerve in my body tingles as she reaches up to brush a strand of hair from my face. I’m acutely aware of her closeness, of each breath, every single inch of her. The urge to pull her closer and kiss until we both can’t breathe consumes me.

“I understand,” Daniella says softly.

“I know you do. Which is why I need you to give me time.” I pause before saying my next words. “Of course I care, *tesoro*. I feel something for you. You just have to give me a while to understand those feelings, okay?”

She smiles softly and nods. And because I can’t help myself, because she’s right in front of me and she’s all I can think about, I slide my hand to the base of her neck and bring my mouth to hers. The kiss is reckless and consuming. I give it my all, knowing that I’m going against everything I say. Knowing that this only serves to complicate our relationship

more. Knowing that it's not helping the confusing feelings raging inside of me.

My tongue licks into her mouth with an urgency she returns, angling to take me deeper. There's nothing hesitant about the way I lay claim to her mouth, nothing cautious about the ache that pulses low in my stomach. I break the kiss only when we're both panting and rest my forehead against hers.

"Now, we sleep," I whisper softly.

Daniella laughs, and the sound is enough to warm every channel in my body, keeping me at ease.

"Fine, but you have to put on a shirt first. Please?"

When I slide into my bed next to her and pull her into my arms, she feels so perfect, the realization tumbles into the deepest parts of my mind.

Somewhere between meeting her and disliking her and arguing with her constantly, I actually started to fall for her. And while it goes against everything I've been taught and everything that makes me who I am, the reasons to stay away from her are slipping. With every moment I spend in her presence, she chips away some of the ice surrounding my heart.

Maybe, just maybe, she'll help me thaw.

## CHAPTER 19

## *Daniella*

I'm not surprised to find Christian gone by the time I wake up. It's on brand for him, the disappearing act whenever I manage to find my way past the barriers he places around himself. He doesn't show up for the remainder of the day, not until I'm getting dressed for the party.

My eyes meet his through the mirror of my vanity. He's leaning against the doorway, staring at me with barely disguised heat and lust. I turn around in my chair to face him.

"Hey, baby," I greet, my lips curved up in a smile.

He rolls his eyes at the endearment before pushing off the doorway and taking several steps forward, closing the distance between us. My eyes roam his body. He's dressed in a crisp, black Armani tuxedo, sans tie. The man has an obsession with the color black and a deep loathing for ties.

"The party's in full swing downstairs," he says. "Mom sent me to escort you."

His tone is a clear indicator of what he thinks of his mother's recommendation. Knowing Martina, he didn't have much of a choice. I get to my feet and Christian's gaze is drawn to my dress. There's pure longing in his eyes as he scans the length of my body, from my bare toes to my neck. I had the dress custom-made for the engagement party. It's a Marilyn Monroe-esque gown that hugs my every curve, in blue fabric the color of my eyes. I smooth the dress over my hips, a little self-conscious as Christian's gaze continues to

coast over me. I'm not dumb enough to be oblivious to the hunger in his expression.

"You look beautiful, *tesoro*," Christian says. "You always look beautiful."

I beam at the compliment. This man has no idea just how much power he wields over me.

"Thank you. Now, come on. Let's get to the party. Best not to keep our adoring fans waiting." I flutter my eyelashes in his direction.

He smirks, clearly amused. But he doesn't say a word, waiting patiently as I grab my silver stilettos and settle down on my bed to tie the buckle. Christian kneels in front of me instead, stealing the breath from my lungs and surprising me when he does the buckles for me. My eyes track every moment, every time his hand brushes against my bare skin.

This tension is going to melt us.

When he stands up, he helps me to my feet and gives me his arm. The entire party quiets as soon as we walk through the doors leading into the room. Contrary to what I told Christian, I didn't go overboard and invite every socialite in the state of New York. But I did invite some of my college friends, a few people in society I'm sure would have been affronted if they had not received an invite, and our close friends and family. The silence dissipates just as quickly as it appeared, with everyone mingling, doing what they do best. We're approached by several people wanting to congratulate us on our engagement.

Christian's perfectly polite, calm, and poised as he answers all the questions. He's a business man through and through. I could just as easily see him as the CEO of some conglomerate if he wasn't the Don. People respect him, and while I'm sure fear is the motivating factor for that respect, it's highly efficient. Half the men want to be him, half the women want to be with him, and yet I'm the woman he chooses to have on his arm. I can't deny that it fills me with a rush.

Eventually, we make our way to my family. My parents were in the process of speaking to the elites in the room but they give us their attention as we approach.

“Mom, Dad,” I greet, my tone casual.

I haven’t seen my father in more than a month and I haven’t seen Mom since she left Christian’s house after telling me to marry him. My dad has practically been ignoring my existence since I moved in here. I want to believe it’s because he feels guilty, which he really should. I would never be in this position if it wasn’t for him.

“Hey, baby,” my mom says warmly.

“Sweetheart,” my dad adds, shifting forward with his arms outstretched for a hug.

I grant it, because there’s no way in hell I’m making a scene in front of all these people. We have to keep up all pretenses. Never show weakness in the face of uncertainty. And right now, I have no idea what my relationship is with my parents. I return to Christian’s side and his hand briefly touches my wrist, the gesture almost comforting. Then he’s looking at them.

“Lucas,” he says to my father. “How pleasant to see you here.”

There’s an air of superiority in Christian’s voice I will never attain. He completely considers himself to be above literally everyone else. And I’m a damaged person because I find that absolutely sexy.

“D’Angelo,” my dad greets with a nod. “It’s good to see you, too. Dany looks well. I’m glad you’ve been taking care of her.”

“Of course. Somebody has to have her best interests at heart,” Christian drawls.

My heart squeezes because I realize all the animosity is because of me. He doesn’t approve of what my parents did, which is weird because he’s one who benefits from the

situation. Or is it the other way around? Regardless, my dad's eyes narrow and his jaw clenches.

“Right. I've been meaning to talk to you, actually. Important business,” dad states.

Christian's expression is bland as he stares at him. “It's my engagement party, Lucas.”

“Like I said, it's important. I'm sure Daniella will be able to spare you for a few minutes.”

Wanting to defuse the tension, I nod once at Christian.

“Go. It'll be nice to spend a few minutes of the party without your insufferable ass,” I tease, lowering my voice so my parents can't hear.

His lips curve slightly. “Don't talk to anyone that seems like they're in the outfit except Carlo. The capos might be loyal to me but I don't want them talking shit to you.”

“Yes, yes, I got it. Now shoo.”

He walks away after one last look at me and I'm left standing awkwardly with my mother. Damn, I really survived twenty-two years with this woman only for our relationship to be fractured now? I don't even know how to talk to her.

Mom opens her mouth to speak but is interrupted when a flash of blonde hair barrels into me. I let out a grunt, instinctively wrapping my arms around Zoey. She laughs. One look at her face and I sigh softly.

“How much have you had to drink, Zoe?” I question, interlocking her arms.

“A lot,” she replies on a giggle. “Skylar decided to get the party started before we got to the party.”

At the sound of her name, our brunette friend appears, walking over. Something stops me in my tracks. And it's not Sky's blatant disregard for the dress code that said formal attire, considering she's in an extremely short black halter dress and thigh-high boots. She looks like she's ready to go

clubbing, not attending a society function. No, what stops me in my tracks is the man on her arm.

Joshua Hart walks toward me like this isn't the last place in the world he's supposed to be. And my blood turns to ice.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" I seethe once they're within hearing distance.

I turn around to take in my mom's expression at the sight of Josh, but she must have moved away when Zoey appeared and is currently sequestered among a group of older women. Good. My parents never approved of me dating Josh, which is why him walking in here is so fucking stupid on so many counts.

"Nice to see you too, Dany," Sky says, her gaze narrowed and also unfocused at the same time.

Great, she's fucking drunk. Under normal circumstances, I wouldn't be against showing up to a party unable to tell my head from my ass. Under normal circumstances, I would have been right there with them, but I'm not that person anymore. And Christian's going to kill Josh. My heart thunders in my chest. Oh God. I need to get him out of here.

"You realize walking in here was the worst thing you could have done, right?"

His eyes are clear and he's not slurring, so I can only assume he's sober.

"I had to see you, Dany. I had to make sure you were okay."

My heart warms at the gesture but it's going to get him in so much trouble.

"And I appreciate it. But I would also really like it if you stayed alive, so please leave," I beg.

He glares, crossing his arms over his chest. "You're worried your fiancé is going to kill me. And genuinely worried if the look on your face is anything to go by. Don't you see, Dany? This isn't a life you should be part of. I let you go once

and left you behind when I shouldn't have. I refuse to do that again. You need to leave him, Dany."

He's ballsy, I'll give him that. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Carlo start toward us, his eyes narrowed in Joshua's direction. Christian still hasn't made an appearance and I'm terrified of what will happen when he does. With wide, panicked eyes, I turn to Sky.

"How could you bring him here?" I cry.

She pouts. "In hindsight, it was probably a bad idea. But I was drunk and he practically begged me."

Joshua rolls his eyes at that. I look at him.

"Josh, I appreciate what you're doing. But you need to go. Please. There's a time and place for a conversation like this."

As soon as I say that, my back tingles and the air in the room drops several degrees. I don't have to turn around to know he's standing behind me.

"Enlighten me, *tesoro*. What time and what place would that be?"

## CHAPTER 20

## *Christian*

Daniella slowly turns to face me. I take in the small group gathered around her. Her best friends pose no threat to me. But it's the man that's openly glaring at me that piques my interest. Joshua Hart is not a coward, I'll give him that. But he's also completely stupid. If he wasn't, he wouldn't think it was a good idea to walk right into my house, at my engagement party, and talk to my fiancée who he's clearly attracted to.

Tension coils in my gut as I stare at him, Daniella's last words reverberating in my skull. She was going to set up a meeting with him? Over my dead body.

"Well?" I ask again, my voice calm, although a sharp edge comes through.

"Christian," Daniella says, stepping in front of me and blocking Hart from my view. "We were just talking."

I almost smile at her obvious attempt to distract me. "Were you, now? Then you wouldn't mind if I had a few words of my own with him, would you?"

"Actually, I do mind," she says.

I take in the stubborn set of her jaw and the fierce look in her eyes. It's moments like this that I'm attracted to her the most. She never backs down from a fight, ever. And while it's beyond sexy, that's the last thing on my mind as I take in her protective stance. In front of him.

“Too bad. Leave us, Daniella,” I order. My throat feels tight as I say the words.

“No.”

“Do you really want me to ask Carlo to carry you away?” I ask. I know she wouldn’t want to cause a scene in front of all her party guests.

Her shoulders sag as she looks at me, panic flitting across her eyes. Her friend Sky steps forward, wrapping her arms around her shoulders.

“Come on, Dany. You need a drink. I’m sure Josh can handle himself,” she says sensibly, leading her away.

I nod at Carlo, giving him a look to take care of her, and he follows the women. And then I’m left alone with Joshua Hart. His arms are crossed at his chest, his posture confrontational. He can kick it down a notch. If I was going to kill him, I wouldn’t do it in front of all the guests. Plus, I suspect Daniella will never forgive me if I do. And I have a vested interest in keeping her happy.

“Here’s how it’s going to go, Hart,” I begin. “You’ll stay away from Daniella. If I even catch you within twenty miles of her, then you’ll regret it.”

My words are lazy, unbothered, but I’m so fucking serious about it. And he can tell.

“Or what? You’re going to kill me?”

The man doesn’t fear for his life. That’s cute. And a lie. But there are worse ways to destroy a man than death.

“I hear the Hart Media Industry has been facing some problems lately. Tax evasion, suspicions of fraud.”

His brown eyes are wide as he takes me in. “You—” He falters. “You’ve been fucking with my family’s company.”

“No. You’ve don’t done that all by yourself. Just some information that fell into my lap but, if you think I wouldn’t

destroy you and your family without blinking an eye, then you're delusional."

"I think you're the one that's fucking insecure. All this because I talked to Daniella? Or maybe it's because you know deep down that she'd rather be with me."

The man really has no brain cells. I chuckle, but the sound has no mirth.

"Baiting me is the completely opposite of what you should be doing right now, Joshua."

"Let Daniella go. You can have any other woman you want."

"But I want her and I have her."

"She's not yours. Daniella and I—" His next words end before he can voice them.

Faster than he can blink, I have my hand around his collar. The gesture comes so easily to me. Holding a man's life in my hands. Very slowly, I apply pressure.

"There is no Daniella and you," I say, my voice deadly calm.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see her start to approach, but Carlo holds her back. The rest of the party edge away from the scene. I take this all in while still trying to squeeze the life out of the man in front of me.

"Christian," my mother say sharply, stepping behind me. Topher's on her arm, and my brother watches with barely disguised amusement. "You will not kill anybody at this engagement party."

"He pissed me off," I tell her, still squeezing. Joshua's starting to turn a little red.

He pushes at my arm but his attempts are useless. I apply just a little more pressure. His eyes are starting to take on that sheen I recognize. The one that shoots a thrill through me. Fear.

“Christian!” my mother yells.

