



LIES OF THE
Underworld

RIGHTEOUS
Deceit

HALEY JENNER

RIGHTEOUS DECEIT

LIES OF THE UNDERWORLD

BOOK THREE

HALEY JENNER



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DEDICATION

*to the boss bitches who will only accept a man who treats them
like the motherfucking queens they are...*

this one is for you

PROGLOUE

DIEGO



I adjust the display brightness on my laptop and lie back against the pillows on my bed. The seconds count down on the digital timer of the website, and I sip my beer as I wait. Impatiently. It's been six fucking months. The blistering winter deprives me of the one vice in life I succumb to. Six indulgences a year, all through the flimsy glass of a computer screen.

There would be others like it, I have no doubt. Events catering to tastes not widely accepted by the community. Experiences built for those with particular sexual eccentricities. I'm not interested, though. Not in anything other than The Quest; not in anything other than *her*.

Red Treasure.

My cell phone buzzes beside me, and I retrieve it.

LEONARDO

Halo or COD?

DIEGO

I'm busy.

LEONARDO

Doing what?

I ignore him and silence my phone.

The thirteenth of every month, May through October, is mine and mine alone. The family knows I'm unavailable. They have no idea why, and I'm not about to divulge my reasons. I'm not embarrassed or concerned or saving myself the eight million questions people will no doubt ask. The cold, hard truth is that I'm reluctant to *share*. While Leo's and my tastes are spectrums apart, I can't trust his curiosity won't be piqued by The Quest, and the thought of him watching her like I do makes me daydream about killing a man who I'd die for on any other day.

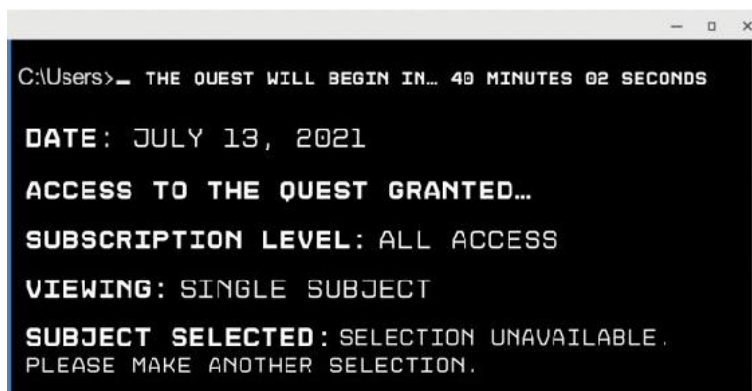
A screenshot of a terminal window with a black background and white text. The window title bar shows standard OS window controls (minimize, maximize, close) and the path 'C:\Users>'. The text inside the terminal reads: 'THE QUEST WILL BEGIN IN... 14 MINUTES 08 SECONDS', 'DATE: JUNE 13, 2021', 'ACCESS TO THE QUEST GRANTED...', 'SUBSCRIPTION LEVEL: ALL ACCESS', 'VIEWING: SINGLE SUBJECT', and 'SUBJECT SELECTED: RED TREASURE'.

```
C:\Users> THE QUEST WILL BEGIN IN... 14 MINUTES 08 SECONDS  
  
DATE: JUNE 13, 2021  
ACCESS TO THE QUEST GRANTED...  
SUBSCRIPTION LEVEL: ALL ACCESS  
VIEWING: SINGLE SUBJECT  
SUBJECT SELECTED: RED TREASURE
```

I stumbled across The Quest when looking up porn. Sites boasted the most explicit of videos, but nothing came close to what I sought, no matter what category the search menu offered. I gave up on mainstream and began using the skills I save for hacking into mainframes for Lorenzo to see if what I craved existed. It was obscure as fuck, but I found it.

An event dedicated to the hunt. Women and men confined to a maze or forest. Those who play prey and others who encompass the role of hunter. It's dark and a little twisted. Targets begging to be ravaged while teasing their predator. I've never spoken to someone with similar tastes, but the reward for each participant would likely differ. Some would partake for the primal need to hunt and conquer. I view the sacrificial lamb as the dominant party. The seeker is playing a game with the rules and pace set by the perceived weaker partner. But a hunter can only truly conquer when their prey decides it's time. The chase, the thrill of knowing I had to work for the privilege of claiming my sacrifice, sets my blood on fire. It's what makes my cock hard.

My screen glitches and her red hood comes into view.

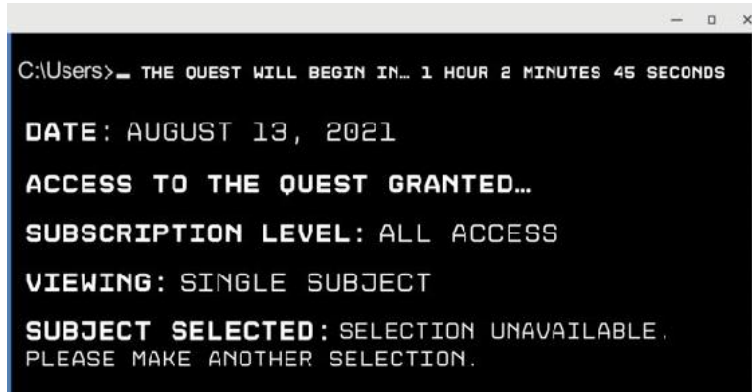
A screenshot of a terminal window with a black background and white text. The window title bar shows standard OS window controls (minimize, maximize, close) and the path 'C:\Users>'. The text inside the terminal reads: 'THE QUEST WILL BEGIN IN... 49 MINUTES 02 SECONDS', 'DATE: JULY 13, 2021', 'ACCESS TO THE QUEST GRANTED...', 'SUBSCRIPTION LEVEL: ALL ACCESS', 'VIEWING: SINGLE SUBJECT', and 'SUBJECT SELECTED: SELECTION UNAVAILABLE. PLEASE MAKE ANOTHER SELECTION.'

I refresh my screen, but it reads the same.

Selection not available.

Fuck.

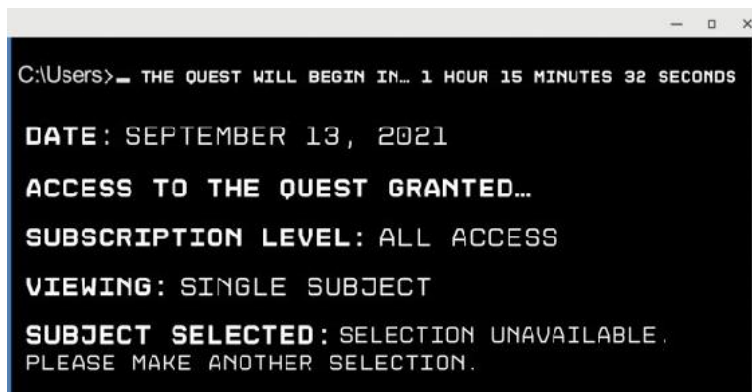
I log out.

A screenshot of a terminal window with a black background and white text. The text reads: "C:\Users>_ THE QUEST WILL BEGIN IN... 1 HOUR 2 MINUTES 45 SECONDS", "DATE: AUGUST 13, 2021", "ACCESS TO THE QUEST GRANTED...", "SUBSCRIPTION LEVEL: ALL ACCESS", "VIEWING: SINGLE SUBJECT", and "SUBJECT SELECTED: SELECTION UNAVAILABLE. PLEASE MAKE ANOTHER SELECTION." The window has standard Windows window controls (minimize, maximize, close) in the top right corner.

```
C:\Users>_ THE QUEST WILL BEGIN IN... 1 HOUR 2 MINUTES 45 SECONDS  
  
DATE: AUGUST 13, 2021  
ACCESS TO THE QUEST GRANTED...  
SUBSCRIPTION LEVEL: ALL ACCESS  
VIEWING: SINGLE SUBJECT  
SUBJECT SELECTED: SELECTION UNAVAILABLE.  
PLEASE MAKE ANOTHER SELECTION.
```

I refresh the screen, but it remains the same. Like I knew it would.

I slam my laptop closed.

A screenshot of a terminal window with a black background and white text. The text reads: "C:\Users>_ THE QUEST WILL BEGIN IN... 1 HOUR 15 MINUTES 32 SECONDS", "DATE: SEPTEMBER 13, 2021", "ACCESS TO THE QUEST GRANTED...", "SUBSCRIPTION LEVEL: ALL ACCESS", "VIEWING: SINGLE SUBJECT", and "SUBJECT SELECTED: SELECTION UNAVAILABLE. PLEASE MAKE ANOTHER SELECTION." The window has standard Windows window controls (minimize, maximize, close) in the top right corner.

```
C:\Users>_ THE QUEST WILL BEGIN IN... 1 HOUR 15 MINUTES 32 SECONDS  
  
DATE: SEPTEMBER 13, 2021  
ACCESS TO THE QUEST GRANTED...  
SUBSCRIPTION LEVEL: ALL ACCESS  
VIEWING: SINGLE SUBJECT  
SUBJECT SELECTED: SELECTION UNAVAILABLE.  
PLEASE MAKE ANOTHER SELECTION.
```

I change tabs and open my email.

To: *inquiry@thequest.com*

From: *dgreco@gmail.com*

Subject: *Red Treasure*

Will Red Treasure be returning?

I get a reply almost immediately.