“Let him do it, *Mamma*,” Topher says in a tone that slightly grates on my nerves. “Judging by the look on Daniella’s face, this might be the one thing that’ll finally drive her away. Maybe then he’ll finally see sense.”

My jaw clenched, I let go of Joshua. He falls to the ground, gasping for breath, while I turn to my brother.

“What?” Topher asks innocently.

My gaze goes to Daniella but she’s not there. Carlo gestures at the doors to the ballroom and her retreating form is the last thing I see. Fuck! Losing my temper like that was definitely a mistake.

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“I DIDN’T KILL HIM,” I say, stepping into the dimly lit art room.

Daniella’s in front of an easel, a paintbrush in hand. I can see the tension vibrating across her body by the way her hand shakes around the brush.

“Fuck off, Christian,” she says, without looking at me.

“I could have, but I didn’t.”

“Give the man a medal,” she states, sarcasm dripping from her words.

“I didn’t do it because I don’t want to lose you.”

Those words effectively shut her up. She drops the brush and turns around to face me. Her blue eyes narrow.

“You don’t want to lose me? Or you didn’t want to look weak in front of all those people? That’s what all this is, isn’t it? When it all comes down to it, it’s about keeping up appearances, making sure they all remember that they can’t cross you without consequences. Making sure they all remember to fear you.”

“Do you fear me?” I toss out the question like my heart doesn’t skip a beat in anticipation of her answer.

Daniella ponders it for a long moment before shaking her head.

“I wish I did, but I’ve seen parts of you no one else has. I’ve seen how much you love your family, how much you fight to protect them. I know how much it has cost you. And I know what it took for you to get here. So no, Christian, I don’t fear you. I never could.”

My heart practically purrs in satisfaction of her answer. This woman will be the death of me one day. She should fear me, it’s in her best interests if she does. But the fact that she doesn’t sends a thrill through me. And chips past even more of my defenses until I feel the need to lay my heart bare before her.

“The Hart situation wasn’t because I was trying not to look weak,” I say to her. “It’s because I was—”

My fingers clench together as I fight to complete the sentence. Daniella’s eyes are warm and encouraging. I see the need in them, as well. She needs me to finish it. She needs to know how much I care.

“I was scared, *tesoro*. Scared that I would lose you. Scared that you would eventually realize that this is a mistake. I was scared you would choose him.”

Daniella takes a step toward me. “The Don doesn’t get scared. Fear is an emotion that’s far beneath you.”

Those words sounds like they were said by my father. Daniella didn’t know him; she never met him. But she knows me.

“When it comes to you, I feel every emotion,” I say passionately. “Fear, desire, lust.”

“You want me,” she says simply.

“More than I’ve ever wanted any woman. Any fucking thing. But I’m—”

“Scared,” she finishes. “I know. You’re scared you’ll ruin us.”

She’s close enough that I can reach over and touch her cheek. “You don’t think I’ll ruin us?” I question softly.

“I’m willing to gamble. It’ll be worth it.”

Worth it. It feels like my entire life has been a gamble, and until this moment, I never knew if I would win.

“No more false pretenses,” I say.

“No more lies.”

“No more fights.”

She gives me a dry look. “Really?”

I chuckle, my hand going to her waist and pulling her closer. “No more unnecessary fights,” I amend.

Her gaze flicks to my lips and her eyes heat. “You have me, Christian. You don’t have to be scared of losing me,” she tells me.

*I know.* But I can’t voice that. Because it would signify that she knows how unflinching my faith in her is. Losing that faith would break me.

“Kiss me,” Daniella whispers.

I don’t waste a breath before doing just that. Her entire body responds to me. She arches closer like she can’t stand any distance between our bodies. I deepen the kiss, swiping my tongue over her soft lower lip and gently sucking on the tender curve. Desire floods my system, hot and demanding.

I hope Daniella never finds out just how much power she wields over me. Because in this moment, I’m terrified I would jump off a cliff if this woman asked.

# CHAPTER 21

## *Daniella*

Our mouths collide, and the kiss is hot and hard and completely out of our control. Need streaks down my spine as he takes my ass in his hands and hauls me against his hips, my back raking the ridges of the door behind me as I use it as leverage to push closer to him.

I wrap my legs around his waist and lock my ankles. My dress rides up with the motion, the material constricting and preventing me from getting closer. The caress of his mouth and strokes of his tongue steal all logical thought and my world narrows down to this moment, this one kiss, him.

His mouth slides down my neck in a sensual assault that makes me moan.

“Fuck, how did I stay away from you for so long?” he asks, against my throat.

“I know, right?” I pant. “You have so much self-control. It’s annoying.”

Christian smiles against my lips. Then he’s carrying me toward the table in the room. Some of my art equipment crashes to the floor as my ass hits the desk. I can barely bring myself to care. He leans over, his fingers latching through my hair as he takes my mouth again. I kiss him back, trying to pour back all the desire and hunger he makes me feel.

“There. Is. Nothing. I. Want. More. Than. This.” He punctuates each words with a kiss along my jaw, making his

way to my ear. He bites my lobe softly and my entire body melts.

Fuck, that feels so good.

Every touch of his mouth to my skin inflames me. He takes my hand and slides it down between our bodies, down his pants, which I hadn't even realized he unbuttoned.

"I want you to feel how much I want you."

He groans when I squeeze his hard cock. When he lifts his head, my gaze meets his, and we both recognize the wild desire mirrored in our eyes. Christian pulls at the material of my dress and it gives enough for him to suck my nipple into his mouth. My blood practically burns as I tighten my hand around his hair, needing something to hold onto, something to ground me.

I gasp when Christian pulls my head back by my hair and presses his lips to my neck.

"You're being awfully quiet, Evans," he muses.

"Can't speak," I pant when he swirls his thumb around my wet nipple. "Need you to fuck me."

"Ask nicely."

This time, I don't even bother trying to tease him or bait him. I look him straight in the eye and say, "Please fuck me, Christian!"

He smirks. "I will in time. I want to taste you first."

Then he's lowering himself before me. I gasp when he pulls me to the edge of the desk and pushes my dress up to my waist. He makes quick work of discarding my panties, leaving me bare for him.

He doesn't hesitate before dipping his head and licking me from entrance to clit. The growl of satisfaction that escapes him vibrates through me. I can already feel my imminent orgasm and he's barely even started. Christian runs a rough hand down my leg, pulling my thigh over his shoulder. The

gesture is tender, warm, making my heart skip a beat even as he tries to drive me crazy.

“You have no idea how addictive this pretty little cunt tastes,” Christian murmurs, awe in his voice.

I lean back against the wall, my head moving up to the ceiling as I try my best not to break. Christian pushes my legs farther apart, delving into and eating me out like a man starved. My clit is swollen and his ministrations are the kind of painful pleasure that increases the pressure inside me.

“Oh God!” I cry.

He chuckles against my pussy. “God’s got nothing to do with this, baby.”

I writhe and buck, begging him to stop one second and then asking him never to. His tongue thrusts into me and when he pulls away to fuck me with his fingers, I detonate.

“Christian,” I moan, nearly bucking off the table as my orgasm causes my entire body to tremble.

He stands, pulling my body against his as he holds me against the onslaught of intense pleasure. When I finally stop shaking, Christian leans down to kiss my cheek.

“You have no idea how beautiful you look right now, *tesoro*.”

He kisses me then, making me taste just how much I want him. Her movements become frenzied as I help him out of his clothes while he pulls my dress over my head. He leans down to capture a nipple in his mouth, sucking softly until I’m practically squirming under him. He bites my other nipple once and that’s all the warning I get before he’s pushing into me.

“Christian,” I gasp, my eyes widening at the feeling of him inside me. “Condom.”

He pauses, his movements growing still. The air in the room feels like it’s been sucked out. An eternity passes during which we just stare into each other eyes.

“The condoms are in my room,” he says carefully. “I could go and get them, but—”

He doesn't have to finish. I'm not sure I would be able to let him walk away from me right now either.

“I'm on birth control,” I tell him.

Technically, I've used my pills pretty casually for the past few months, but I'm sure I took one a few days ago. I try to mentally calculate when I should be ovulating. We should be in the clear. Christian searches my eyes for any sign that I might not be comfortable with going on. I nod once to assure him, trailing my fingers across his face.

He pushes back inside me in one deep thrust, bottoming out. I choke while he hisses, his eyes on where we're connected.

“Oh God, slowly, Christian. Slow!” I beg, clutching at his arms.

He's so big, too much, and I practically have heart palpitations as I try to get used to his size.

“*Scusami tesoro,*” he apologizes, brushing his lips across mine.

His arms are practically shaking with the effort it's taking him not to move. He's trying to be patient for my sake, giving me a chance to adjust. After a few quick breaths, I give him a thumbs up. Christian smiles. We're both shaking as he eases out and then back inside again. Pleasure burns my veins and I moan, running my fingers up his chest. I hold onto his shoulders as he fucks me slowly.

His eyes are fixed down as he watches his length disappear in and out of me. His movements are controlled, powerful. He fucks just like how I knew he would. Everything about his personality is precise.

“I'm clean,” Christian rasps.

It takes me a few seconds to rationalize that statement.

“I know. Someone like you would never slip up and get an STD.”

His eyes come up to mine and narrow. He punctuates his displeasure with a violent thrust that causes me to gasp. Then he’s thrusting into me faster, each thrust sending a wave of heat searing through me. My orgasm hits me hard, shooting stars behind my eyes and knocking the breath out of my lungs.

“Christian!” I scream, as the pleasure threatens to pull me over.

He’s still going when I’m tugged back down to earth.

“You have no idea how perfect you felt just now, coming around my cock.”

I moan, unable to reply, bouncing against the table with the force of each thrust. Christian continues to hit a spot so deep and intense, it’s bringing me to a point I’ve never gone before. I just came but my body doesn’t seem to register that fact. I clutch onto Christian’s arm, holding on for my dear life.

“Come inside me,” I plead.

He presses his face to my neck, smothering a groan. He’s so fucking deep that I can feel him everywhere. He draws back, his eyes searching mine for a heartbeat or two before he devastates me with another kiss that has me straining for more, rocking my hips against his.

“Tell me whose pussy this is,” Christian demands.

My jaw clenches. “Mine. Who else? It’s attached to my body, so it’s mine.”

He’s not pleased with my answer. His thrusts decrease in tempo and my looming orgasm retreats as he fucks me slowly and leisurely.

“If you want me to fuck you hard and fast, Daniella, you’ll tell me who this pussy belongs to.”

I’m panting, my hands scraping across his arms as I try to summon the willpower to resist him. When he places a finger

on my clit and starts to tease me lightly, I lose it.

“Yours,” I sob. “I’m yours.”

“Good,” Christian whispers, right before he picks up the pace.

My mind groans in protest, while my body screams his approval as he fucks me so hard I’m sure I’ll feel it for days.

“You’re so fucking beautiful, *tesoro*. Let go for me.”

Pleasure takes me in waves, rolling through me again and again until all I can do is clutch Christian’s shoulders, holding on tight. He thrusts once, twice, and on the third one, he shatters, shuddering as he finishes inside me, filling me to the brim.

He leans against me, both of us breathing heavily. I’m still clutching onto him when Christian kisses my cheek, the motion tender and sweet. Which is so at odds with his personality, I grin like an idiot.

“That was...” I pause because I literally have no words.

“Mind-blowing?” he suggests with a smile of his own.

“That’s one word for it.” I take him in, the muscled lines of his chest, his devilishly handsome face. This man could destroy me and I wouldn’t mind as long as I could stare at him forever. “Let’s do it again,” I suggest, still giddy from the post-orgasmic high.

Christian brushes some of my hair behind my ear as he looks into my eyes.

“We have a whole party waiting for us down there, Evans,” he reminds me.

My eyes widen. The party! Shit, I completely forgot about the party.

“I’m sure we won’t be missed,” I say on a shrug.

“Of course not,” Christian agrees with a smile. “We’re only the guest of honors and the hosts. They’ll definitely not

notice we've disappeared."

"Exactly," I tell him, wrapping my arms around his waist. I'm smiling so hard my cheeks hurt. Great sex will do that to you. "Let's just go to your room and you can let me drive you wild."

His eyes heat at the insinuation. He cups my cheek, his expression saying a thousand words that he can't say on his own. "That does sound infinitely more interesting than the party."

"Right? Fuck the party."

"You're a terrible influence, *tesoro*," he mutters.

"I'll take that as a yes," I say, sliding down to my feet. Unfortunately, my legs have yet to wake up and I stumble a little. Christian wraps his arms around me immediately.

"Easy," he says on a chuckle.

"This is doing wonders for your ego, isn't it?" I ask. He literally fucked me so hard I can't walk.

"I can't say it doesn't hurt."

I roll my eyes before leaning forward to brush a kiss over his mouth. "Asshole," I say fondly.

"Come on, let's go."

I try to ignore the fact that his cum is still trailing down my thighs. But it's a clear indicator that we just had completely unprotected sex. Except the birth control pills I've rarely been using. I definitely need a shower, and he's definitely using a condom next time. There's no way in hell I'm willing to take this risk again.

We both get dressed as well as we can before exiting my art room and heading to his bedroom. A thought hits me as we climb up the stairs. I stare at our intertwined fingers with a grin.

"You know, I just realized something," I say.

“Which is?”

“We’re in a relationship. Like an actual romantic relationship. Damn, I have a boyfriend,” I say to myself in disbelief.

I haven’t dated anyone since Jack two years ago. I keep that little tidbit to myself, though. No use pissing him off when he’s being so nice.

Christian squeezes my hand once. I can’t see his expression since he’s walking in front of me but I hear the pleasure in his voice.

“I’m your fiancé, Daniella. We’re engaged,” he reminds me.

“Yes, but our engagement is pretty backward. Now at least we get to start at the beginning. Like a normal couple.”

“Whatever makes you happy, *tesoro*.”

“Speaking of things that would make me happy...”

Christian tenses, and I have a feeling he’s worried I’m going to ask him about my trip again. He doesn’t have to worry. I won’t be bringing that up anymore.

“Can I cook dinner for you tomorrow? The staff hasn’t let me in the kitchen since we arrived and I miss cooking.”

He turns to look at me with an arched eyebrow. “You like to cook?”

“Yeah. I’m a mysterious girl, Mr. D’Angelo. There’s so much you don’t know about me yet.”

“I look forward to learning everything,” he says, and those little words are enough to make my heart race. “As for the cooking, I didn’t realize you would be interested. We hired a chef because my mom’s a mess when it comes to the kitchen.”

“That’s unexpected, she definatly gave me cook vibes,” I say, smiling. But totally on brand for Martina D’Angelo.

“Tell me about it,” Christian mutters. “Anyway, you can cook all you want, *tesoro*. I’ll let the staff know so they can give you a little space.”

I beam. “Dinner tomorrow.”

“How about breakfast, lunch, and dinner?” he suggests, opening the door to his room.

I freeze in the doorway, staring at him uncertainly. “You’ll be home all day?”

“Yeah, I’m taking a vacation. Tomorrow, you have me all to yourself.”

“The Don doesn’t take a vacation,” I say.

He flashes me a bright, heart-stopping smile. “When it comes to you, I do.”

## CHAPTER 22

## *Christian*

On an average day, I get about five hours of sleep if I'm lucky. My body is already prepped to be up way before the sun rises. And I never fall asleep before 2 a.m. Last night, thanks to Daniella, I fell asleep way before that. One moment, I was kissing her and enjoying the feel of her naked body beneath mine, and the next, I was asleep with her in my arms.

When I roll over to check the time, it's 7 a.m. and I'm so surprised I don't move for several seconds. I haven't slept this well in forever. And the nightmares that usually plague me were kept at bay. I smile softly, easing my body from Daniella's so I can get to the bathroom. When I return, my gaze coasts over the bed.

Long, red hair, smooth beautiful skin, and a face that I could stare at forever. Daniella's already turned over in the time I left. She's on her stomach, with one hand under her pillow. My chest feels heavy when I take in her soft expression and the sleepy smile on her face. My best guess is she's probably dreaming, and it had better fucking be about me.

I don't expect her to wake up for another few hours after last night's workout, so I settle down on the couch in my room and grab my laptop to get in some work. I'm so engrossed, my body tenses when hands wrap around my neck from behind. Then I take in her maddening scent and all the tension dissipates. She kisses my cheek, breathing softly.

"Good morning," she mumbles, hugging me tighter.

The grin that forms on my lips is instantaneous and impossible to stop. Turning slightly, I lift Daniella over the couch and into my lap. She lets out a surprised gasp before I place my lips on hers. She kisses me back, scraping her teeth against my bottom lip. I could kiss her for hours. And I really wouldn't mind if she woke me up like this every morning.

"Hey, baby," I greet, a little breathless as I stare at her.

She threw on one of my shirts when she woke up and the sight of her in it causes warm, unbidden thoughts to rise in my mind.

"I wanted to wake up with you," she pouts, staring into my eyes like she can barely believe I'm here. "It's 9 a.m., Christian and we had a long night. Surely you could have slept in."

I give her a look. "I woke up around 7, *tesoro*. In my book, that classifies as sleeping in."

"Then you started working." She points at the laptop. "What happened to, 'today's a vacation day'?"

"It is a vacation day. But that doesn't mean I can't work from home."

She sighs softly and I chuckle, pulling her even closer and relishing in her warmth.

"I believe I was promised breakfast, dinner, and lunch," I say, nudging her cheek softly with my nose.

"I assumed a vacation meant I would get you without all the... you know... work stuff," she retorts. "Come on, Christian. No more working."

My next words are drowned by the ringtone of my phone cutting through the air. I give her a small smile before grabbing it and picking it up.

"Hold that thought," I tell her, gently placing her beside me on the couch when I realize it's my brother.

"We have a problem," Carlo says as soon as I pick up.

“Of course we do,” I mutter, getting to my feet so Daniella can’t overhear the conversation.

“Two of our men are dead.”

I let out a harsh breath, quickly switching to Italian. “What happened?”

“Someone busted our drug deal. This detective’s out for D’Angelo blood, Christian.”

Carlo sounds pretty pissed and my blood ices over, as well. He doesn’t even comment on me replying in Italian. I can hear the frustration lining his voice.

“Who?” I ask, referring to the dead men. Every single man that works for the family is my responsibility, which means I’ve currently got two dead men and their families on my hands.

He tells me their names and my fist clenches around the phone.

“We need to look into this detective, *fratello*,” Carlo says, switching to Italian as well, probably unconsciously.

“I know,” I tell him, my eyes momentarily meeting Daniella’s. She looks pissed but this is out of my hands. “Listen, Carlo. Could you take care of the funerals and meeting their families for me? I can’t today.”

My brother pauses. “You’ve never delegated something like this.”

“No,” I agree, “but I promised Daniella I would spend the day with her.”

Another long pause. “Well, damn. You haven’t taken a day off in years.”

“I know. Which is why I need you to handle this for me. I’ll take care of the detective. Find out who he is, where he lives, and...” My gaze connects with Daniella’s and the quickening of my heartbeat is a clear sign of what I figured out

last night. I'm so fucked. "We're going to destroy him," I tell my brother.

He lets out a sound of approval before hanging up. I turn to my fiancée, switching to English.

"Every time you look at me like that, Evans, all I can think about is how much I want to kiss you."

Her eyes narrow. "You said no more secrets."

"Sure, but there are some aspects of the business you really shouldn't concern yourself with," I explain, dropping onto the couch beside her.

She scoffs, crossing her arms over her chest. "I'm going to brush up on my Italian, babe. When that happens what are you going to do? How are you going to have your secret conversations then?"

I kiss the side of her neck. Her breath hitches and she clutches my neck.

"Don't worry, baby. I speak other languages," I assure her.

She pushes me off and I laugh.

"Alright, fine." I lean back in my seat. "That was a call from Carlo, telling me that two of our men died last night. Shot down during a drug deal." My jaw tightens at the thought.

Daniella's warm hand covers mine, her blue eyes sympathetic. "I'm sorry. I know it must eat at you."

"Yeah." I blow out a breath. "Want me to make you feel better?" she asks.

My eyes gleam and I nod once, before she slides down to her knees in front of me. One hand on my cock and it immediately hardens. Fuck, she barely has to try before I'm ready to go. She looks up at me and I'm sure the sight of her will be ingrained in my mind forever.

I shudder when she reaches into my briefs to pull out my cock. It bobs in front of her. She doesn't do anything but rub it

for several seconds, slowly stroking me. I nearly lose it when she licks her bottom lip, staring at it hungrily. I start to grow impatient.

“Suck me off, *tesoro*,” I say calmly, despite the rapid beat of my heart.

A bead of arousal leaks from the tip of my cock. The first slide of her tongue on my shaft hits me hard. Heat spreads up my stomach and tightens in my chest. My head falls back to the couch and I clench my teeth in an effort not to make a sound as she licks my cock like a lollipop.

Her free hand slides up to my taut abs. Her fingernails are painted red, like sin. I don't if it's the color I'm obsessed with or her but the sight of it on her lips or hands drives me wild. The press of them on my stomach burns a path just as hot as her mouth. Her gaze meets mine as she tongues the head of my cock. I hold in my groan as she tortures me with little licks and sucks that make me ache.

She tilts, staring at me with barely disguised amusement. “You're being pretty quiet, babe.”

“I'm fighting against every urge to fuck that sweet mouth hard,” I tell her, gritting my teeth.

Her eyes glint. “Do whatever you want, Christian. I can take it.”

She has no idea what she just promised. I run my thumb down the smooth skin of her cheek. She inhales before taking me in her mouth. This time, she slides all the way down, managing to take in every inch.

“Fuck,” I growl.

She pulls back to suck in a ragged breath. Her eyes water as she takes me in deep again. I ease my cock in softly, trying to feed it to her slowly. Daniella takes me in again and again.

“Daman, baby. You have no idea how perfect you look, taking every fucking inch of my cock.”

She makes a sound of approval around my cock and rubs her thighs together. She's just as turned on as I am right now. When her throat constricts around me, I know I'm about to come.

"Can I come in your mouth, *tesoro*?" I ask breathlessly.

She blinks up at me in acquiescence. It's her eyes that do me over. Heat erupts inside me so violently my ears ring as I come in her mouth. She swallows every single blast, her eyes still a little teary. I make a rough sound in the back of my throat, every cell in my body filled with satisfaction and something else. An emotion I can't name right now.

She leans away from my cock, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. Her hair is an unruly mess of curls almost reaching her waist. I grab her by the neck and pull her lips to mine, kissing her deeply, sliding my tongue into her mouth. Her fingers find their way into my hair and I groan softly as a shudder goes through me.

"Now your turn," I tell her, pulling back. "Sit on my face."

She sighs softly. "Christian, if this keeps up we'll never make it to breakfast."

"Breakfast is overrated," I tell her, needing to taste her badly.

She sighs again and I smile. She has no idea how cute she looks right now. By the time I carry her to the bed, slide her panties to the side, and pull her to straddle my face, every sound out of her mouth is a moan and a plea for me to never stop.

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WE NEVER DO MAKE it out of the room in time to eat breakfast. By the time we arrive in the kitchen, it's noon. I'm famished and Daniella's cranky. Her eyes light up when she takes in the empty kitchen. I sit at the counter and stare as she gets to work on preparing our meal. I could watch her for hours. The cute

quirk of her lips when she's thinking about something. The way her eyes glaze over a little any time she looks at me.

"Did you go to college?" she asks, grabbing the ingredients for the meal.

I arch an eyebrow. "That was random."

"I'm just curious. It's not like your career path requires a college degree."

"No, it doesn't," I agree. "But Mom made sure each and every one of us went to college. Carlo went to college abroad. I went to Stanford. Topher went to Princeton."

Her eyes widen. "Damn. Both you and Topher went to Ivy League schools. What did you study?"

"Cyber security," I reply gruffly. "Toph studied mechanical engineering. He came out top of his class."

"So Topher's a genius?" Daniella asks and I laugh.

"Pretty much. He gets a kick out of pretending to be a doofus, but my little brother's pretty damn smart."

Her eyes narrow when she looks at me. "You studied cyber security."

"Yeah."

"Does that mean you're good with computers? Like hacking and stuff like that."

I nod once and her mouth drops open.

"That is such a frightening ability for someone like you to have."

"Makes me pretty much invisible," I brag, leaning back in my seat.

She rolls her eyes. "Your humility is so touching." Then her eyebrows pinch in a way that tells me she's thinking hard about something.

"Spit it out, *tesoro*," I prod.

“It’s just... you had four years away from home. Was it hard?”

I wasn’t expecting that question. I hesitate for a second, staring into her warm blue eyes. When I reply, my voice is low and a little detached.

“No, it wasn’t. Those were the best years of my life. I came home regularly, of course. And if the family needed help, I was there. But it was sort of freeing.”

“I can imagine.”

My hand goes to my jaw and I rub it gently. “Why do I have a feeling you’re making my dad out to be some kind of bad guy in your head, Evans?”

“I’m not,” she blurts. “It’s just... it seems a little cruel that he made you who you are today.”

“Who I am today is who I was meant to be. And my father was the best man I’ve ever known. He might have been lacking in some areas, but he fought hard for this family. He made us who we are and I’m so grateful to him. I’ll always admire him for that.”

“Of course you will. He’s your father. I wasn’t trying to judge, Christian,” she says softly.

I calm down, unclenching my fists. “I know, sweetheart. Go back to preparing lunch.”

She smiles, returning her attention to the food. We don’t speak for several minutes and I spend that time just staring at her and enjoying the view. She’s still in just my white shirt, buttoned haphazardly. It stops mid-thigh and when she bends down, I get a peek of her tits. Which is making my blood heat, and now I’m considering bending her over and fucking her until we both can’t think straight. I’m not worried about anyone walking in on us. I sent all the help away for the day.

“Stop staring at me like you’re contemplating either murdering me or spanking me over the counter,” she says,

without looking at me. Her eyes are on the vegetables she's currently chopping expertly with a knife.

“Am I really so transparent?” I drawl, leaning forward, my eyes never leaving hers.