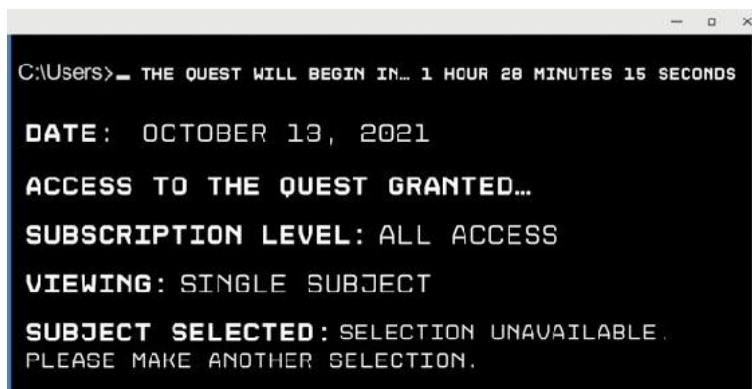
To: *dgreco@gmail.com*

From: *inquiry@thequest.com*

Subject: *RE: Red Treasure*

Thank you for your inquiry.

At this time, we have no return date scheduled for your selection.



```
C:\Users> THE QUEST WILL BEGIN IN... 1 HOUR 28 MINUTES 15 SECONDS  
DATE: OCTOBER 13, 2021  
ACCESS TO THE QUEST GRANTED...  
SUBSCRIPTION LEVEL: ALL ACCESS  
VIEWING: SINGLE SUBJECT  
SUBJECT SELECTED: SELECTION UNAVAILABLE.  
PLEASE MAKE ANOTHER SELECTION.
```

I OPEN a new tab and consider sliding into their back doors to find out who she is. I stare at the blinking cursor. They wouldn't even know. A simple search to make sure she's safe.

“Jesus, Diego.” I rub my hand roughly down my face.

To make sure she's safe. Who the fuck am I kidding? My need to know her identity has nothing to do with her protection. I spin the ring on my index finger, trying to convince myself not to turn into a fucking psychopath.

My cell starts ringing, and I answer it to distract myself.

“Yeah?”

“It's the thirteenth.” I can barely hear Leo over the loud thrum of the club he's calling me from.

I scowl. “And?”

Normally, I'd speak to the underboss of our family with more respect, but I'm pissed off and not in the mood for his idiocy tonight.

“And I made a fucking bet with Tony that you wouldn't answer your phone like every other night of the thirteenth because you're a part of some cult that likely sacrifices virgins or some shit, and now I've just lost a thousand bucks.”

I hang up, cancel my subscription to The Quest, and slam my computer shut.

It taunts me. A measly piece of technology offering me access to an obsession I've let overtake me for over twelve months now. I pick the laptop up and throw it against the brick wall of my bedroom.

I grab my cell.

DIEGO

Tell me someone in the club is asking to die.

LEONARDO

Ha. The cult ran out of virgins. Call Lorenzo. He has some shit you can take care of.

I leave my apartment without a backward glance, calling the boss to request an assignment that will let me feel blood on my hands.

—

Date: January 12, 2022

To: dgreco@gmail.com

From: inquiry@thequest.com

Subject: RE: RE: Red Treasure

Your selection will be returning to The Quest.

The first hunt is scheduled for May 13, 2022.

Please follow the link below to reactivate your subscription.

Date: *January 12, 2022*

To: *inquiry@thequest.com*

From: *dgreco@gmail.com*

Subject: *RE: RE: Red Treasure*

Send me the paperwork to register as an active participant.

CHAPTER ONE

DIEGO



The air is silent. No wind rustles the leaves on the trees. No life burrows in the earth underneath my boots. I can hear the quiet. The echoing chasm of nothing as I stand still, waiting, listening. Seconds pass, and my hands clench at my sides involuntarily. My breath is warm under the black gaiter covering the lower half of my face. I long to remove it, to feel the cool air brush across my skin.

Even with my hoodie up, my ears are on high alert, and I listen intently, waiting for movement. I'm in the middle of the maze. The soft glow of the spotlights artfully placed under evenly spaced thickets of trees shines across the heavy footing of my boots.

A sharp intake of breath catches my attention, and I turn to my right, conscious not to make a sound. A grunt of pain echoes in my direction, and I smile.

I've never hunted an animal. I was never dragged into the forest as a child by his dad, dressed in camouflage, and taught to fire a gun with the sole purpose of killing an animal for entertainment.

I was trained to shoot a gun, but that was for business.

This is different, though. The raw resolution of basic human experience. Survival, sex, and status. The world doesn't exist between the walls of trees that surround me. Surround *us*.

Status. I am a hunter. She is my prey.

Survival. Her goal, mine to undo.

Sex. The primal need for possession has taken ownership of my being. I want to own her if only for the split second she knows I claimed her.

I've watched countless hunts through the barrier of my phone screen. Observing patterns of prey and the way they panicked. Their rushed escape attempts ended in bloodied knees and scraped palms as they fell to the ground in their plight for freedom. Their hysteria was often unnecessary. Examining the strategy of the hunters, I found most of them wouldn't stop moving. They were forever stalking *away* from their prey with an innate need to keep going.

When hunting game animals, you want to be quick and efficient. You're there to complete a task. To kill.

Hunting people is different. For me, anyway.

I want to prolong my entertainment. I want to take my time. I want to center myself enough that my body becomes alert to every move she makes.

The Quest operates for six months out of the year, and for a sizable subscription fee, you can watch it unfold online. For a much more significant contribution plus a shit ton of psychological and medical assessments, you can participate. I was content in watching, in observing.

Until her.

Until she stepped into the maze in her red cape and played the game the same way I would.

She didn't run when she didn't need to.

She stood still and listened.

She was a hybrid of hunter and prey. She hunted him as much as he did her. She needed to know where her predator was at all times.

I was enraptured.

I became obsessed.

I watched her like a man possessed. I replayed her hours of footage time and again, watching the gives in her body. The freedom and pleasure that flickered in the soft edge of her muscles.

I became consumed by her.

Everything about her screamed to something primal within me. I've never seen her face, but her body has tattooed itself on the inside of my eyelids. She's thick. There would be no thigh gap, and I know if I pushed that skimpy fucking negligee she wears up over her hips, there would be dimples on her ass and thighs. Markings for me to frame with my hands as I squeezed and bruised. My mouth waters at the thought, and I swallow my lust to concentrate.

The Quest is generally a group event. A collection of huntsmen and an array of prey are divided into three groups, differentiated by the color of the hood that works as a beacon. No one belongs to anyone in particular. The huntsmen are only confined by the color of hood they elect to chase, and those rules are gospel.

My obsession only ever wears red. As a hunter, I can chase her, but I'm forbidden from touching, even to capture. She can concede once cornered, and the hunt ends. Or time runs out, and I exit defeated.

A large collection of women wear gold. A hunter will chase and has permission to capture through force. The golden women like to fight. Within reason.

A smaller selection of women wear purple. A rich indigo that makes them near impossible to spot in the dark. They're harder to see because the reward is bountiful. The prey who dons purple participates to be *taken*. They will fight capture until they're screaming for surrender, but their shouts for mercy will morph into that of pleasure as they're pushed beyond their limits and succumb to the dominating force of the man pursuing her.

The crack of twigs alerts my senses, and I turn toward the sound, listening intently. She attempts to bite back the soft grunt of pain the stumble causes, but it echoes along her vocal cords, and I move closer.

She comes into view, her head moving left and right slowly, ears as alert as mine.

My gaze licks over her bare legs, and as though she can feel the fire in my eyes, she turns, searching in the shadows. But no matter how hard she pushes her eyes, she can't see me. She steps forward and then back, squinting into the darkness. She twists on the spot, careful to remain as quiet as possible. She searches with only her eyes and ears. Her instincts know she has company, but her eyes deceive her.

I clear my throat, not ready for her to move away from me. She turns her face, chin to her shoulder. Her smirk is visible in the moonlight, and I grin.

“Confident, *tesoruccio*.”

My voice is almost lost in the breeze, but she shivers.

She makes a soft sound of disapproval. “*Il mio stupido lupo*.”

My silly wolf. She’s Italian. Interesting.

Without another word, she darts to the right, her feet moving faster than they have all night.

A growl of approval tails her retreat, and I bite my lip to stop any further sounds from escaping.

I have no idea how much time has passed. Rules stipulate the hunter has two hours to capture or corner his chosen prize, and I’m annoyed that our time could be coming to an end.

I fight the panic that forms in my chest at the realization I won’t be able to see her again for another month.

I could never go back to watching her on my screen. Replays or playing audience will no longer suffice. I’ve had a taste of her scent. I’ve listened to the hitch in her breathing and the heavy but expert pad of her feet against the earth.

My prize in the dark has invigorated me.

I had to jump through a multitude of hoops to hunt her alone. One-on-one experiences are rare and expensive in a way that seems ridiculous when there’s a no-touch rule in place. I’m paying a small fortune to breathe her air. But I know I’ll do it again next month. And the month after that.

I can see a peek of her red hood hidden among the trees, and I step closer. “*Sei mia ora*.”

You’re mine now.

Her gasp sends blood straight to my cock.

But it's lost against a loud horn that pulsates through the manufactured maze, and I bite my lip to curb the need to swear in frustration.

"Not tonight," she speaks into the shadows.

I laugh lightly. "Oh, *tesoruccio*. We both know if I wanted this to end, I would have cornered you over an hour ago. You're good, but I'm better."

She steps closer to the sound of my voice, but I disappear into a thicket of trees. She sighs, turning away as she drops her hood back on her shoulders.

Red hair.

I watch her retreat, wishing she'd turn back just once so I could see her face, but she doesn't. She follows the beacons of light warming her path back to the estate. She limps, and I'm more pleased than I am concerned, knowing that at least for a few days, I'll be in the forefront of her mind every time she puts pressure on that foot.

CHAPTER TWO

ALESSIA



I rub my fingers roughly over the stiff material of my jeans in an attempt to remove the buildup of black charcoal that seems to forever stain my hands. It's futile. The dark medium has imprinted itself on my fingertips. I leave it pressed into every surface I touch.