“Yep. You've got that whole scary, brooding man attitude down pat. I honestly don't know what I see in you,” she states, turning on the electric cooker.

“Really? Would you like me to remind you?”

“No. Leave me alone, Christian. I need to focus.”

“I wasn't even doing anything.”

“You are distracting me,” she says through gritted teeth. “Go play with your phone for a while.”

A laugh escapes me. “You're kicking me out?”

“Yes. Go.”

My eyes narrow for a second. “I'll spank your ass for this later.”

“Promise?” she asks, giving me a heated gaze of her own.

*Fuck, I'm so screwed.*

Eventually, I excuse myself, letting her prepare our meal in peace while I retire to the living room.

## CHAPTER 23

## Daniella

Dinner's ready in under thirty minutes thanks to Christian leaving. I carry both plates into the living room and place them on the table. He smiles softly, kissing my forehead in thanks.

"I feel like I should warn you, baby," I start and he throws me a curious look. "No one has ever eaten my cooking and not fallen in love with me."

"Hmm," Christian says, a playful glint in his eyes. "I'm going to have to test that theory."

I stare at him intently at his side as he takes the first bite. A half-smile pulls at his lips but he doesn't say a word as he continues to eat.

"Well?" I question when he continues to be silent.

"Eat your food, *tesoro*," he tells me.

I pout, but considering I'm too hungry to argue, I do as he says. We finish our meals in silence, after which Christian carries the plates to the kitchen. He doesn't return for several minutes and I have a feeling he's doing the dishes. He's such a clean freak. I'm a little upset he had nothing to say about the food but he finished it so that has to count for something.

My attention is on a melodrama airing on HBO when he returns. He settles down beside me and pulls me until I'm seated on his lap. Then he kisses me, soft and slow in a way designed to drive me wild.

“Thank you for making me lunch, baby. It was amazing,” he whispers against my lips.

Happiness blossoms in my chest, his words settle like molten metal in my blood.

“I knew you’d love it,” I say.

“It was delicious.”

“Don’t love it too much. I only want to cook on occasion. But it’s one of my only two talents. I always knew I would either become a painter or a chef. Although,” I falter, “I guess I’m not either right now.”

I have an art degree from college and everything but nothing to show for it. I’ve barely been able to paint since I moved in here with Christian. I don’t blame him, but it’s hard to feel inspired here. The only times I ever paint are when he pisses me off or when I’m feeling strong emotions in relation to him. That just goes to show how obsessed I am.

Christian must see the thoughts in my mind plainly on my face because a pained expression crosses over his. Then he kisses my cheek softly, moving his kisses down to my neck.

“You’re perfect, *tesoro*. And you’re everything you want to be.”

“The food really altered your brain chemistry, huh?” I tease, pushing away the dark cloud hanging over me.

Today couldn’t be more perfect and I’m not about to ruin it. I turn, straddling him, and soon enough we’re kissing deeply. Christian’s dick presses against my core and just like that, I’m wet and hungry for him. His hands grip my ass and I squeal when he slaps one cheek hard. I pull his hair in revenge and he lets out a low dark chuckle.

The pressure in my chest grows tight as he kisses me hard, his teeth nipping at my lips.

“Well,” someone says, “this is awkward.”

I scream and jump off Christian’s lap.

“What the fuck!” Christian growls, looking at the doorway of the living room.

“Topher!” I snap, staring at his brother. I quickly try to make myself look decent, although it’s hard considering I’m only wearing a shirt and panties.

“Sorry,” Topher says insincerely, walking in. His hair is disheveled and he’s only wearing pants without a shirt. I hadn’t even realized he slept here last night.

“What are you doing here?” Christian asks, eyeing his brother with annoyance.

“Mom and I crashed here last night after the party. You know, the party in your honor that you two ditched?”

“You could have told me you slept over,” Christian grumbles.

“So you guys finally made up?” Topher questions, his brown eyes full of mischief. “And it only took Christian almost killing your ex-boyfriend for it to happen. I wouldn’t have thought you had the violence kink, *nuora*.” He winks at me and my mouth drops open.

Christina glares at his brother. I swear, Topher revels in starting shit with him.

“How do you even know he’s my ex-boyfriend?” I ask.

“Lucky guess,” he says on a shrug before clarifying. “I had a very interesting conversation with a sexy brunette last night.”

“Sky?”

He nods, grinning like a Cheshire cat.

“Stay away from my friend, Christopher,” I tell him.

He pretends to think about it for a while. “Sorry, Dany, but you can’t make me.”

My eyes widen. With a groan, I turn to Christian and give him a look that warns him he’d better make his brother fall in

line. He smiles before looking at Topher.

“Stay the hell away, *fratello*.”

“You know,” Topher says, crossing his arms over his chest, “that order doesn’t sound any better coming from you either. Makes me want to do the exact opposite.”

“Listen to your brother or I’ll smack your head,” Martina says, walking into the living room.

My cheeks heat when she takes in my closeness to Christian and our barely dressed state with an approving smile.

“I’m guessing you two had sex,” she says casually.

Christian drops his head back onto the couch with a pained groan. “That is just not okay, Mom. At all.”

I grin. I’m embarrassed, but I adore Martina’s ability to make Christian flustered in moments like this.

“What? I’m just happy to see you so happy,” she says with a grin. “Although I am upset you two left the party last night. That was rude, Christian.”

“We’re sorry, Martina,” I hurriedly say. “We just had some things to take care of.”

Topher laughs. “Yeah, my brother definitely ‘took care’ of you.”

Martina reaches over and smacks his head. Satisfaction fills me at that.

“Ow, *Mamma!*”

She says something to him in rapid Italian. I don’t understand most of the conversation but I get the gist when he walks out of the room. I’m pretty sure Martina just kicked him out.

“I’ll leave, too. The two of you can enjoy having the house to yourself,” she says to us. “And Daniella, it was nice talking to your parents yesterday. Although your mom seemed a little worried that you don’t call often. You should do that, *cara*.”

“I will, Martina,” I tell her. She blows me a kiss before leaving, then it’s just Christian and me.

“What did my father have to say to you, anyway?” I ask after a few seconds.

“Business,” Christian replies gruffly.

I give him a look. “Really, babe? In what world would I ever be satisfied with that answer?”

He groans softly, pulling me down onto his chest. He starts to run his fingers through my hair as he answers my question

“A shipment was delayed at the port in China and he asked for help in case it gets seized by the authorities. I have the same issue, actually. There’s this fucker called Giovanni that’s refusing to cut a deal with us. It’s making business flow from China really hard.”

“Want me to talk to him? I can be very persuasive,” I say with a smile.

His fingers tighten in my hair. “No. I don’t want you anywhere near him or the business.”

“Fine,” I sigh. “I’ll be a dutiful housewife.”

“You’d be a sexy housewife,” he corrects and I roll my eyes.

“Don’t give my dad everything he wants,” I say. “He thinks he’s won by arranging this marriage. I hate that he’s using you like this.”

“He’s not using me. I’m doing this for you, baby. It’s your family’s company, after all.”

“Still.”

“You should make up with your parents, *tesoro*. Their intentions may not have been pure, but they love you. And you’ll always care.”

“I will,” I promise him. “But not anytime soon.”

We both fall into silence, our eyes trained on the TV. I'm not sure Christian's paying attention, but I'm soon invested in the drama on the screen. Then a scene comes on where one of the characters takes his girlfriend to a fancy restaurant, and I look up at Christian.

"How come you've never done that?" I ask, pointing at the screen.

He smiles. "Do you want me to?"

"Of course. What girl doesn't want to dress up and go on dates?"

"Then we're going out for dinner tonight. I'll make reservations."

Appeased, I settle back onto his chest. Christian might not want to toss out the word "perfect," but nothing has ever actually felt as perfect as this moment. I can't help the sliver of fear that rolls through me that it might come to an end.

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"YOU'RE A BRIGHT BUBBLE OF SUNSHINE," Sky notes as she slides into the booth opposite me and Zoey.

It gives me flashbacks to a month ago, when we were in a similar position. Things have changed so much since then. Christian and I are in an actual relationship now and we're happy. There have been some fights since we got together a few weeks ago, but apart from that, we finally found a rhythm that works for both of us.

"Don't start," I say on a glare. "You kept us waiting for thirty minutes."

"Not cool, Sky," Zoey agrees with a shake of her head.

"I had a good reason this time. Law school's no picnic," she states.

“Sure, but Zoey has a full-time job and yet she got here early. Just admit you didn’t get here on time because you didn’t want to.”

She crosses her arms over her chest and narrows her eyes. “And if I do?”

“Then you apologize,” Zoey chips in.

She groans when she finally realizes Zoey and I are genuinely upset.

“Fine. I’m sorry I got here late. I wasn’t kidding about school being hard, though. It’s a nightmare.”

“I’m having a hard time at work, too. I hadn’t realized pursuing a career in design would be so tedious,” Zoey says.

They both turn to me and I sip my coffee, looking away. “What?”

“Does the housewife have any troubles she wants to pitch in?” Sky smirks.

My jaw clenches but I don’t let her words get to me. Sky hasn’t hidden her disapproval of my inability to pursue my career in art.

“I’m perfectly content, Skylar.”

“There’s a difference between content and happy,” she points out.

“I’m perfectly happy as well! Christian and I have never been happier.”

“Listen, sweetie, I know you like the guy. But you’ve got to understand he’s keeping you back. You’re a star, Daniella. He needs to let you shine.”

Tough love is Sky’s way of showing affection. But that doesn’t make her words any much easier to hear. Zoey’s quiet beside me, which is a clear indication that she agrees.

“What do you guys want me to do?” I burst out.

“What you were always meant to do,” Zoey says quietly. “Remember the plan, Dany.”

“The plan won’t work. Christian has attachment issues,” I mutter.

The man is insanely overprotective. Even now that I have more freedom over my movements, he always has someone watching me at all times. Bronx is my new bodyguard and driver. He came with the red Mercedes Christian got me two weeks ago.

“Well, I hope he gets over himself soon,” Sky says. “The two of you are in your new relationship honeymoon phase right now. But eventually, he’ll have to understand that you need more than that. He can’t be your entire world.”

“We’re going to be married.”

“Exactly. Can’t that be enough for him?”

Zoey speaks up. “A ring seems like enough security. It’s just a year, Dany. It’ll pass by quickly.”

Frustration fills me. They don’t understand. Christian doesn’t think the way normal people do. Add that to the fact that he’s the Don and I’ve got a man that won’t be able to handle having me so far away from reach.

“What if he goes with you?” Zoey suggests.

Sky scoffs, crossing her arms over her chest. “That kind of defeats the purpose of getting away, doesn’t it? All he’ll do is distract you.”

She’s right, but she’s also really starting to piss me off.

“Can we move on from this topic?” I ask, irritated.

Her brown eyes soften. “I’m sorry. I know the truth’s a hard pill to swallow. But I’ll shove it down your throat until you see sense.”

I just sigh and swirl the straw around my coffee. Zoey provides a much-needed conversation change. Unfortunately, it revolves around another D’Angelo man.

“Are you still seeing Christopher D’Angelo?”

“No. We slept together once and I haven’t called him back since.”

I make a noise of disgust at the back of my throat. “You slept with him? Ew, Sky, he’s like my brother!”

“Brother-in-law,” she corrects, flipping her brown hair over her shoulders. “Plus, he was really good in bed. Don’t worry, I know the drill. Men like Topher are only good for one thing. And I’m too busy becoming a lawyer to ever get involved with him.”

“Smart girl,” I say with a sniff. “Stay away from him, Sky. I’m still upset with you for showing up to my party drunk. You’re on thin ice!”

“That wasn’t my fault!” she exclaims. “Zoey was upset after breaking up with her on-again, off-again douchebag of a boyfriend. I did it to make her happy.”

I glare at her and she shrugs.

“What? They’re permanently broken up, I can finally hate the dickhead all I want. He wasn’t good for you, Zoey, and I’m glad you finally saw that.”

With a sigh, I wrap my arms around Zoey. “Sky’s a bitch, Zoe. Ignore her.”

“She’s right, though. I’m glad the Zack chapter of my life is finally over.”

The conversation shifts to safer topics and I enjoy the rest of my afternoon in the company of my best friends. Although Skylar’s words stick in the back of my mind, eating at me.

Because I know without a doubt that she’s absolutely right.

## CHAPTER 24

## Christian

Love might be an annoying, elusive word I'll never understand, but in this moment, with Daniella in front of me, her body slick and wet, I love the feeling of sliding into her. I love the little moans she makes, the way she always takes whatever I'm ready to give. I love spending every hour, every second of the day with her, even though most times I can't.

She pushes back onto my cock and I let out a tense breath, grabbing her hips to stop her.

"Babe," she moans.

"Easy, *tesoro*. You feel so good right now, I'm trying to take this slow."

I feed my cock into her inch by inch and she arches her back, crying out.

"Fuck," I breathe. It doesn't matter how many times I slide into this woman, the sensation is mind-blowing every time. The shower head sprays water over our bodies as I thrust into her over and over again, the space filled with a cacophony of noise from our bodies slapping together.