I slide my hand back under the cold metal table, trapping it between my knees to stop myself from fidgeting. The second I step into the cold reinforced walls and wired-up fences of this prison, panic seizes my insides. I work my hardest to ignore it. But the irrefutable fact that I could be in the beige jumpsuit at any given time—leaving my brother to make this same trek to visit me and not the other way around—has enough power to steal my breath.

The generator outside the window buzzes loudly enough that I can't hear myself think, and I focus on it instead of the intrusive thoughts of my demise. It smells funny here. An indistinct cocktail of perfume and aftershave. Sweat from inmates and visitors alike. The sterile smell of high-grade cleaning products. It melds together in a scent that lingers in my nostrils long after I leave.

“Alessia.”

I stand at Salvatore's voice, swallowing the wince of pain that shoots through my leg when I put pressure on my heel. I work to ignore the ache and work *harder* to repress the memories the injury seems intent on bringing to the forefront of my mind.

Letting the warmth of Salvatore's body embrace mine, I breathe in the quickest hug manageable before the guards yell at us to separate.

His tattooed hands cup my cheeks, and he leans forward, kissing my forehead. "You have charcoal on your cheek."

I wipe at it with my hand, likely making it worse. I shrug. "Traffic was lighter than I expected. I drew in the car while I waited for visiting hours to begin."

"What were you drawing?" He waits for me to sit before lowering himself to the seat across from me.

My gaze tracks over his face, cataloging the contours of his jaw, nose, and eyes. The lines are harsher than I remember, and I'm annoyed that I'll have to sit in my car and fix my drawing before I allow myself to drive home if I want it to be as true to form as possible.

I visit him once a week, but it's not enough to recall his face accurately enough when I'm drawing. I'm not forgetting the minor details of his face, but it's obvious his lines have hardened since he's been incarcerated, and I don't care for this acrid version of my brother.

"You." I decide then and there that I won't change my drawing. I like my memory better than reality.

His right eyebrow rises, and I smirk.

"Narciso said you've started going to an art class."

Fucking Narciso. Our cousin and my brother's second-in-command.

I fight the urge to roll my eyes. "I thought the two of you would have more pressing matters to discuss than my hobbies."

He doesn't bite back the way I had hoped. "He also said you won't let him in the building."

I'm still not used to seeing him in beige. Even after nearly five years. My brother wears black. *Only* black. From the boots on his feet to the rings on his hands and the tattoos that cover most of his skin. He's shaded from head to toe.

This time, I don't fight the way my eyes roll in my head. "That's not true. I welcomed him inside. He chose not to enter when he discovered it was a live drawing class."

He waits expectantly for me to explain.

"Nude drawing."

That gets me a smile.

"If he wants to stare at a naked twenty-three-year-old man, he's more than welcome. I fear the class would be more interested in the mobster lurking in the shadows than their artwork, though."

He watches me, staring into my eyes and searching for my lie.

I stare back, and he blinks first.

"How is Mamma?"

My frown comes on before I can stop it. "You know she doesn't talk to me."

“That doesn’t stop you from trying. Who is to say when her tantrum will end?”

That makes me laugh. “Salvatore, it’s been eighteen years.”

“I’ll talk to her.”

I shake my head. “It’s fine. I’ve learned to accept it.”

“I’ll be home in less than a year. Then it’ll all go back to normal.”

I snort. “Normal? You mean her tolerating me because she fears you?”

“I’m sorry,” he says.

I reach across the table and squeeze his hand. “I’m the only one to blame for the breakdown of my relationship with my mother. Don’t apologize for something you have no control over, brother.”

“Narciso has said all is well with the family.” He changes the subject. “The incident with Amadeo and the younger Caruso brother was taken care of.”

My brother refers to the Irish soldier who found himself in one of our clubs. Leonardo Caruso, underboss to the New York family, and Narciso’s younger brother, Amadeo, took it upon themselves to teach him a lesson in the consequences of trespassing in territory run by someone more powerful. The term trespassing is a stretch, but the Carusos have a history with the Irish. With the olive branch extended between our families in the shape of a blushing bride just out of her teenage years that my brother is expected to marry, Leonardo took the Irish soldier’s presence as an insult.

I dip my chin. “Lorenzo and Narciso were in agreement on how to handle the situation. We discussed it before he met with Caruso. I wasn’t present, but I was assured it unfolded without further issue. We’re remaining vigilant.”

“Communication with New York?”

“Open and regular. Caruso has been in Seattle solidifying connections with the Rein and Shay conglomerate. I don’t know them. Are you aware of their dealings?”

We normally wouldn’t speak so openly during visits. However, the table was chosen specifically for this reason. Our conversation would be nothing but mumbled syllables against the steady rhythm of the generator outside.

He tips his head side to side. “I haven’t met either of them, but Rein has a reputation for being loyal. If Caruso trusts him, we can too.”

“Can we trust Caruso?” I lower my voice.

“Considering he’s sending his consigliere’s sister-in-law into my world, he’d be stupid to double-cross me.”

“That’s hardly enough reason for us to put our trust in him?”

He watches me for a beat. “Lorenzo Caruso is honorable.”

I accept his words because I trust my brother.

“Caterina Rossi will arrive in the next few weeks.”

My eyebrows pull together. “Why? You won’t be released for another four to six months.”

He straightens his shoulders. “It was Caruso’s idea.”

“She’s young,” I whisper before I can stop myself.

“She is.”

“How soon will you marry her?”

“I’ll decide when I meet her.”

“New York will be satisfied with that?”

“They don’t have a choice. They keep fucking with our deal. They offered me one sister, and then Necktie Ferrari went and caught feelings like a sap. Caterina is my consolation prize, and I accepted the change without argument. They’ll wait until I’m ready to make good on my end.”

The thought of Salvatore married sits strangely in my stomach. My brother is a happy loner. He has the men he’s required to surround himself for business reasons, but me aside, his friend list is short. Watching him tie himself to another soul is so far out of character, I worry about how he’ll handle it.

“I would like you to check in on Caterina.” He shifts in his seat for the first time in the thirty minutes we’ve been talking. Her presence makes him uncomfortable, not that he’d ever admit it.

I nod. “Of course.”

“I won’t have time to settle her into life in Chicago when I’m released. I would like her comfortable and undemanding of my time when I leave this shithole.”

“I’m not a babysitter.”

“No. But she could use a friend.”

Shit, I could use one of those, so I agree with a soft nod before clearing my throat. “CJ has been calling me.”

Salvatore waits for me to continue, unperturbed by the information. It’s not a shocking revelation. CJ is my late husband’s eldest son.

I remain quiet.

“What are you not telling me?”

I stare at him.

“Alessia,” he warns.

“Charles had certain *stipulations* written into his Will.”

My brother sits up straighter, leaning forward. “What kind of stipulations?”

“Don’t snap at me like that.” My spine straightens.

“Alessia.” My name is nothing but an exasperated sigh.

“When Charles died, certain parts of his estate automatically transferred into my name. He did it to ensure I was looked after financially.”

“You don’t need to be looked after financially.”

My lips flatten. “Charles was a gentleman. I was his wife.”

“He was a geriatric who wanted a trophy on his arm and a link to the outfit.”

My eyes narrow. “Stop it.”

“The stipulations, Alessia,” he pushes.

“These assets were mine until such a time that I die.” My brother growls. “Or I remarry.”

He says nothing.

“His business has also been entrusted to me.”

“What?” He yells loud enough to pull the attention of everyone in the room. He scowls at the room in its entirety, and every person, children included, is smart enough to look away. “Why?” He lowers his voice.

“Control your temper,” I bite out. “It’s just paperwork. CJ, Caleb, and Callum need to meet certain conditions before his conglomerate transfers back to them.”

“Sign everything over to them right the fuck now, Alessia.”

“No.”

His fists clench. “No?”

“I gave Charles my word.”

“That promise puts a price on your fucking head.”

“I’m a thirty-five-year-old widow. I’m not a threat. The Lincolns know I don’t want their livelihood. Once they meet the conditions Charles set for them, everything will be theirs.”

“You’re not a threat?” he spits. “You’re consiglieria to the biggest corporation in Chicago. You’re smarter than this. What are you thinking?” Every word is said through gritted teeth, and I long to roll my eyes at the theatrics of it all, but I refrain.

My temper flares, and I grind my teeth. “I married an eighty-year-old billionaire for the family. I was twenty-four. I gave over ten years of my life to that marriage, and I did it dutifully.” Salvatore doesn’t need to know the level of duty I succumbed to. In the end, it doesn’t matter. I found myself while being owned by a man, which is something I struggle to accept every single day. “Charles wanted me to look out for his sons. Maybe in a way they can’t make sense of yet, but I will grant him that wish. He made me promise I wouldn’t fold to the pressure of his sons on his death. I plan to keep my promise.”

“They could kill you.”

I scoff. “CJ and his brothers are not murderers. They might not live in the confines of the law, but they’re not stupid enough to attempt to kill a consiglieria. Their whole empire would crash under your wrath.”

“Why are you telling me, then, if you’ve already made your decision?”

“CJ might not be dangerous, but I know he’ll attempt to manipulate the situation. I’m warning you in case he tries to use your influence.”

His eyes narrow. “He can’t be stupid enough to think I can influence any decision you make.”

Leaning back in my chair, I cross my arms over my chest. “Don’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“Salvatore, I might not back down to every little demand you make of me and I may not be afraid to go head-to-head in a heated argument with you like most others are, but don’t insult me by acting as though you don’t control my life to some degree.”

Shame hits him harder than I expected it to.

“Relax,” I say. “You’re not my puppet master, but you know as well as I do that I sacrifice more for the family than most because I was born with a vagina.”