Daniella moans loudly as she comes, her pussy gripping my cock like a vise. I hold onto her ass, kneading each cheek in turn as I thrust into her repeatedly. When I feel myself about to come, I pull out and my beautiful girl immediately drops to her knees. She takes me in her mouth and swallows every

single drop. When she's done, I pull her up and thumb her cheek, the gesture reverent.

"I don't deserve you," I whisper.

"Easy, Christian. No need to hero worship because I sucked you off."

A rumble of laughter leaves me. "One of these days, that mouth will get you in trouble."

She grins but doesn't say a word as I grab the shampoo and begin washing her hair. Moments like this have fast become my favorite part of the day. Nights when I come home and find her in my room—our room—lying in bed, waiting for me. Nights where I get to do something as simple as wash her hair. Or have dinner with her.

When we're done in the shower, we step out. After drying off, I grab some boxer briefs and put them on. Daniella wraps a towel around herself, moving to the vanity I had moved in here. She begins applying some products to her face. It took a while to get used to her stuff cluttering up my space, but the discomfort has quickly become an itch I'm adept at ignoring. I love her being in my space too much to care how much she disrupts it.

But seriously, my fiancée can be a slob.

"What happened at work today?" Daniella question abruptly.

I arch an eyebrow. "What makes you think something happened?"

"The frown on your face when you walked out of the car. And the way you seemed tense when you came in the house."

I had been a little tense, but all my worries dissipated the moment I saw her face. I run my hands through the back of my hair, contemplating asking her.

"Spit it out, babe. Come on."

With a sigh, I do. “Your mom’s on the New York Gala committee, right?”

“Yes...” she says curiously. “Where are you going with this?”

“I need an invite to a party being hosted by General Colby. You think she can get it?”

She turns around to face me fully, her eyes alight with curiosity.

“Are you going to tell me why you need it?”

“You don’t need to know, *tesoro*,” I grumble.

“But *baby*,” she says in a fake whiny voice that causes me to smile, “I can’t help you if you don’t give me information.”

I blow out a breath. “Fine. I need to talk to one of the federal agents that’ll be in attendance.”

“An FBI agent?” Her eyebrows go up. “In what world would you have business with an FBI agent?”

“A world where he seems intent on fucking things up with my business.”

I had thought a detective was responsible for the random raids and the death of two of my capos a few weeks ago. Turns out the guy was much higher up, and I just recently found out exactly who he is. Unfortunately, he’s a hard man to meet.

“So this man,” Daniella drawls. “You’re planning to corner him at the party, and what?”

“Talk to him,” I say on a shrug. Threaten him, bribe him, blackmail him, whatever it takes to get him off my case.

“Right,” she says, disbelieving. “I’ll tell Mom we need two invitations to the event.”

My eyes narrow. “One. You’re not going.”

“I am going,” she states, her nose turned up in a way that tells me she’s gearing for an argument. “It’s a formal event, Christian. Your fiancée will escort you.”

I could fight it and tell her no, but I really don't think it's necessary. "Fine. But you're not going anywhere near Richardson."

"That's his name?"

I nod, falling onto the bed and placing a hand under my head. My gaze is trained on the ceiling as the words flow past my lips. She doesn't need to know all this, but Daniella's persistent. And I have a vested interest in making sure she's not upset.

"Asher Richardson," I tell her. "It turns out he and my father were involved and their relations went south. He wants revenge, I guess."

Daniella falls onto me and I let out a grunt before wrapping my arm around her waist.

"I'm sure you'll handle him," she says, looking me in the eyes.

She kisses me once and I grin. "Of course I will."

---

ASHER RICHARDSON IS the single most fucking annoying person I've ever met.

"You've got some balls, D'Angelo. Walking into a party full of feds and military personnel? Serious guts, man," he says with a chuckle before slamming back a shot of vodka.

My jaw tightens. I've been sitting beside him for the past ten minutes, trying to get him to talk, but he seems intent on dancing around the issue. I'm really starting to lose my patience.

Almost involuntarily, my eyes seek out Daniella, and I find her immediately. She's practically glowing in the middle of the room as she talks to another woman, her eyes dancing excitedly. Then they meet mine and she arches an eyebrow in

question. I shake my head subtly before turning back to Richardson, but he noticed that my attention wavered.

“Gorgeous woman,” he notes, staring at Daniella.

“Thanks,” I say through gritted teeth. “Are you ready to tell me why you’re fucking with me?”

Richardson’s only a few years older than me. I’m not sure what his history is with my family, but according to Carlo, he used to work for us, helping us out with some deals in the city until his relationship with Dad soured. Carlo didn’t seem to know what went down either. My best guess is that the bad cop went good and now he’s trying to take us down.

“Her name’s Daniella Evans, right? I’m really curious how you came to be engaged with a woman like her. As far as I can tell, her family’s pretty clean. No affiliations with the mafia until she turned up engaged to you.”

“This isn’t about Daniella,” I tell him, my voice calm despite the inferno raging inside of me.

“Of course not,” he says, leaning back in his seat, his blue eyes flicking to my face. “This is about me taking down your illegal little business.”

I smirk. “Don’t flatter yourself, Richardson. You might have amassed some power in the FBI, but my business is nowhere near little. And if you think someone like you has the power to destroy it, you’re delusional.”

I’m only entertaining a conversation with him because he has caused enough problems.

“But you’re here, aren’t you? You sought me out at a party like this in order to talk to me. Which means I’m doing something right.”

“You’re fucking pissing me off,” I say.

“I haven’t even started,” he says, his eyes flashing. “In a few minutes, you’ll get a call or a text whatever. Better prepare yourself.”

“What happened between you and my father?” I question.

“Honestly? Nothing. Your father was a good man. He helped me out and he’s the reason I’m where I’m at today. But I’ve got orders from the higher-ups to curb the crime rate in the city, and that starts with kicking you D’Angelos out. If you’ve got something interesting to make me look the other way, I’d be happy to hear it.”

That was exactly the opening I was looking for, but my eyes narrow. He’s not a trustworthy man. Not even in the slightest. My phone pings with a text and I open it.

“Motherfucker,” I swear, reading the text from Carlo. A weapons deal just fell through.

Richardson chuckles. “You might want to go take care of that, D’Angelo. I’m sure I’ll be seeing you around.”

He turns around, effectively dismissing me. My jaw grinds but I know there’s nothing I can do to him right now.

I head over to Daniella. She pauses in her conversation, moving to stand in front of me.

“What’s wrong?”

“Business, baby. We need to leave.”

She frowns, eyes shifting behind her to the woman she was talking to.

“I want to stay. I haven’t seen Cara in years and we’re catching up.”

“Daniella,” I say, ready to fight.

“You can go, Christian. I’ll be fine. Plus, Bronx is outside and I’ll call him if I need anything. Just go, okay?”

I pinch the bridge of my nose in frustration. I really don’t want to leave her, but I have to go. She reaches up to kiss my cheek.

“I’ll be fine, Christian,” she assures me.

“Okay,” I breathe.

One light kiss on her lips and then I'm gone.

## CHAPTER 25

## *Daniella*

“I can’t believe that gorgeous man is your fiancée,” Cara sighs.

We were friends in high school, but most of my friendships from back then fizzled out, with most of them moving away from New York, either abroad or to another state for college. Cara spent four years in Brazil and only just returned a few weeks ago. Her dad’s a congressman and her mom owns a non-profit charity organization. Her grandfather’s General Colby. This party’s in his honor, which is why she’s here.

“Trust me, I find it hard to believe on occasion,” I tell her with a smile.

“You seem happy, though. I’ve heard some rumors,” she says worriedly.

“I am happy,” I quickly assure her. “My relationship with Christian is amazing.”

It feels like I’m constantly having to defend us, and honestly, I’m getting a little sick and tired of it. But I understand that if I was on the outside looking in, I would definitely have some worries as well. Especially since it’s in relation to someone I care about.

“I’m glad,” Cara says warmly.

Her mother beckons her over and she gives me an apologetic look.

“Go ahead,” I tell her. “I might leave soon, anyway.”

She walks off and a part of me regrets not going with Christian in the first place. But he would have made me go home instead of taking me along with him, and the night is still young. I'm considering bribing Bronx to take me to Zoey's apartment when my phone rings.

I sigh, stepping out of the room. I don't answer the call until I'm outside the building. My car's parked not too far off but I stay hidden in the shadows.

"Hey, Mom."

"Sweetheart," she greets. "How's the party? Are you still there?"

"No, I was just about to leave," I reply.

My parents and I have a long way to go before our relationship is completely mended, but I've missed them. I hadn't realized how much until Christian and I had dinner with them a few days ago.

"Alright. I don't want to hold you up, darling. It's just Annalise's anniversary is coming up. I was wondering how you were."

My heart practically stops. I forgot. The single most important day of my life and I fucking forgot. I've been so distracted by everything lately, by Christian, that it didn't even cross my mind once. Usually, around this time of the year, I'm a complete mess.

"I'm okay, Mom," I tell her, even though I can feel the quickening of my heart.

My hands start to shake, the telltale sign of a panic attack.

"If you say so," Mom says. "I was also wondering if you and Christian have picked a date for the wedding. We really should start to prepare."

My throat feels tight but I manage to reply. "The wedding's not happening any time soon. Mom, I have to go." I hang up and lean against the wall, trying to steady myself. "One, two, three, four,"

I count all the way to a hundred, taking deep breaths until I start to calm down.

Tears blur my eyesight for a second. Annalise.

“Are you okay?” someone asks, stepping out of the shadows.

My eyes widen as they meet icy blue ones.

“I’m fine,” I say, my words clipped.

“Really? Seems like you were going through something.”

“Don’t worry, Mr. Richardson,” I state, letting him know I know who he is. “It’s nothing a quick visit to my therapist’s office won’t solve.”

I’m not kidding. I really should book an appointment with Dr. Wells. Asher Richardson smiles like I made a joke, however. He takes another step toward me. Whatever he wants from me can’t be good. I’m about to scream at the top of my lungs for Bronx, but his eyes narrow.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” he says, adjusting the tie at his collar. “You know who I am, Ms. Evans. But you don’t know what I want.”

“I know it can’t be good,” I toss out.

He smiles. “I can see why Christian’s so enamored with you. I knew him as a teenager. He was always such a cold kid, but something’s different about him now. I’m guessing that has to do with you.”

I don’t reply. I don’t say a word, my eyes moving to my car in the middle of the lot. Bronx will be inside waiting for me. If I could only draw his attention.

“Your bodyguard’s gone,” Richardson says and my blood runs cold.

“What?”

“I killed him,” he tells me proudly. “I can’t have him coming to save you.”

My throat feels tight but I manage to find the words. “What do you want from me?”

“From you? Nothing. Your fiancé, though, that’s another story. I have a feeling before today runs out you’re going to regret ever agreeing to marry the head of a mafia organization.”

My fists clench as I stare into the dark, hoping someone will walk through the doors of the building.

“That party is crawling with cops and federal agents. You’re not going to kill me so close to them.”

He grins then, and the smile is so unnerving, my skin crawls. Why the fuck didn’t I just go home with Christian? If I survive this, he’s never going to let me live it down. He’ll keep me locked up forever. I’m going to die in that mansion, if I don’t die here today.

“I’m not going to kill you, Ms. Evans. As for the cops and feds in the building...” He flashes me another grin. “Unlike your fiancé, I’m considered one of the good guys, Ms. Evans.”

There’s no warning, no time to prepare myself. He rushes forward and I only have a split second to take note of the white handkerchief in his hand, right before he uses it to cover my mouth. My eyes are blurry as they meet his.

“Sleep well, Daniella,” Richardson says, and everything goes dark.

When my eyes open, there’s sunlight streaking through the large windows of a room I recognize to be inside a warehouse. It takes a moment for me to notice the men standing guard around the room. My heart thudding in my chest, I count at least a dozen. Richardson is in a corner of the room. I try to move, but my hands and legs are tied to a chair. At least they didn’t gag my mouth.

One of the men strides forward. He’s wearing a suit, but there’s something about his gait that tells me that the suit isn’t for board rooms. He’s in the mafia, just like Christian. I have no idea who this man is. He’s in his fifties, with short dark hair

and hard eyes. He doesn't smile as he approaches me. His expression is serious, almost grim.

"Let me go!" I scream, trying to pull at the bonds holding me in place.

He studies me for several seconds, his eyes black and cold. "I'm afraid I can't do that, Ms. Evans."

"Who the hell are you?"

He finally smiles, one crack in his icy façade. "My name is Romano Santos."

## CHAPTER 26

*Christian*

Carlo holds the security guard by his collar and punches him in the face. Blood and spittle fly through the air. My muscles are coiled tight as my eyes catch and narrow onto the other man kneeling on the ground. I move instinctively toward him but my brother comes to stand in front of me, pressing a hand against my chest.

“No! You’ll kill him.”

“Let me fucking go!” I shout.

Daniella’s missing. Last night, I got a call that one of my men was found dead in the parking lot of the Colby party an hour after I left. The minute I heard Bronx was dead, my blood turned to ice. I rushed back to the party, but it was no use. Daniella was gone.