He looks around the room purposely.

“A few years in prison is not the same as becoming the *wife* of a man who is old enough to be your grandfather.”

He reads well enough between the lines, and I let him believe the lie.

“I didn’t realize it was a competition.”

“It’s not, but I will not fold on this, Salvatore, and I expect you to stand by me. As my brother and my boss.”

He stares at me long enough that I think he’s going to reject me, but finally, he drops his chin once in acquiescence, and I let go of a panicked breath.

“Caterina...” I change the subject. “Is she pretty?”

He shrugs. “I have no idea. Caruso sent over her file, thinking I’d care one way or the other. I don’t. I don’t plan on having any relationship with the girl. It’s business and nothing more.”

“More bizarre things have happened than falling in love with the person you were contracted to marry.”

The severe lines on his face ease, and he laughs. “Jesus, Alessia, what romance bullshit have you been reading? Give me *one* person you know who is genuinely in love. It doesn’t exist in our world. You should know that better than anyone.”

My shoulders deflate because he’s right, but I lie when I say, “I still hold out hope that Caterina Rossi will bring a spark of color to all your gray.”

“If she sparkles, I think you need to accept that my storm clouds will dull her shine easier than she’ll part them to release the sun.”

CHAPTER THREE

DIEGO



I feel Caterina's gaze on my profile, and I take a deep breath, calming my overwhelming need to tell her to fucking stop. My fingers tighten against the soft leather feel of the steering wheel resting against my palm. My knuckles whiten, and I release the wheel before Caterina can see the open show of irritation. She'd probably cry, and I do not have the coping mechanisms for an event that uncomfortable.

I shouldn't have volunteered for this job. Any soldier could've run this fucking errand for Lorenzo. But he's been understandably stressed. He lost a capo and two soldiers in the aftermath of his wife's maternity becoming common knowledge. Not that any of them were anything but leeches and snakes. The family is better off without them. I know it, and Lorenzo knows it, but it doesn't ease the shitstorm that circles the organization when an event like this happens in-house. He's doing damage control, and delivering Caterina Rossi to Chicago was a headache I could take off his hands.

It was entirely selfish. I have my reasons for wanting to be in Chicago, none of which Lorenzo needs to be aware of. They're recreational, after all.

Caterina sighs.

"Stop it."

I should have forced the issue and made her sit in the back seat when we picked up the car at the airport. That way, I could ignore her incessant staring and the exaggerated sighs she threw out for attention.

“Stop what?”

My eyes close in irritation. “Cat,” I warn.

I tolerate Caterina, and I tolerate very few people in this world. She’s sweet, and I’d likely feel bad for her current situation if I had any emotional intelligence. Not adult enough to buy a beer in a bar but old enough to be delivered to Chicago like a fucking present for an incarcerated man who won’t likely be released for another six months. She’s leaving her family and friends behind, so she’ll have no one.

“I can’t believe Lorenzo agreed to this.”

Before I can stop myself, I say, “It was Vincent’s idea.”

“What?” she screeches.

Annoyance claws its way up my spine.

“The family is business, Caterina.” My tone turns harsh. “You know that. Bianchi is in prison, so you’ll be able to find your feet before he’s released. This is a good situation.”

“A good situation?”

She doesn’t expect a response, so I don’t give her one. I’ve spoken more words in this fifteen-minute car trip than I did the entirety of last week. I’m exhausted. I don’t do drama. I do my job, and I do it well. The stray threads of strained relationships, hurt feelings, and perceived wrongdoings are too much for my mind to handle.

“Wait until Bianca finds out her husband orchestrated this nightmare.”

“What difference does it make if you’re in Chicago now or in six months?”

“My friends, my family.”

“You’ll make new friends, and you can talk to your family on this invention called the telephone.”

She pulls out a book from her handbag and pretends to read for all of three seconds before slamming it shut again. “It’s all well and good for you because you’re a man. You couldn’t possibly understand.”

“Did you not witness Leonardo’s fall into despair when Lorenzo and Vincent pushed him to marry Gabriella? We’re the same, Caterina.”

She crosses her arms over her chest.

“How do you plan on avoiding a situation like this for yourself, then?”

“I aim to be indispensable enough in my work that forcing me into marriage would only disadvantage Lorenzo. I want to save myself the fucking headache of the whole affair.”

“That is why we are *not* the same and will never be the same. You have that luxury, Diego. The only thing I have to offer the family is my virginity.”

I laugh, enjoying this side of her. She usually stands quietly with her sister. She has naivety painted on her rosy cheeks and in her doe eyes. But the soft-spoken Rossi sister has a fiery side, and I hope like fuck Salvatore Bianchi cares enough to discover it.

“You don’t want to be married, ever?” she asks after a beat of silence.

This is what baffles me about human nature. The constant need to fill treasured moments of quiet with noise, with the sound of one's own voice, with questions I don't care to answer.

But as much as I could ignore her, knowing she'd eventually give up, I find myself answering. "I would despise the idea that the woman charged with marrying me would be sitting in a car, like you are, on the verge of tears and blaming the world for the family she was born into."

She brushes her hair behind her ear. "So you want to fall in love the right way?" A softness to her voice communicates everything she doesn't in that simple query. Her greatest wish phrased as a question.

I want to shake her. She can't be that naive. She was never going to fall in love the way the fairy tale had formed in her mind.

"I don't want to fall in love at all," I tell her honestly.

Twisting in her seat, she loosens her seat belt to give herself more room. "You don't believe in love?"

I frown at her. "That's not what I said. Of course, I believe in love. Have you seen your sister and Necktie? Or Gabriella and Lorenzo? It's hard to deny its existence when it smacks you in the face whenever you open your eyes."

"If you believe in it, why do you reject the idea for yourself?"

Her voice is always so gentle and unassuming. Uncertainty sits behind every word she speaks, and I wish she'd grab hold of that bite she just introduced me to and find belief in herself.

I scratch the back of my neck. "I don't want to be responsible for another person."

She looks outraged by my declaration, and it's my turn to sigh.

"I'm not saying that my hypothetical wife will be dependent on me in any way. But when you enter a relationship, a dependency forms, whether you care to admit it or not."

That settles the storm in her dark eyes. "I guess you're not wrong."

I laugh at her inability to tell me I'm right, slowing the car as Bianchi's house comes into view.

A sharp gasp escapes Caterina's mouth, and before I can second-guess myself, I drive past it.

"Than—"

"I'm only driving around the suburb once more to give you time to ready yourself, Caterina," I snap. "I've been tasked with you arriving safely at Bianchi's door, and I intend to fulfill my obligation."

"Thank you," she says.

"I didn't do it for you," I lie. "I did it to save myself from the panic attack ready to seize you."

I ignore the way she stares a little too long at my profile.

We spend the next fifteen minutes in complete silence. I drive through the streets, admiring the homes and architecture of Caterina's new hometown. It's a beautiful city, and I hope that even if she chooses to reject her marriage, she doesn't do the same to her new home. She could be happy here if she let herself.

Caterina breathes purposely for the additional minutes of her journey. She whispers to herself, soft enough that I can't

hear what she's saying. While grateful not to be privy to her inner thoughts, I would be interested to know what motivational garbage she stuffed down her own throat because, by the time we arrive at the large cast-iron gate of Bianchi's mansion again, she's calm and collected. Or she's managed to disassociate. Either way, I breathe a sigh of relief.

I stare up at the intricately designed front gate. I've never met the boss of the Chicago outfit, but I can already tell he's an obnoxious asshole.

"We have company." Caterina points at my window without looking at me.

I put my window down and lift my chin at the somber guy in the dark suit wearing an earpiece staring down at me.

"Help you?"

I can't see a weapon, but I don't doubt for a second he's carrying.

"Diego Greco. I have Caterina Rossi with me. Narciso and Alessia are expecting us."

He takes a sizable step back, lifts his phone to his mouth, speaks into the device, waits for a beat, and then nods his head once. Moving to the edge of the driveway, he inputs a code into a concealed keypad before waving me on as the gates open.

I lift a hand in thanks, rolling up my window and inching the car forward.

"Not a bad prison," I murmur, but Caterina refuses to acknowledge the sprawling property before us. Her eyes are cast downward, at her knees, and she keeps them that way as I cruise toward the front of the house.

I park directly outside the front door. Narciso stands casually on the front steps, a cigarette held lazily in his right hand.

“Caterina.”

She ignores me.

“Enzo wouldn’t have set this in motion if he thought you’d be at risk. He protects his family.”

She looks at me, and I fight to ignore the curtain of tears shining in her eyes. “You’re wrong, it’s not the same. You’re a man, Diego. You’ll never understand risk the way we do. I’m not afraid for my life. Other things can be taken from me. Things I might not care to give, but have no choice either way. You couldn’t possibly understand, and that’s why we’ll never be the same.”

I should reach out and reassure her, but it would be a lie, so I give her the only truth I can. “You’re right. I couldn’t possibly understand the fear you speak of. But I can promise you this. If anyone, Salvatore Bianchi included, hurts you in *that* way, you call me. I will be here faster than you can say my name, and I’ll destroy him. I won’t need permission or forgiveness from Enzo, Vinnie, or Leo because they’ll be fast on my tail, readying to go to war for you as well.”

Her tears fall.

“You are one of us, Caterina Rossi, whether you hold Bianchi’s name or not. Remember that because we will. Take as long as you need. I’ll take your bags in and talk shit with Narciso while you find a way to compose yourself, but I refuse to let you walk into that house in tears. You’re going to walk into your new home with your head held fucking high and that fire from earlier in your eyes.”

Without giving her an opportunity to respond, I unfold from the car and turn my attention to the underboss in front of me. “Narciso.”

“You’re late.”

I move to the trunk of the car. “Be grateful we’re here.”

“It’s like that?” He steps up beside me.

I ignore him. “I have a few bags here. Vincent has organized a few more things to be shipped over the next few weeks.”

Narciso takes two of the bags from the trunk. “Is she planning on getting out of the car?”

I shrug. “When she’s ready. I thought Alessia Bianchi would be here to greet her. It may have softened the blow.”

“It’s Lincoln.”

“What?”

“Alessia Lincoln. She’s widowed, not divorced.”

I raise an eyebrow in a *who-gives-a-fuck* gesture, and he sighs.

“Alessia is busy, and we aren’t in the business of softening blows, Diego. Best Caterina learns that sooner rather than later.”

He moves toward the house, and I follow. We don’t speak again as he walks through the monstrosity Salvatore calls a home.

Reaching a set of stairs, he gestures me up, and I maneuver Caterina’s bags, lifting both suitcases enough to carry them up the curving marble staircase.

I pause at the top.

“To the right.” Narciso is a step behind me.

The bedroom he walks us into has to be Bianchi’s. First and foremost, it’s fucking huge. A bedroom, living area, and bathroom all in one. My home in Manhattan would almost fit inside the space. Everything is black—the walls, the carpet, the curtains. The only splashes of color are the muted grays of the lampshades, bed linen, and the sofa in the room.

“They’re not even married.” I speak without thinking.

Narciso looks at me as though I’ve grown two heads. “And Salvatore’s not here. He wants her in his space, though. I’m just following orders.”

My brows pull together, and my grasp on Caterina’s bags tightens. “She’s too young.”

“I didn’t set this fucking union in motion,” he spits. “So climb down from your moral high horse. Who are you fucking kidding anyway? What did you expect would happen? Salvatore would lock her away in separate living quarters and let her live her life without interaction. She’ll be his wife. Jesus, Diego.”

He’s not wrong. They’ll be married. Who fucking knows what that means to Bianchi. I don’t know the guy. Just because I’m not into forcing women into my bed doesn’t mean he isn’t. Caterina is right. As a man, I have no idea of the danger attributed to an arranged marriage. For men, it’s inconvenient and bothersome. For the women in our lives, it can be downright fucking dangerous.

Narciso must see the hesitation on my face because he groans out in frustration. “Salvatore isn’t a monster,” he concedes. “He has no interest in forcing his way into the pants of an unwilling woman, no matter how fucking old they are.”

“How reassuring.”

I turn toward Caterina’s voice.

“You can leave my bags here, Diego,” she assures me with the tender uncertainty back in her voice.

Narciso smirks at me.

“I have no intention of sleeping in my future husband’s bed, but I have no argument with my belongings messing up his organized space.”

It’s my turn to smirk, and I do it triumphantly. If I were a better man, I would tell Caterina I was proud of her. Zero evidence exists of the panic attack that almost claimed her in the car, and there’s no indication her eyes were full of tears only minutes prior. Instead, she stands with her chin as high as the fucking vaulted ceilings and her eyes as void as the personality in this room.

“I’m going to explore my prison. Are there rooms I’m forbidden from entering?” Her arms cross over her chest, and I catch the tremor in her hands as she tucks them into her elbows.

Narciso laughs. “This isn’t *Beauty and the Beast*, sweetheart. This house is as much yours as it is Salvatore’s, so you’re free to roam wherever you wish.”

She nods. “In that case”—she clears her throat—“I’m not your sweetheart, and you’ll call ahead before turning up at my home moving forward.”

Narciso slides his hands into his pocket. “My wife and daughter will love you.”

That brings a genuine smile to Caterina’s face. “I can’t wait to meet them.”

I wait with Narciso for another hour, convincing myself I'm killing time until the evening, but even my subconscious isn't stupid enough to believe me. I'm worried about Caterina, and I don't know what to do with it.

Excusing himself, Narciso leaves me on the back deck, staring out at the choppy water and stormy sky. I arrived at Salvatore's home, assuming he was an obnoxious prick, but the serenity is addictive. So much is happening against the skyline, yet a sense of calm has engulfed me.

I shake it off, hating feeling anything but vigilant. I move through the house with purpose in search of Caterina to let her know I'm leaving. I doubt she'll care, but after the effort of the day, it seems wrong to leave without informing her. I find her in a room that could be a study or a library, likely both. She's more content than I've seen her all day. Lying along one of the many sofas in the room, she has one of her legs thrown over the backrest, the other the armrest. She has a book in her hands and a smile on her face. I don't interrupt her and walk away a little more at ease that she isn't rocking back and forth in a corner, praying for a hero to rescue her.



THE NIGHT IS COOLER than I expected, but a sheen of sweat still scores along my skin.

Mother Nature hinders my ability to hunt with ease. She thwarts my practiced skill of zoning in on specific sounds and smells, her tantrum whirling around me in the precipice of a storm that I wish I had the power to stop. The wind whips at my ears, camouflaging the soft thud of her feet as she runs

through the maze. I stop, centering myself. I breathe deeply through my nose, but rain tickles at my nostrils instead of the disturbed earth giving away her position. A smell I normally admire, but tonight, I wish it would fuck off out of my life.

She's running more than usual. In the few instances I've managed to cross her path, she's been breathless and sweaty. Mud caked onto her calf muscles like clay, and her small footprints are a conflicting sight of fresh and worn, half washed away by the sporadic showers that continue to fall upon us. She's doubling back over already explored ground. Not that I'm doing anything different. My boot prints are not dissimilar from that of her feet. The weather has scrambled our ability to hunt one another effectively, and as pissed off as my novice effort is making me, the harder I have to work, the harder my dick grows in my pants.

I glance left and right, searching my mind for the path back to one of the few small clearings in the large maze. If I can make it there, I'll have an open view of multiple passageways. She'll have to come into view at some point, and then I'll have her where I want her.

I turn right without delay, moving quickly against the light raindrops collecting themselves over my hoodie. It takes me five minutes of wasted time, but I find one of the open plains. It's not large enough for me to lose sight of her quickly when she passes, but not small enough for me to catch her the second she breaches the threshold. She'll be exactly where I want her.

I stand back from manufactured light spurting up from the ground, leaning into the shadows of the trees instead. The rain slows its fall, and I look up toward the sky, the stars and moon not visible under the indecisive weather.

When I right my neck, I smile.

Looking back over her shoulder, she jogs right into the open space, her eyes searching the obscurity surrounding her for any sign of me.

Confident she's alone, her shoulders relax, and her feet stop moving. She breathes in deeply, tipping her face up to the sky.

I choose my path purposely, waiting until I'm in full view before letting the sole of my boot press against a stick large enough to crack with notability.

She startles, and I smile beneath my mask.

Barely a yard in length or width separates us. We're bracketed by a thick smattering of trees that stand tall beside us.

Her chest begins to heave—in panic or excitement, I can't tell, but it delights me either way.

I step forward, expecting her to turn and run, but instead, she too advances.

I pause, and so does she.

I tilt my head, trying to work out her game plan.

She copies the movement with a small smile playing on her lips.

I still can't see her face completely. The color of the night and the shadows of her hood ensure that.

I step left, and she shifts right.

I do it again, and so does she.

We could do this all night, circle one another in a clearing that we both know has her caught. Technically, the game is

over, but neither of us is ready to admit that.

I laugh against the material covering the lower half of my face, the sound quiet.

She hears it, though. “That’s pretty,” she whispers.

“*You’re pretty.*”

“You can’t see me.”

“I see enough to know I like.”

I don’t know why I’m giving so much away. I’m offering an insight into an obsession I should keep only for myself.

She ducks her head, and I take the opportunity to step closer.

“Aren’t you supposed to be running?” I ask her.

She looks up, assessing the distance between us multiple times before focusing on my hidden face. “Aren’t you supposed to be hunting?”

“I seem to have my prey in my sights.”

She adjusts her hood, her small hands remaining on the material beside her head.

“You’re not scared,” I surmise.

“I needn’t be. My hood sets my boundaries.”

“Hm,” I concede. “But what if I’m not a rule follower? What if I’m a man living on the wrong side of the rules?”

*What if my job entails breaking the law day in and out?
What if I kill men and feel no remorse at the loss of their lives?
Would you run then?*

She takes a step back. “You want to hurt me?” She doesn’t sound scared, only curious.

“I want to claim you.”

Her hands drop away from her hood. “Is there a difference?”

“Oh, *tesoruccio*. One day, I’ll show you the difference, and you’ll regret that you waited so long to be captured and ravaged.”

“*Ravaged*,” she echoes so quietly I almost miss it. “Not tonight,” she says louder.

“Not tonight,” I agree.

I step forward, and she shifts backward.

“Give me a head start?”

I shake my head slowly.

“You pride yourself on being a hunter? It’ll only taste sweet if you work for it.”

She’s studied me as much as I have her.

“Fifteen seconds.”

“Thirty,” she counters.

“Fifteen.”

“That’s not a negotiation.”

“Fourteen,” I count aloud. “Thirteen.”

She turns so quickly that she slips in the mud, falling on her ass.

“Twelve.” I don’t stop. “Eleven.”

“Shit,” she bites, climbing to her feet.

“Ten.”

She takes one step, but it's mistimed, and her bare foot hits the ground at an angle that makes her stumble. She cries out in pain but tries again, only to fall back to the ground.

I'm beside her before she can attempt to move again.

"Give me permission to touch you so I can check on your ankle."

Her face, twisted in pain, looks up at me. "What?"

Her right hand grabs her ankle, applying pressure to the injury.

"Give me the okay to touch you."

She frowns.

"To help you."

"Okay."