“You need to calm down, Don. We’ll find her.”

“Fuck,” I mutter under my breath. My heart hasn’t beat right since last night.

It’s seven in the morning and I’ve never been so terrified. I’m used to spreading fear, not feeling so much of it that I can’t breathe.

When Carlo’s grip releases, I brush past him and kick the man he was beating up in the ribs. He tries to block the blows with his arms. Fucking mistake. My boot connects with his balls and his cry of pain fills the room.

Carlo pulls me away. “What is wrong with you, Christian? This isn’t their fault!”

He yells something else at me in Italian but I barely hear him. He’s right, the two men aren’t the reason Daniella’s gone. But they were in charge of manning the gate that led to the party. And they should have fucking seen something, dammit.

“How could no one have seen anything?” I ask my brother.

His expression is pained as he looks at me. “I’m sorry, Chris. It was late at night. I already questioned her friend Cara and all she had to say was that Daniella told her she was leaving and left. Anything could have happened.”

*Anything could have happened.* The words ring in my ears and I let out a grunt of pain, leaning against the wall. If anything happens to her, I swear I won’t be able to handle it. I’ll never forgive myself.

“I should have been there,” Carlo says.

“No. I never should have fucking left her alone,” I say, refusing to let him blame himself for this.

It’s my fault. She’s gone because of me.

“Keep beating them up,” I mutter.

Right now, I’m not a Don. I’m just one man looking for his woman and willing to do anything to find her. Carlo walks over and places a hand on my shoulder.

“I know, *fratello*. We’ll find her.”

“You keep saying that, but we have no clues. And we’re not any closer to finding fucking Richardson either.”

I think back to my conversation with the man. Something had seemed off. He claimed to have been trying to destroy us due to orders from the higher-ups, but I made some calls and found out the Bureau has no interest in us. Which means Richardson’s getting his orders from somewhere else. But I can’t for the life of me figure out where.

My phone rings and I pull it out quickly. My eyes narrow when I see Romano's name.

"This is a bad time," I say, answering the call.

The man chuckles. "I'm sure you won't be saying that in a few seconds."

My teeth grind together. "You have Daniella."

Carlo's eyes widen when he hears that. Romano sounds fucking pleased.

"Ding, ding, ding," he says. "You always were a smart kid, Christian. Yes, I have your fiancée."

My chest constricts. "What do you want from me?"

There's some rustling on the other line before he speaks.

"You probably haven't heard this, but my business is going through a particularly hard time right now. Cash flow is shit, drug deals aren't coming through, I lost a pretty big shipment, and none of my casinos are bringing in any money either."

"Sounds tough," I say dryly.

"It really is, Little D'Angelo. So here's the thing. I need money and I need lots of it. If you want your fiancée returned to you alive, you'll bring it to the warehouse near the Glenwood power plant. And you'll come alone."

My fingers clutch the phone so hard it might actually break. "I want to talk to her," I say. "Give Daniella the phone."

"I'm afraid she's otherwise occupied."

And that's when I explode. "Listen, you motherfucker, if you don't put her on the phone right now, I swear I'll hunt down every single fucking person you've ever cared about and I'll put a bullet through their heads. And if you've done anything to hurt her, I'll kill you slowly and in a way that'll make you regret the day you ever touched my woman."

He chuckles. "Well damn, I almost got chills. You're so much like your father, you know that?"

“Let me talk to her,” I say through gritted teeth.

“Fine,” he says. “Hey sweetheart, your boyfriend’s looking for you.”

The next moment, her sweet voice is in my ears.

“Christian?” she asks softly. Relief nearly knocks me off my feet.

“Hey, baby. Are you okay? Are you hurt?” I question.

“Well my arms and legs are tied and I really need to pee, but otherwise I’m good.”

Even in danger she can’t help being a smartass. My mouth twitches.

“I’m coming for you, *tesoro*,” I say fiercely.

“I know you are. Please hurry,” she whispers those last two words, the only indication that she’s scared out of her mind right now.

She’s trying so hard to be strong when she shouldn’t have to be. Fury works its way through every part of me.

“I’ll be there soon.” The call ends and I look up at my brother. he’s already waiting for orders. “I need ten grand in cash,” I tell him.

“You’ve got it,” he says gruffly.

“Call in every single favor we have from the authorities in the Tri-State area. Romano’s not walking out of this alive.”

An eerie calm settles over me as my brain works through the chinks in the plan formulating in my head. There’s only one thing on my mind right now, and that’s saving my girl. I’m going to do everything I can to make that happen.

Romano’s about to learn what happens when he fucks with the D’Angelos.

## CHAPTER 27

## *Daniella*

**C**hristian's on his way. He's coming for me.

I repeat the words over and over like a mantra because if I stop for a second to think about the situation I'm in right now, I might start crying, or pass out, or worse. Surprisingly, my kidnappers have mostly ignored me. Romano walked out a few minutes after letting me talk to Christian.

Richardson's still here. He's been eyeing me like a piece of roasted turkey but has yet to approach. I think they have strict orders not to, although I can't be sure.

I groan softly when the pressure on my bladder increases. Unable to hold it anymore, I turn to the man closest to me.

"Listen, I'm not sure you understand what manners are, but when a lady needs to use the bathroom, you show her to a bathroom," I say.

He smirks cruelly, walking toward me and running a hand across my face. My skin crawls in disgust and I move my head.

"You're pretty hot. How about I show you to a bathroom and then show you a good time?"

My stomach roils. "No thank you," I quickly say.

He leans down until he's eye level with me. His breath smells like cigarettes, adding to my nausea. I swear if he doesn't move I'll throw up all over his face.

“You’re pretty brave, that’s admirable. But I’d be more scared. Boss has plans for your little fiancé and those plans end with you in a body bag and him in a torture chamber.”

My eyes widen. The thought of any harm coming to Christian causes fear to seize up my throat. I’m suddenly more terrified for him than myself. Romano asked him to come alone but surely he wouldn’t be that stupid.

I’m sure he has a plan. Christian always has a plan.

“What?” the man taunts when I grow tired. “Nothing to say.”

“I’ll hold in my pee.”

He grins and his mouth moves closer to mine. I’m bound so I’m unable to push him away, but if he so much as touches me—

“Enough, Milo,” Richardson barks.

Milo moves away, a glint in his eyes promising that we’re not done. Richardson comes to stand in front of me. He seems so out of place here and yet somehow he fits right in. A federal agent and a criminal all at once. Oh, the irony.

“I’ll take you to the bathroom if you want,” he suggests.

“I changed my mind.” I’m not spending any time alone with any one of these men.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Now please leave me alone.”

His eyes peruse my face, settling on my eyes. “You know what? I like you, Daniella. You seem like a woman with a lot of spirit. Maybe I can persuade Romano to let you stay alive. If you want me to, of course.”

“I don’t want a fucking thing from you.”

He chuckles. “Is all your bravado coming from the fact that Christian told you he’s coming to save you? Trust me,

sweetheart, your fiancé's going to die today. And you'll be all alone. I can help you."

"Fuck off, Richardson."

His eyes narrow. "You've got some mouth on you."

"Would you like it on you? I'm sure I'd be able to tear off an adequate amount of flesh before they ripped me away!"

Christian was right. My mouth is definitely going to get me killed. That becomes extremely clear when menace bleeds into Richardson's eyes. He lifts his hand and delivers a stinging slap to my face. I gasp in shock and tears well in my eyes.

Then he leans down to whisper in my ear. "Behave, Evans. Or you'll regret it."

Richardson walks away and I'm left with a cut in my lip and the realization that this situation is dangerous. It settles in my gut that I might actually die today. And Christian might, too.

I'm not sure when the first tears fall. All I feel is them running down my face.

---

ROMANO RETURNS AN HOUR LATER. He takes one look at me and his footsteps still.

"Who did that?" he demands, anger barely concealed in his voice.

Richardson steps forward. "I did, boss. She pissed me off."

One punch to the face and I hear something crack. Romano's body quakes with raw power as he stands over Richardson, who's on the ground.

"Are you fucking stupid? He's going to take one look at her busted lip and lose his shit. We're dealing with a fucking D'Angelo."

I would smile but I'm frozen in terror when Romano brings out a gun.

"I should kill you for this."

Richardson finds his way back to his feet, his hand cradling his jaw. "But you won't. Because you still need me. The Santos won't survive without me."

Romano's jaw ticks, but that seems to placate him because he moves away and walks toward me. "Sorry about the bruise, sweetheart. Your fiancée's almost here."

My jaw is shut tight right now. I don't say a word, I barely even look at him. The men in the room get into position, and my pulse starts to race as everyone waits for Christian to show up.

When he does, my eyes widen. There's a briefcase in his hand and he's completely utterly alone.

His eyes find mine immediately—icily calm, dull amber eyes. Despite myself, relief fills me. He's here. I'm safe. His steps falter for a beat. Christian's fury cools and burns my skin as his gaze skims my face.

"Who touched her?" His voice is low, dark and fucking terrifying. Christian doesn't need to raise his voice—when he speaks, people listen.

Romano clears his throat, casually waving the gun in his hand. "That was an accident, D'Angelo. My apologies."

Christian doesn't react to his words. His eyes flick to the man closest to me. "Untie her," he orders.

In a room full of men armed and dangerous, he's still giving orders. I'm not sure if I admire him or want to hit him. Surprise fills me when Romano actually turns and nods at the man.

"Yes, untie her. Then press a gun to her head so he knows I'm not fucking playing."

My heart stops, then restarts again at the calm, easy expression on Christian's face. The only thing that's thrown him off is the bruise on my face. Of course he has a plan.

The ropes at my hand and feet are cut and I'm dragged roughly to my feet. Christian's lips press together but he doesn't comment. He tosses the briefcase at Romano's feet.

"There. Ten thousand dollars in cash," he states.

One of Romano's men walks forward to grab it.

"I want Daniella."

Romano smiles at him. "Unfortunately, plans have changed, Little D'Angelo."

"Of course." Christian smirks. "My father used to say he never met a Santos that was capable of keeping their word."

"Your father was a smart man," Romano drawls.

"He was, and I'm my father's son. You really think I would have walked in here without a plan?"

"Of course not. But I've got a plan of my own."

"Yes, I'm aware. When you kidnapped Daniella, my first thought was that surely you wouldn't be so stupid. Taking a woman in my family would lead to a gang war, and your finances are already struggling. It would have been a war you would have lost. Which means you've got someone backing you. Someone powerful. And it's not that fucking waste of space," he says, pointing at Richardson, who immediately frowns and reaches for the gun in his holster.

Christian had better get to the point fast or he's going to get shot.

"The police commissioner. I have to say, I was impressed you managed to buy him over. But I'm a D'Angelo and I'm afraid I offered an even better price."

For the first time, Romano's bravado falters. "What?"

“I’m afraid those reinforcements you’re expecting won’t be coming, Romano. Surrender.”

Christian’s words are punctuated by the door bursting open. Several men file in holding guns and knives. Carlo’s right in the lead, his eyes meeting mine. The relief I see there warms my heart. We might not be close, but he cares about me too. He takes his place behind his brother.

Romano’s next words are less confident, “Well played, D’Angelo. But what makes you think I won’t ask my man to shoot your pretty fiancée?” Christian’s eyes flicker to meet mine. “You’re going to kill me regardless.”

“Because I’m not going to kill you.”

My eyes widen at that. Even Romano’s surprised.

“Desantos has been in New York just as long as D’Angelos. If I kill you, that name disappears, and I’m not interested in wiping out an entire empire because their boss is fucking stupid.”

“So what’s your plan?”

Christian smiles. “I was going to ask you to join me. If you’re interested.”

The air in the room chills. Romano doesn’t say a word for several seconds. “An immersion. You won’t wipe us out but you’ll wipe out our name.”

“Exactly. This is the only way the gang survives, Romano. Like I said, Desantos has been in New York for as long as D’Angelos. Make the right decision, you don’t want to ruin your family due to pride.”

Several seconds tick by. Romano clenches and unclenches his fist.

“You’ll guarantee my safety?”

Christian nods. “I won’t touch a hair on your head.”

“Fine. You have a deal.”

Both men shake hands. Romano gestures for the man holding me to let me go. Christian walks toward me immediately. I'm the only one that hears his sigh of relief as he pulls me into his arms. And I'm the only person that feels his hand shake as he runs it through my hair.

"Fuck, *tesoro*," he whispers against my ear.

"Excellent diplomatic skills, babe," I tell him.

He laughs softly before pulling away to look me in the eye. "Who did that?" he asks, his expression darkening.

My mouth is bitter as I reply, "Richardson."

Christian doesn't even blink. He pulls a pistol from his jacket and *pop*. The gunshot reverberates off the walls and rings in my ears. Everything but my heart goes still. I watch as Richardson slumps to the floor. A chill passes through me when Christian puts the pistol away without a flicker of emotion.

His hand tightens around mine. I barely feel it, too stunned by the dead man and the blood pooling from his head.

"If you do something like this again, Romano. I swear I'll end you," Christian promises.

"Well, well. I guess you're not Little D'Angelo anymore."