"Okay," I repeat, moving her hand out of the way to get a better look. "Can you move it?"

She moves it back and forth, grunting out in pain. "Yes, but it hurts."

"Not broken." I turn back toward her face and stop.

She's pushed back her hood, eyes watching my thumb rub back and forth over the tender spot.

Her auburn hair hangs loosely around her shoulders, tendrils having stuck to her forehead and temples courtesy of the rain. A flourish of freckles that span the bridge of her nose, forehead, and cheekbones decorate the golden tan of her skin. Her hazel eyes sit wide on her face, throwing speckles of gold when you look too close. Her two front teeth sit slightly larger than the rest, visible through the gap of her lips, open with curiosity and wet with raindrops.

She's more beautiful than I could have imagined.

Having noticed I'm no longer focused on her ankle, she turns her gaze to me, thankfully still covered by my hood and gaiter. But there's limited space between us, our eyes caught and her breath close enough to taste.

"You have me at a disadvantage, *il mio lupo*."

My wolf.

"You're mistaken." My voice is hoarser than I intended. "I'm the one at a disadvantage."

I *was* obsessed.

My addiction will now forever haunt me.

"My ankle." Her words are barely audible, her throat moving heavily to combat the thickness in her tone.

I shake myself from the moment and reluctantly turn away from the most exquisite face I'll ever see.

"I should be able to walk."

I press lightly against different parts of her foot, gauging her reactions. Her pain begins in her ankle and stretches through her cuboid bone. "You could, but it would be ill-advised. I'll carry you."

Sliding one arm under her knees, I move the other behind her back. I stand with little effort, and she stumbles over her words of objection.

"No way. Absolutely not. I'm way too heavy. I'll walk. Or just head up to the estate. They'll send someone down. Better yet, leave me here. They'll have security footage, and someone will find me eventually."

I ignore her.

She moves to argue again but bites her lip to stop herself, and I look at her once more before focusing on the path ahead.

“I should take you to the hospital.”

“Please, no. It’s a sprain. Grace will wrap it up, and I’ll be as right as rain.”

“I could wrap it for you.”

She stares at my profile as we move toward the estate where the hunt is held. “Are you a doctor or medical professional of sorts?”

“No,” I answer honestly.

“Then you’ll forgive me for declining your very generous offer. I’ll stick with the medical staff. You’re being kind enough by carrying me all the way to the building. I know I must be heavy.”

The estate entrance comes into view, and a woman dressed in a white lab coat stands at the threshold with a wheelchair beside her.

“You’re the right kind of heavy, and I’m not kind.”

“The right kind of heavy?”

I wait until we’re mere steps away from the woman obviously waiting for what I’m reluctant to give up in my arms before speaking. “The kind of heavy that tells me you’ll fuck me all the way up because the moment I convince you to sit on my face, and I can feel all of this all over me, I know I’ll drop to my knees to beg you for another taste when you discover I’m the man you should stay the fuck away from and you tell me no.”

A sharp intake of breath.

“Are you okay? Staff were deployed to retrieve you, but I see that was unnecessary.” The doctor looks me up and down as I place my treasure into the chair.

“Rest up, *tesoruccio*. I’ll see you in the forest.”

“Tesoruccio?” the other woman asks as I walk away.

“Treasure,” my prey answers, her voice telling me she’s watching me disappear back into the dark.

CHAPTER FOUR

ALESSIA



*A*nkle bandaged up, Grace busies herself with tidying her workstation. “Stay off the ankle tonight and take pain relief as required,” she says with her back to me. “But it’s important to start walking normally again as soon as possible to encourage ankle movement.”

She’s so much like her sister that sometimes my breath rushes from my lungs, and I have to concentrate on inhaling and exhaling not to feel as though I’m suffocating. I trained myself to stop crying in front of her years ago. It only caused her pain, and our family has served her enough of that. I save my tears for *after* I see her. Like tonight, I’ll go home, drink an obscenely large glass of red wine, and sob for the friend and sister we both lost.

“Alessia?”

I glance up at her. “Huh?”

“Please tell me you heard what I said about aftercare?”

I nod, ignoring the way the pink in her hair has faded to the point that the blond is more prominent, making the resemblance to Lucy too hard to ignore. “Yes. Rest up and drink tonight. Run a marathon tomorrow.”

She rolls her eyes. “You’re funny. Now, tell me about that scary but super-hot stranger who carried you up to the estate tonight.”

She gossips more than Lucy ever did. But I’ve come to a hypothesis as to why. Lucy’s life *was* drama. She put herself in situations that most would cower away from, and in the end, her desire for the forbidden placed her directly in harm’s way. It wasn’t her fault. None of it. She was a child, a teenager searching for the fantastical things the world could offer her. She didn’t see danger; she saw adventure and experience. I only wish she saw my family for what it was and not an opportunity to dabble in a world she knew little about.

Lucy Snow was my best friend. We met in kindergarten and remained attached at the hip until the day she died. We had our ups and downs, trivial arguments that lasted less than twenty-four hours before we needed one another again, and whatever had sent us down a path of disagreement was forgotten. Even when she confessed to sleeping with my father, I wanted to hate her, but my fear for her safety won out. I didn’t see betrayal. I saw a need to protect her, to rescue her.

And I tried. I did.

I begged her to listen.

I pleaded with her to see reason.

But she was blinded by the fairy tale of an older man who promised her the world. He shone so brightly for her she didn’t see the life he promised her was one he would always control how it unfolded and how it ended.

When she became pregnant at seventeen, she had this fantasy in her mind that would see us as *family*. My father didn’t love my mother, and everyone knew that. Especially

Lucy. She believed she'd be the exception. The woman the man left his wife for.

My father was a predator in every sense of the word. He was evil incarnate. He was devoid of emotion and procreated only to carry on his bloodline. Chicago was his, and if he had his way, even after death, he would rule it, even if it was only by way of his last name sitting atop the hierarchy. He held no love or affection for me or Salvatore. We were our mother's obligation. Until Salvatore was at an age he could manipulate and mold him in his honor. I was a nobody, nothing of value. My mother had hoped our presence in their marriage would make him love her, but it didn't work. So, while our dad dismissed us like inconvenient houseguests, our mother blamed us for failing her in a way we were destined to with a man like Edoardo Bianchi.

When Lucy divulged news of her pregnancy to me, I cried. I was as truthful to my best friend as I had ever been. I told her what would happen if she shared the news with Edoardo. I vowed to keep her safe if she would let me. I would've made any deal with the devil to keep her away from my father. But she ignored my warnings, and I never saw her again.

Lucy irrevocably changed Chicago, but Salvatore, my mother, CJ, and I are the only ones alive today who know that truth.

“Earth to Alessia!”

I blink twice. “Sorry.”

Grace shrugs. “Don't be. I'm a little mesmerized by him, too.”

I force a smile. Grace doesn't know for sure that her sister is dead. She holds out hope that she's still alive, and I've never

been kind enough to tell her the truth. By doing so, I'd lose her, too, and I'm too selfish for that.

"I wouldn't say I'm mesmerized," I argue weakly.

The moment I convince you to sit on my face, and I can feel all of this all over me, I know I'll drop to my knees to beg you for another taste when you discover I'm the man you should stay the fuck away from and you tell me no.

"Alessia," she calls again, laughing. "You are so caught up in this guy and don't even know what he looks like."

"I think his eyes are black," I say to offer something to the conversation. "Dark enough that you can't distinguish them from his pupil anyway. It should be creepy."

"But it turns you on?" Grace does little to hide her smirk.

"Stop it!" I scold, throwing a box of tissues at her.

She catches them. "CJ said he's requested you solely."

I nod. "It's strange to be in a maze with only one other person, and CJ keeps moving us between the allotments. We've done East and West. If it continues, I'm guessing I have North and South to look forward to. But with the constant move, I can't find my bearings, and he always manages to find me."

"He's an expert at the hunt."

"Why me, though?" I test. "He knows he can't touch me. I've only ever and will only ever wear red. What is the reward for him?"

"You also know you'll never be captured, and you get something out of it. If it was just running, you could do that on a running track like everybody else. You want to be chased, you kinky bitch. I know you only joined The Quest because

Charles pushed you into it, but you kept returning because you enjoyed it. Maybe you and your hunter are similar.”

You and your hunter.

I don't know anything about the man behind the mask, but something tells me belonging to a woman isn't high on his priority list.



LINCOLN TOWER SITS SMACK dab in the middle of the Loop. When Charles was alive, I would visit weekly, and we'd stroll down the Riverwalk, coffee in hand, as we catered to mindless conversation, pretending our marriage was built on mutual affection and not a business strategy. I enjoyed Charles's company enough, but I would see the looks we were given. The horrified expressions on passersby as we walked hand in hand. I was ashamed. If we had been in love, I imagine my self-reproach wouldn't have existed because, in my heart, I would have known my love to be true. But that wasn't the situation, so humiliation sat heavily on my shoulders when my husband would kiss me in public. Not because I think love should be held between age brackets but because the disgust aimed our way was always fired in my direction. Never his. He was a man, after all; why would he reject the idea of a younger woman? I, on the other hand, was the callous gold digger. Simple eye contact with a stranger would convey so much in so little time. Our gaze would catch, and they would strip away my self-respect. My worth was void in their silent opinion, and I wanted to scream at them to look deeper.

Instead, I would smile politely and let my husband's withered lips caress mine for a show he seemed to enjoy.

Today is the first time I've stepped foot in the Lincoln Tower since he passed over twelve months ago. It hasn't changed. I could have closed my eyes and described it in vivid detail, and all these months later, I'd be scarily accurate.