"I never fucking was."

He guides me out of the warehouse and it isn't until we're outside that my feet stumble. Christian immediately sweeps me into his arms.

"Afraid of me now?" he asks softly.

I bury my face in his neck, inhaling once, twice. "Never," I whisper.

My words are a promise, a vow. One I intend to keep.

## CHAPTER 28

## *Christian*

I haven't left Daniella's side in twenty-four hours. She's sleeping now. After we left the warehouse, I brought her home. I wanted to take her to the hospital and make sure she was okay, but she fought that idea. So I placed ointment on her lip instead.

I still can't look at her busted lip without fury lashing through my chest. I can't fucking look at her without feeling ashamed. That never should have happened to her. I should have protected her.

"Christian," she says softly, shifting on the bed. I move closer and her eyes open. "I can practically hear your thoughts."

My eyebrow furrows.

"This is all my fault, blah, blah, I should have protected Daniella," she says, doing a terrible impression of me. "She's my fiancée, my responsibility and I should have been there, blah, blah."

My eyes narrow into a glare as she sits up, her own eyes gleaming mischievously, "You're awake."

"I've been awake for a while now. I just didn't want to open my eyes."

My mind whirls as I try to think of the right thing to say. "Baby..."

She stops me with a shake of her head. “No. I’m not talking about it with you. That’s what my therapist is for.”

I smile. “Do you really want to tell Dr. Wells you were kidnapped by the mafia?”

She shrugs. “It probably won’t be the worst thing he has heard in that office. You should come with me.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m worried about you blaming yourself and I know nothing I say will ease your guilt. Maybe if you talked it out with him, it would help.”

“That’s sweet, *tesoro*. But I’ll pass.”

My guilt is nothing in the face of my relief that she’s here in my arms right now. Daniella doesn’t push the therapy issue, choosing to settle her head on my shoulder.

“Do you want to hear about the painting?” she asks softly.

My eyes widen. I don’t even need to ask her what painting she’s talking about.

“Of course I do.”

I can’t see her face and I realize now that it was intentional on her part. She doesn’t want me to see, but I always want to see all of her. So I shift away and cup her cheek.

“It’s me, Daniella. You can tell me anything. You watched me kill a man for you yesterday. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you.”

She swallows, taking a deep breath.

“When I was sixteen, I had a best friend. Her name was Annalise. She was wonderful. She had this energy around her that just caused everyone to love her. I make jokes all the time to hide how I’m really feeling, but Anna was always brutally honest, fierce. She was pretty protective too, like a certain someone I know,” she says with narrowed eyes.

“Not the time for jokes, *tesoro*,” I say softly. I give her an encouraging look, brushing her cheek.

She sighs. “Anna died. We were two sixteen-year-olds going for a joyride in my dad’s new car. I had just gotten my license and she was at my house so I invited her along. I promise I was driving safely, but then it started to rain hard, out of nowhere. Anna made me turn around. We were going back home. I could barely see. I wasn’t speeding or anything like that, but another car crashed into us. A drunk driver. One second, I was singing at the top of my lungs with Anna, and then the next there was just so much blood. The last thing I remember before I passed out was the sound of thunder. I was so scared.”

A tear falls and I brush it away tenderly. Daniella’s fists are clenched tight.

“When I woke up she was gone. The driver died, too. His neck snapped on impact. Anna died due to bleeding in her brain. I blamed myself for a long time after the crash. I survived with only a broken arm to show for it while my best friend was gone.”

“It wasn’t your fault, baby.”

“I really got into painting after Anna died. Dr. Wells said it was a perfect outlet for all the emotions raging inside of me. But honestly, for the longest time, I just felt guilty and empty. I couldn’t think about Anna without crying. Then one day I woke up and stepped in front of the easel. I made myself feel—pain, guilt, everything. I poured it all into the painting.”

My jaw tightens as I think about the painting. “It feels like you’re punishing yourself. Like you want that cyclone to sweep you up. Like you want the suffering to end.”

“I knew you were a sorcerer,” Daniella says dryly. She takes in the expression on my face and blows out a breath. “I’m not the person who painted that anymore. I was in a dark place after Annalise died, but that’s not me anymore. I promise.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” I repeat, needing her to understand that. I can’t bear to think about how much she must have suffered. How much pain she must have gone through.

“I know. It took a while for me to realize that, but I know now that I couldn’t have controlled it. I was a stupid teenager and I had no control over the man that got behind the wheel and killed a teenage girl.”

“He’s lucky he died,” I say fiercely. “Otherwise I would have hunted him down and—”

“Put a bullet in his brain. Yeah, yeah, I know.”

A chuckle escapes me. “You’re way too blasé about this murder thing. It’s making me worried.”

“It’s probably because I spend so much time around you.” She smirks. Then her expression sobers. “The anniversary of Annalise’s death is tomorrow. My family visits her grave every year. We meet her parents there and we all just cry and miss her together.”

“Will you be okay?” I ask gently.

“I’ll be okay. As long as you’re beside me.”

“There’s no place I’d rather be, *tesoro*.”

“Good, because my appointment with Dr. Wells is tomorrow morning. And since you’ll be with me tomorrow, you might as well come with me.”

I groan softly. “You’re going to drag me to see that therapist tomorrow, aren’t you?”

She grins. “Yep.”

I kiss her softly, carefully due to her busted lip. “Fine. We’ll go see Dr. Wells in the morning.”

## CHAPTER 29

## *Daniella*

“You seem to be handling the abduction well,” Dr. Wells notes when I’m done narrating the past few days to him.

Dr. Harrison Wells is a man in his sixties with bronze skin and short salt-and-pepper hair. I’ve known him since I was a teenager. He has helped me through all my issues and honestly, sometimes he feels like a grandfather.

“What can I say, Doc? I guess I grew tougher skin over the years.”

He nods. “You definitely did, and I’m so proud of how far you’ve come. Although we could maybe do with fewer jokes.”

Christian makes a noise of agreement at that. He has been otherwise quiet since we walked in, a silent, immovable supportive force at my side. Dr. Wells attention turns to him, though.

“Dany, is there a reason you brought your fiancé to our therapy session? He looks like he doesn’t want to be here.”

I laugh softly. “He doesn’t. But I was hoping you could help us. We need some relationship counseling.”

Christian’s gaze swivels toward me. Dr. Wells just looks amused.

“I’m not a relationship counselor, Daniella,” he says to me.

“And we don’t need any counseling,” Christian says through gritted teeth.

“Actually we do,” I tell him, meeting his eyes so he can see what this means to me. Then I turn to Dr. Wells. “I know you’re not a counselor, but you always have really good advice. And I’m hoping you can convince this meathead to do something.”

“This is about your trip abroad,” Christian says, realization dawning in his eyes.

“Yeah.” I nod. “You have to let me go, babe.”

Honestly, a part of me knows that if I was insistent on leaving, Christian wouldn’t stop me. But I don’t want to leave at the expense of his feelings. His refusal to let me go comes from a psychological wound and relates to how he was raised. Which is why we need a therapist.

Dr. Wells looks from me to him. “Daniella, is this the trip we talked about a while ago? The one where you go to Europe and paint?”

“Yes. Since I got engaged to Christian, those plans have been derailed.”

Beside me, Christian’s shoulders sag and he leans back in his chair. “They weren’t derailed. I told you that you couldn’t go. For your own safety.”

“Her safety?” Dr. Wells questions.

“She got kidnapped two days ago, Doctor, and I only left her unprotected for an hour. I don’t even want to think about leaving her alone for an entire year.”

“But she would be safe abroad. Realistically, she would be even safer there than in New York City. Unless you feel your position provides you enemies that would cross international borders to hurt someone you care about.”

“It’s not just about my position. She’ll be a million miles away from me and if anything were to happen, I wouldn’t be there to help her.”

Dr. Wells takes off his glasses and crosses his legs. That’s usually a sign that he’s taking off the kid gloves and moving

past professionalism, which I appreciate.

“Daniella is a competent woman and I believe she is capable of taking care of herself. Why don’t you?”

Christian doesn’t have an answer for that. His jaw is clenched as he stares at the doctor.

“You seem like the kind of man that doesn’t like to relinquish control, Mr. D’Angelo. Maybe it’s because you had so little of it growing up or maybe because it’s all you had, that’s really not my place to say. But I do have a question for you. Daniella’s your partner, and it’s obvious you have strong feelings for her. But do you trust her?”

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CHRISTIAN’S quiet during the drive to the cemetery. We left Dr. Wells’ office thirty minutes ago and he hasn’t said a word to me since. He didn’t answer the doctor’s question, and Dr. Wells seemed content to leave it at that. I talked to the doctor about Annalise and how the day’s making me feel and then we left.

I stare at him for a second. He seems lost in thought. His eyes are on the road, but he’s not totally focused. After a moment’s hesitation, I place my hand on his, which had been resting by the side, and intertwine our fingers.

“Are you mad because I made you do that?” I question.

His gaze swivels to mine for a fraction of a second.

“No, *tesoro*. I’m not mad,” he promises. “I just have a lot of things to think about.”

He squeezes my hand and I let out a breath of relief. Neither of us says a word until we reach the cemetery, and then Christian’s just an unshakeable boulder beside me. He holds me through the tears and the grief of seeing her parents. My parents arrive as well and the day turns into a picnic.

When we're finished, I give each of them a hug. Because despite their faults, they show up every year. I think they do it partly because they feel guilty and grateful as well that their daughter survived. My arms latch around my dad.

"I love you both," I whisper.

"We love you too, sweetheart," he says, running his hand through my hair. "So much."

They leave and I return to the man leaning against his car, staring at me. I remember the first time I saw him. Striding toward me in the airport terminal, looking every bit like the Don—in control, in charge. He scared me then. But now fear is the furthest thing in my mind when I look at him.

Love sounds much more accurate. I feel in love with Christian D'Angelo and I don't even hate it. Daniella two months ago would have been horrified. I'm pretty sure she would have called it Stockholm syndrome.

His hands wrap around my waist when I reach him, an easy look in his eyes.

"You can go," he tells me.

I gasp. "Really?"

He smiles. "Yes. I can't keep you from reaching your true potential. That would be selfish of me. And I do trust you, Daniella. You're one of the strongest people I know."

I rise on my toes to kiss him, my tongue teasing into his mouth. "And you're one of the most amazing," I whisper.

His hands tighten around me. "Promise me you'll be careful."

"Pinky. I'll call you as often as I can."

"We'll get married as soon as you get back." He sighs, pulling me closer to his chest. "Is it weird that I miss you already?"

"I'm still here," I point out.

He hugs me tighter. Now would be the perfect time to say it. I should tell him I love him now. But when Christian pulls back and I meet his amber eyes, the need to say the words dies in my throat. We'll have forever to say them. And judging by the way he's looking at me, he feels it too.

"Annalise would be so fucking proud of you," Christian tells me.

Tears well up in my eyes. He's right, she would be. But I've cried enough for today, so I blink away the tears and kiss him hard. Hard enough that the painful feeling in my gut that hollows at the thought of leaving him starts to lessen a little.

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### **Three Weeks Later**

I STARTED IN PARIS. My paintbrush flies over the easel, light strokes filled with color. My mouth is pulled into a smile as the fountain in front of me comes to life on my canvas. There are other artists around me. It's a popular spot that manages to soothe an artistic mind, providing the perfect ambience. At least that's what my travel guide told me. I left the U.S. a week ago and so far, things have been going well.

"That looks fire," a woman says over my shoulder, and I turn to face her with wide eyes. "Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you."

"It's fine. I'm just jumpy," I tell her, feeling a little nauseous.

I'm in a foreign country alone. Of course I'm jumpy. Add that to my constant nausea these past few weeks and I'm a big ball of nerves. I'm trying not to think about it, though. It's a tactic I've honed over the years. Ignoring my worries, out of sight, out of mind. I study the woman for a bit. She's dressed like a typical artist in jean overalls, a black tee, and a beret over her short dark hair. She smiles, her expression unassuming and down-to-earth.

“That’s alright. My name’s Lila,” she introduces.

“Daniella.”

“Anyway, I think you’re really good, and correct me if I’m wrong but you’re a tourist, right?”

“What gave it away?” I question dryly. “It’s the clothes isn’t it?”

I’m in jeans and a white crop top—doesn’t really scream Parisian fashion.

“That and other things. You came to Paris for inspiration?”

“I’m touring Europe, actually,” I say, the words flying out of my mouth before I can stop them.

Lila’s eyes light up. “That’s amazing. Here.” She pushes a card into my hand. “I’m going on an artist retreat in a week or two and we’re going around the continent. You should join us—the more the merrier.”

I stare at the card. I had been a little worried about traveling alone. A retreat would be a great way to travel while still being safe and focusing on painting.

“I’ll think about it. Thanks, Lila.”

She gives me a little wave before walking away. I make a quick stop before returning to my hotel room later that day. It’s time to stop being a coward. A few minutes later, I’m seated on the toilet and staring at the positive pregnancy test in my hand.

My heart practically breaks into a million pieces. I’m having a baby. Then it really hits me and I start to cry.

“I’m having a baby,” I say in disbelief.