"Mrs. Lincoln." The security guard dips his chin, and I smile cordially as I glide past on my way to the bank of elevators. Moving to the last one, I push my thumb against the touchscreen. I watch as it turns green, approving my access.

The ride up to the very top floor is quick, and I readjust my coat as the doors open.

The receptionist stands as I enter. "Alessia, so nice to see you again. Mr. Lincoln is waiting for you. His office is..." She swallows uncomfortably.

"His father's old office?"

She nods. "Thank you."

I straighten my shoulders, approaching the large corner office overlooking the water.

My need to wear flat shoes instead of heels today lets my confidence slip, only slightly, but enough to make me pause before continuing. My ankle has healed well over the last few days, but I knew even my pumps would hinder my recovery, and I can't afford that. Fighting with men in the family is always so much easier in stilettos. The added height and the poise a thin long heel offers screams *don't fuck with me* far more powerfully than the Louis Vuitton sneakers currently on my feet. CJ isn't a made man, but he's no less formidable. Add to that his fury over his father's Will, the one he still refuses to

accept, and I could've used the added confidence of my redbacks today.

Still, I hold my head high, tighten my grip on my Kelly clutch, and march into his office without knocking.

CJ is only five years my junior, which is why I was surprised when he accepted my union with his father without debate. After all, he is a businessman focused solely on success, and he, like his father, saw the advantages of such a merger. I only wish I could say the same for his brothers.

CJ watches my approach, hand cupping his cell as he finishes a phone call I interrupt with my entrance. He ends the call without preamble, standing to greet me with a kiss on my cheeks. "Alessia."

"Am I interrupting?"

"Yes, but you don't care about that."

I smile sweetly. "Very true."

He laughs, and I watch him unabashedly.

He doesn't look like your typical billionaire's son. He's dressed the part, his bespoke suit tailored to line his tall frame like a second skin, but the hair on his head—always a little too long—hangs over his forehead, and he brushes it back before shoving his tattooed hands in his pockets.

He's handsome enough to turn heads and arrogant enough not to care. He has a good heart, but he's dead-set on keeping every person in his life at a far enough distance that they'll never know it.

But I know his secret.

And I think my friend Grace knows that same secret.

I also think CJ knows that Grace sees him a little better than everyone else, which is why he pushes her away harder than anyone else.

Grace Snow has been in love with Charles Lincoln Junior from the first time she saw him. Charles Senior employed her as head nurse for The Quest, but as he aged, CJ oversaw more of the Lincolns' business interests. The Quest included. CJ introduced himself to my sweet friend, and she opened her heart right then and there. I tried to warn her that CJ was oblivious to feelings of affection and love, but she still refused to see it. It didn't help that CJ fucked her. He fucked her and bailed on her and now avoids her like the plague. She thinks it's her. But I know the truth. I know deep down my similarly aged stepson can't look Grace in the eye, knowing what he does about her sister's death while she lives on with hope.

CJ has a good heart; he just wraps it up in a detached demeanor that paints him as a villain.

He gestures to the brown leather sofa in the corner of his office.

"I like what you've done with the place." I let my eyes drift over how different this office looks and feels in CJ's space.

"Coffee?"

I check my watch. "I'll take something stronger."

The right side of his mouth tips up, and I consider that, once upon a time, my late husband was likely just as handsome as his son is now. Tall and broad. Chiseled jawline and dark and heavy brows that bring attention to the rich brown color of his eyes.

I take a seat on the sofa he gestured toward.

He flicks a button on his desk, and the windows of his office shade to keep prying eyes from looking inside. I frown, but he ignores me, moving toward the drink cart and pouring us a sizable whiskey each.

“Was that necessary?” I take the drink with a smile of thanks, pointing toward the now opaque glass. “It looks highly inappropriate.”

He scoffs. “Oh, dear stepmother, whatever will we do with their mindless gossip?”

“I will throw this drink in your face.”

He flicks the button of his suit jacket as he sits across from me. “Be my guest. You should be warned, though. If you ruin my suit, I’ll send you the invoice. I had this handmade in Italy.”

“I’ll add it to your allowance.”

His thick barrel of laughter echoes through his office, and I smile.

“How is the foot?” he asks after his laughter settles.

I twist my ankle one way and then the other. “Comfortable enough to walk on. Not recovered enough for high heels.”

He tsks. “Oh no.”

“You’re an asshole.”

“How are you finding being involved in The Quest again?”

A smirk tickles the side of my mouth. “It feels good to be back out there. I was worried with Charles gone that maybe it would feel different and that I wouldn’t enjoy it as much.”

While not a billion-dollar corporation, The Quest generates sufficient income for it to remain fruitful enough for CJ to

keep. It was a big fear of mine after Charles died that The Quest would die with him. But I shouldn't have been worried. I know my late husband's eldest son enough to know he'll nurture and expand anything where money is to be made. The small hunt that Charles created only grows each year. The world is opening themselves up to their sexual preferences. Kinks are no longer shameful but celebrated, and The Quest is a testament to that.

He considers me for only a second before asking, "It felt the same?"

I lower my voice, afraid I'll offend him. "Better. I don't know. It was as though it was all for me and no one else."

Warmth spreads into his face, and while his lips don't smile, I can see the gesture in the pull of his eyes.

I clear my throat and avert my eyes. "The man who has been with me in the forest since I returned. The one who requested me personally. He's new?"

"Do you say that because he did something wrong? Did he touch you?" He shifts forward in his chair, his voice taking on a harder edge.

"God no," I reply quickly. "Nothing like that."

"You would tell me if he did or said anything untoward? You know we don't tolerate that behavior."

I nod vehemently. "Apart from carrying me up to the estate because of my ankle, he was the perfect hunter."

With the exception of talking to me about how it would feel to have me sit on his face.

"Good." He nods once, sitting back in his chair.

We drink quietly, and I try not to let my nerves overtake me. I've never been so torn in a situation that was not my doing. I know I could make it all go away, but I wasn't lying to Salvatore when I told him I wanted to keep my promise to Charles.

Even now, as I sit across from CJ, at thirty years of age, I wonder if he realizes he's throwing the best years of his life away for a job that will never offer him happiness.

He travels the world, but only when work dictates. His trips are quick. He doesn't take the time to explore the countries and cities he visits. He does what his position requires, and then he comes home.

He doesn't date. I'm sure he has women available to him whenever he wants. You don't look like CJ and go without, but he doesn't *share* his life with anyone. Grace has been in love with him for at least three years, but he's so oblivious to the world around him that I'm not sure he even remembers her name.

He laughs but doesn't do so freely.

He has little to nothing to do with one brother and is estranged entirely from the other.

This business he is so intent on claiming decimates his life into nothing but long hours and stress. He's just too blind to see it.

"You've been avoiding my calls."

I don't deny him, nodding softly at his accusation.

"Why?"

"You know why."

His phone rings, and he ignores it, watching the device on his desk vibrate against the black glass. It stops, and he leans forward, bracing his elbows on his knees. “My father had many stipulations written into his will.”

I hold back my sigh but inhale deeply. “He did.”

“These stipulations.” He turns his whiskey glass in his hand, watching the way the amber liquid coats the crystal. “Fuck with all of us.”

I don’t speak, and that grabs his attention enough to stare.

“You don’t agree?”

I lift a single shoulder. “Not entirely.”

His brows lift high enough that they disappear into the hair that has fallen over his forehead. “Jesus, Alessia. You can’t be fucking serious. He gave you *my* fucking business for some fairy tale bullshit about me falling in love. This isn’t a fucking Disney movie; it’s my life.”

“I know.”

“You know? So you know it’s stupid.”

“It’s stupid to you. It wasn’t to your father.”

“Caleb and Callum have to agree with me. I’m certain whatever ridiculous terms and conditions he set out for them has them scratching their heads.”

I tilt my head. “You haven’t spoken to them?”

“Why would I?”

“Because they’re your brothers.”

“Blood doesn’t make a family, Alessia. Sometimes, blood is what teaches what a family should never be. You know that better than anyone.”

I scowl.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” he says, the apology more exasperated than remorseful.

“I think you did,” I combat. “I think you used something you were told in confidence by your father, against my wishes, against me.”

He rubs a hand down his face. “My brothers and I fell out a long time ago, Alessia. The catalyst was what Charles did after our mother’s death. His demise isn’t going to reconnect us. If anything, it solidifies the fact that we have no common ground anymore.”

I feel sad for him. Salvatore is my greatest ally in life. CJ and his brothers should feel that, too. Instead, they let old wounds fester and continue to poison something special.

I sip my drink.

“I want you to marry me,” he announces unexpectedly.

I hold my whiskey in my mouth, afraid I’ll choke on it if I attempt to swallow.

“It makes sense,” he implores. “With our union, the Lincoln and outfit connection remains secure. I’ll be married in line with my father’s wishes. We both win.”

I spit the whiskey back into my glass. “Do we?”

“How do you not see it?”

I slide my glass onto the coffee table. “You’re my late husband’s *son*.”

“So? Everyone knew you and my father were a business arrangement.”

“Absolutely not.”

He slams his glass down on the table. “Alessia, I will not adhere to his ridiculous demands. I’m not going to go on a quest for love.”

“Then you won’t ever regain controlling power of the Lincoln Corporation.”

His lips turn downward, and he shakes his head. “Unless *you* remarry or die.”

“Are you threatening me?”

He pinches the bridge of his nose. “No.”

“I needn’t remind you of who you are speaking to.” I stand to leave.

“Alessia,” he whispers. “I’m sorry. I would never... I didn’t mean that. We’re friends. You know I didn’t mean it.”

He’s right. While Callum Lincoln rejected me the moment I came into Charles’s life, and Caleb Lincoln refused to acknowledge my existence, CJ and I have always gotten along well enough to count him as a friend.