Right on cue, my stomach turns and I drop to my knees, throwing up every single thing I’ve eaten today.

“Oh shit,” I say, shaking. “Oh shit, I’m so fucked.”

How could this have happened? Christian and I have been safe. He uses a condom most times and I’ve been taking my

birth control pills regularly. Except for the first time we had sex. When I begged him to come inside me.

That would mean I've been pregnant for almost three months. My hand goes to my stomach. Surely I would know. I have no idea what to do. I step out of the bathroom and fall onto my bed, my face streaked with tears. Oddly enough, I'm not in denial. I know I'm pregnant. I just have to schedule a doctor's appointment to make sure the baby's okay.

*My baby.*

Mine and Christian's. I have no idea how he'll take this. We've never really talked about kids. I know he wants them, but it wasn't supposed to happen this early on in our relationship. I just left home.

My phone rings, interrupting my downward spiral. I grab it from the bedside table and sigh softly. Christian has the worst timing. If I don't pick up, he'll get worried, so I try my best to clear my voice and sound normal as I answer.

"Hey, baby," he greets his voice raspy from sleep.

Despite being three thousand miles away, my thighs clench at the sound of his voice. God, does he have to be so sexy? Then I shake my head because, honestly, I have much bigger problems.

"Dany?" he asks when I don't reply, I hear the rustling of sheets.

"I'm okay, babe. Did you just wake up?"

"Yeah," he replies. "I got in late last night. The house doesn't feel the same without you."

"Of course it doesn't. I'm a joy to have around."

"You're my joy," he says sincerely and my heart clenches. "So, how has your day been? Get any painting done?"

I should tell him. It's just on the tip of my tongue to say the words, but it would change everything. I just got here, he finally let me go, and I know Christian. If he finds out about

this baby, he'll make me come back. And I'm not ready to go back.

My gaze flickers to the business card Lila gave me earlier and my mouth clamps shut.

“Yeah, I did.”

“Anything interesting happen?” he questions.

“No, absolutely nothing.”

No one talks away how easy it is to lie to someone you love. Or the feeling of emptiness and ice that blossoms in your chest after you've done so.

# CHAPTER 30

*Christian*

5 MONTHS LATER

I smile when Daniella's name flashes across the screen of my phone. She arrived in Italy a few days ago. It's a little late for her over there. I had been in the middle of a meeting with some potential buyers, but I excuse myself stepping outside the office.

"Hey, baby," I greet.

Fuck, I miss her so much. Every day I wake up missing the feel of her in my arms.

"Christian," Daniella says urgently, fear coating her words. "I need you."

I don't even think or ask what's wrong. My entire body locks down until all that's on my mind is getting to her.

"I'm on my way."

An hour later, I'm on a borrowed private jet, flying across the Atlantic toward my fiancée. Every second away from her feels like torture. I thought it was bad before but now that I know something might be wrong with her, a visceral ache settles in my chest. I know it won't leave until I set my eyes on her.

Eight hours later, I land in Madrid. I immediately head for the hospital Daniella told me she was at. She wouldn't tell me why she was there, she just told me to hurry.

I fire off rapid Italian at one of the nurses and she quickly shows me to Daniella's room. There's a dark-haired woman

with green eyes waiting in front of the door.

“You must be her fiancé,” she says. “Christian, right? I’m Lila.”

Tension lines every inch of my body but I accept her outstretched hand.

“I know who you are. Is she okay?”

“She’s fine. The doctor says it’s a normal complication when a woman’s this far along.”

Lila’s saying words but I don’t understand them.

“What are you talking about?”

Her mouth clamps shut and her eyes widen like she was just caught saying something she shouldn’t have.

“You should go in.” She gestures at the door.

I take slow hesitant steps inside until I’m face to face with the woman of my dreams. The woman I’m fucking in love with. And then I see the baby bump in front of her. My heart drops.

“Christian,” she begins through tears, “I can explain.”

“You’re pregnant,” I say in awe, staring at her stomach. She’s seated on the hospital bed. Her face is a little pale, but other than that, she looks perfectly fine. Except for the baby bump.

My head aches. I think I need to sit down.

“Just breathe and let me explain.”

“How are you pregnant?” I ask, confused. Then realization hits and it feels like someone slid the floor from underneath me. “It’s not mine?”

There are tears in her eyes as she looks at me.

“Of course it’s yours.”

I almost laugh. “There’s no way you’re that far along and you didn’t tell me you were pregnant.”

Daniella's practically shaking. "That's what I'm trying to explain, Christian. I had to. I had no choice."

I was in denial before. But when I take in her expression and the tears in her eyes, it hits me like a punch to my gut.

"You were pregnant with my baby and you didn't tell me?" I yell.

She winces. And I remember that we're in a hospital room. I rein in my temper, force myself to maintain some semblance of calm.

"What happened? Why are you in a hospital?" I ask.

"I-I passed out. Lila saw some bleeding and freaked out, but the doctor assured me it wasn't anything serious."

"So what? You were planning to deliver the baby here?" I ask, casually leaning against the wall. I can barely even look at her right now. "I mean, I know it's half Italian but that seems a little like overkill."

Pain flashes in the blue depths of her eyes. She has no idea how much pain I'm feeling right now.

"I was going to come home," she cries. "I had a ticket booked for next week."

"Cancel it," I say harshly. "We're going home today."

She doesn't even argue. "Christian—"

She tries to get off the bed but I step out the door before she can even try. Her friend's still waiting outside, and she offers me a sympathetic smile that I ignore. My world was just thrown off its axis today. Now, I don't know what to think.

I don't say a word to Daniella the entire flight home. She tries to talk to me once.

"Christian, you need to at least hear what I have to say."

"Don't talk to me," I say harshly, getting to my feet and switching seats so I don't have to look at her.

Eventually, she goes quiet. An hour later, I move to stand in front of her. She's asleep. She must be fucking exhausted. And she's fucking pregnant.

It doesn't matter how many times I say that to myself, there's a fucking baby in her stomach and it's mine. I can't believe this. I talked to her every day. We fucking FaceTimed and she didn't say a word.

Betrayal hurts like a fucking bitch. It hurts even more when it comes from someone you love. Which is why no matter how beautiful she looks right now, no matter how much it hurts that I can't hold her or kiss her like I've wanted to all this time, I step away.

I've lived my life closing my heart out to people for fear of being burned. And the one person I let in ended up doing exactly that. I just can't help but wonder, why didn't she tell me?

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“CHRISTIAN!” Daniella snaps as we walk into the house. “You have to talk to me sometime. It's been hours.”

If I talk to her right now, I won't have anything good to say. I'm incapable of having a rational conversation at the moment so she needs to leave me alone.

My mom steps out of the living room with Carlo right behind her.

“You're back,” she says, letting out a breath of relief. “What happened to Daniella?”

I step aside so they can take her in. Mom's brown eyes widen.

“*Dios mio*,” she breathes. “Daniella, you're pregnant.”

“Trust me, Mom,” I drawl, “she knows.”

I brush past them and head up the stairs to my room. Then I remember it's her room too and stop. Turning around, I head toward the front door instead. Carlo places a hand on my shoulder.

"You good?" he asks.

"Fucking fine," I reply, shrugging his arm off.

I don't return to the house for two days. I'm still not ready to forgive her. But I had to check in and make sure she's okay.

My mom's still around when I walk in. She calls me into the kitchen and there's this serious expression on her face.

"Where is she?" I ask, leaning against the wall.

"She's asleep in her room. She's still getting used to the change in time zones," she replies before looking at me. "Christian, I raised you better than to ignore your pregnant fiancée for two days."

"She can take care of herself. She's been doing so for nearly six months."

"I know you're angry," Mom says placatingly.

"That's the thing, Mom. I'm not angry, I'm just hurt. Why didn't tell me?"

My mom steps in front of me and places a hand on my shoulder. "She had her reasons, *figilia mia*. They were not necessarily good ones. But you need to try to understand her. Regardless of what has happened, you'll be parents soon. You need to fix this."

A breath leaves me. "I understand, *Mamma*."

"You'll do right by the woman you love," my mom says fondly, brushing some hair from my forehead. She leaves and I just stare for the longest time. Eventually, I make my way to our room. She's sleeping so peacefully, and since I can't find it in my heart to wake her up, I slide in beside her instead. She shifts in her sleep, her head coming to rest on my chest. My

arms go around her and, for the first time in months, I let out an easy breath.

I wake up to soft blue eyes. Daniella's staring at me, her eyes roaming my face like she's trying to imprint it to memory.

"You came back," she breathes.

"Of course I came back," I grumble, sitting up and resting against the headboard. "It's my house."

Her lips twitch but she doesn't smile. "Do you want me to start with the apology or the explanation?"

"Explanation. Why the hell did you think it was a good idea to hide your pregnancy?"

"Look me in the eye, Christian, and tell me you wouldn't have asked me to come back the minute you found out I was pregnant."

My jaw tightens. I would have gone to Europe and dragged her back myself if I knew she was pregnant. But only because I wanted to take care of her. Only because I would have been scared out of my mind having both her and my child so far from me.

"Exactly," she says softly. "I needed that retreat, Christian. I needed to stay. And I hate that I kept it from you. You don't think it tore my heart out every day when I had to do it?"

"And yet, you did it!" I say, pain slashing across my heart. I slide out of the bed and head over to my closet. Daniella stands as well. I grab something and walk over to her. Her expression is carefully guarded.

"Take it," I say handing her keys. She looks at me for an explanation. "Those are the keys to a building I bought a few months ago. I thought it could be an art gallery. Your art gallery. To show your work and other works you purchase. I never want you to think I don't support your passion, Daniella. I would never hold you back."

Her hand tightens around the keys and her eyes fill with tears.

“I know you support me. You’re the biggest support I’ve got.”

“Then why?” I question desperately. “Why couldn’t you have trusted me?”

“I’m sorry I hurt you Christian but I did it for me. I needed time,” she says crying. “Maybe it was stupid and immature and I’m so sorry, but I can’t show up for this baby, or even for you if I can’t show up for myself. I am a better woman because of that trip.”

She has no idea that the sight of her in tears has the power to unman me. My eyes flutter closed and I let out a deep breath.

“You’re lucky I love you,” I say jokingly.

Daniella’s eyes widen as they meet mine.

“What?” she breathes.

“I said I love you. I know you love me too.”

She sniffs. “That’s presumptuous of you.”

A joke, finally.

I walk closer until I’m standing in front of her. I brush away all her tears.

“I don’t know when it happened, but I fell completely and irrevocably in love with you, Daniella Evans. Unfortunately, that means I can’t live without you, which also means being angry with you would be such an epic waste of time. I’m sorry I exploded. I’m trying to understand you and all your shits just like you’ve accepted me and all of mine.”

“So, we’re good?” she asks hopefully.

“I guess I should ask you that?”

She nods. “We’re good.”

“I’m sorry, I hurt you. I promise it won’t happen again,” I say.

“I’m sorry too, Christian.”

She lets out an audible breath of relief when I kiss her forehead softly. Then she wraps her arms around me. The two of us just stand there in the privacy of our bedroom, holding each other.

“We’re getting married tomorrow,” I announce after several seconds have passed.

“We’re doing what now?” Daniella asks, staring at me like I’ve gone crazy.

“I’m serious, *tesoro*. If I don’t tie you down now, you’ll run from me again.”

Her gaze softens. “I wasn’t trying to run.”

“It felt like you were. And the thought of losing you puts me in so much pain, I wouldn’t survive if it actually happened. So I think we should get married.”

“First, you didn’t propose to me in the conventional way and now you’re trying to convince me to have a shotgun wedding.”

I smile. “About your proposal.” Her eyes widen when I get down on one knee and remove a velvet box from my jacket. “I got this from Mom a few months ago. She said she had rings made for all three of her sons to give to the women they loved. This is for you, baby.”

Daniella gasps when I open the box. “It’s beautiful.”

“Will you marry me, Daniella Brienne Evans?”

She’s already crying. “If I say yes, you’ll have to cancel that wedding tomorrow.”

“Done,” I grin.

She sighs happily. “Then yes. Let’s do it. I think it’s crazy, but yes, Christian.” Her eyes meet mine, fierce and bright.

“Yes to forever with you.”

She slides the ring on her hand off and I replace it before standing and kissing her deeply.

“I love you more than you’ll ever know.”

“I love you too.”

“What will we call him?” I ask, placing a hand on her stomach.

“I already chose his middle name,” Daniella confesses. “You get to pick the first.”

“I can live with that. What’s his name?”

“Carman. Like your dad.”

I grin. She has no idea how grateful I am for that. I know she has reservations about the way my father raised me, but I’m glad she also sees that I wouldn’t be here today if it weren’t for him.

“We’ll name him after you,” I say. “Daniel Carman D’Angelo.”

“That sounds perfect,” Daniella breathes. She kisses me again, slowly this time—because we have all the time in the world.

It honestly feels like every breath I’ve ever taken has been leading up to this moment.

“Daniella looks at me and smiles, “I can’t believe I’m marrying the Don of fury.” I smile as I gently grab her chin and begin to kiss my future wife.”

THE END

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