He looks up at me. “Please. Don’t leave.”

“Get me another whiskey, and I might consider staying.”

He smiles gratefully, standing almost immediately to retrieve a new glass.

I sit down when he passes it over.

“Your father and I weren’t in love, CJ.”

“Exactly.” He sits next to me this time, his face pleading with me to understand. “You know better than anyone how fucking ridiculous the conditions of his estate are.”

He’s angry but attempts to hide it under a thin layer of desperation.

“CJ,” I start, but he cuts me off.

“I gave him my life. I gave this business my life.”

“That was his concern.”

He sits back. “What?”

“Your father and I weren’t in love, but we *were* friends. He trusted me. He confided in me. He’s been worried about you for *years*. The world has more to offer you than this.” I gesture around the room. “Travel and experience and friendship and *family*,” I emphasize. “And love.”

“Shouldn’t you take your own advice?”

“What?”

“You’re no different than me, Alessia. You’ve devoted your life to the outfit. Now that you’re free from the marriage orchestrated for business purposes, are you set out to see what the world can offer you? Are you searching for true love?”

I swallow the contents of my glass in one deep swallow, leaning back in my chair enough to grab the whiskey bottle and refill my glass. “You’re a real asshole, you know that right?”

He smirks.

“I’m still not marrying you.”

His smile drops, and he takes the bottle from my grasp, filling his glass and clinking it against mine before it disappears down his throat without so much as a grimace.

CHAPTER FIVE

DIEGO



“*Y*ou weren’t wrong. This place is something else,” Lorenzo murmurs from the back seat. He shifts forward, seat belt already removed, looking between the driver and passenger seat to get a better look. “The photos don’t do it justice.”

“It’s beautiful,” Gabriella echoes.

“It’s obnoxious as fuck.” Leo snorts beside me. “But also pimp.”

“Don’t use the phrase pimp, Leonardo.” His brother groans, sitting back in his seat as we pull closer to the front door.

He scoffs. “What do you want me to say? It oozes fucking big dick energy? Look at the place, Enzo. It’s epic.”

“He’s not wrong,” Gabriella agrees.

Lorenzo shifts in his seat, hand still clamped against her thigh, his eyebrow raised in her direction. “Are you serious? You’ve never met Salvatore Bianchi, and you’re commenting on the size of his dick based on the square footage of his house?”

“Husband.” She leans forward and kisses him. “Big dick energy isn’t me measuring up the size of his penis.”

I bite my lip to hide my smirk.

“Big dick energy is more a reference to a person’s confidence without them being cocksure.”

“Everyone, stop saying words referencing Bianchi’s fucking cock.” He massages the bridge of his nose. “Remind me again why we’re all fucking here when I could have done this meeting on my own?”

Leonardo lets go of his laughter.

“Because Bianca and I wanted to see Caterina, and you can’t stand being away from me for more than an hour at a time.”

Lorenzo grabs Gabriella’s sweater and pulls her toward him. That’s my cue to adjust the rearview mirror to remove them from my eyesight. I’ve seen the way the boss feels the need to kiss his wife in the presence of others, and I don’t need a refresher this early in the day.

Salvatore was released from prison less than a week ago, and he’s up in everybody’s shit. He’s making up for lost time, and I’m annoyed that on the *one* day of the month I don’t want to be disturbed, I’m being forced to pretend like I give a shit about his and Caterina’s wedding plans.

I pull the car to a stop, and Leonardo and I remove ourselves from the vehicle immediately. Vincent pulls up moments later. Opening Bianca’s car door, he looks at us and then toward the car Lorenzo and Gabriella have yet to remove themselves from.

“What’s going on?”

“Gabriella started talking about the size of Bianchi’s cock,” Leonardo says without a hint of teasing.

“It’s the house,” Bianca concurs as Vincent helps her from the car.

She steps toward the house as Vincent slams the door. She winks at him, but he thwarts her escape when his hands snake around her pregnant belly, and he pulls her back. She arches her neck as his lips meet the exposed skin, words too soft to hear whispered between them.

Leonardo bangs on the window to grab his brother’s attention. “Will you two fucking control yourselves? We’re in enemy territory, and you’re acting like horny teenagers. Find your vigilance.”

One last kiss to Bianca’s cheek, and Vincent straightens his clothes. “Leave your brother. It doesn’t hurt for Bianchi to be kept waiting. Let’s go.”

I want to remind him that we’ve made a habit of making Bianchi wait. First, when Vincent stole his bride, and second, when we assured him that Caterina would be delivered to Chicago when she turned eighteen, only to wait another two years before following through. But I hold my tongue, knowing Vincent already knows that well enough; he just doesn’t fucking care.

Before we can take another step, the front door blows open, and Caterina steps out.

“Bianca!” she squeals, running toward her sister and barging past Leo and me without a glance.

“Cat!” Bianca wraps her in a cuddle tight enough to squeeze her very breath from her body.

“Leave them to it,” Vincent murmurs, moving toward the open door.

He steps through without an invitation, and a housekeeper dips her chin, gesturing toward the back of the house. “This way.”

Salvatore stands against the railing of his balcony, the jagged rocks and choppy water of the river behind his home a fitting backdrop to the bleak image he sets in head-to-toe black. From his polished shoes to the rings on his fingers, every item of clothing is as midnight black as one person could manage. The tattoos dancing up his neck and spanning every inch of skin on his hands are a mix of gray and onyx.

He glances over his shoulder when he hears our approach, waiting another minute before turning to give us his attention.

His beard is dark and manicured to an inch of its life, the sides of his head shorn close with a mass of black hair combed back, not a strand out of place.

He likes control, and his appearance screams that loud enough for us all to hear.

He glances between us, his face giving away no change in demeanor when he notices Lorenzo missing. “Did you kill Caruso and take power since I spoke to him yesterday, Ferrari? Or is your boss disrespecting me in my own home?”

Vincent smiles. “He’s teaching his wife some manners. It won’t take long.”

Placing a cigarette between his lips, he dips his face to his cupped palm to light the stick, inhaling thickly before releasing a relieved exhale.

Standing to full height, he’s taller than the three of us, and I despise that I have to adjust my neck to look at him.

He reaches a hand out, and Vincent takes it.

“Welcome home,” our consigliere greets. “You know Leonardo.” He gestures to his right, and Leo dips his chin. “This is Diego Greco.” I offer the same greeting with a slight bow of my head.

Salvatore nods once in my direction. “I understand you met Amadeo and Narciso while I was inside?” He gestures to the men mere feet away, watching each of us cautiously.

Leonardo and I nod.

Amadeo shakes our hands, but Narciso remains silent against the balcony’s railing.

“Apologies, gentlemen.” Lorenzo takes that opportunity to step onto the balcony, Gabriella’s hand held tightly in his. “Something pressing I had to take care of.”

I don’t need to smell the air around her to know the scent of his cum clings to her skin. Her messy curls are more disheveled than usual, and she pulls it over her shoulders in an attempt to cover the deep red marks pressed into the skin of her neck.

Bianchi sucks his bottom lip into his mouth. “Manners.” He snorts.

Stepping toward the boss of the outfit, Gabriella extends her hand. “I’m Gabriella Caruso.”

Bianchi takes her hand, lifting it to his mouth to kiss her knuckles. “Pleasure.”

She smiles, turning her back on him completely to look at Leo. “Big dick energy,” she mouths, settling back beside her husband. “If it’s okay, I’m going to look for Bianca and Caterina.” She presses a kiss to the corner of Lorenzo’s mouth.

“If her sister can convince Caterina to wear the engagement ring she refuses to acknowledge on her bedside table, I would be much obliged,” Bianchi calls to her retreating back, and Gabriella pauses.

“Try asking her yourself. Vincent here has experience with that. Made it a whole lot easier when you plucked the courage to look her in the eye when you gave it to her, didn’t it, Vinnie?”

With that, she’s gone, and Salvatore turns his attention to Necktie. “So it wasn’t paradise from the moment you stole her from me?”

Vincent shrugs. “She was never yours. She always belonged to me. I merely made certain the world was aware of it.”

Too concerned with swinging his dick, Vincent doesn’t read the dip of uncertainty in Salvatore’s question. The words are more about the fact that Bianca didn’t warm to him right away and nothing to do with Bianca as a person.

Salvatore gestures to the large concrete table mere steps away. “Please. Take a seat. My sister is finishing up a phone call and will join us momentarily. Can I get you something to drink while we wait?”

I keep my place standing but move close enough not to be disrespectful. Salvatore or his men don’t comment, and the housekeeper is outside within seconds, pushing a drink cart toward the table.

“Thank you, Emma.”

She whispers, “You’re welcome,” and retreats into the house.

The soft click of high heels sounds along the balcony, and the conversation drops away as Salvatore's sister approaches us. Her face is tipped down and focused on her phone, but even without seeing her face, I'd recognize her body anywhere.

My mouth goes dry.

The heavy sway of her hips are encased in a skintight skirt that cinches at the pull of her waist and fits all the way down to her ankles. Her feet, normally bare and subject to the elements, are pushed into high heels that were the melody of her arrival. Her sheer black blouse cuffs at the wrists and ties at her neck in a soft, satin bow. It stretches comfortably over her generous-sized tits, and I stand taller as my throat closes over.

Her auburn hair hangs loosely over her shoulders, and her painted-red lips tip up into a smile when she finally lifts her head.

Images attack every corner of my mind, and I can't begin to determine what is reality and what is my mind reminding me of the way I carried her, the first time I saw her face, the moment she whispered to me in Italian. Her scent. Her skin. Her lips. Her laugh. Her shocked gasp.

I rub a hand down my face.

"Gentlemen, apologies for my tardiness. My husband passed away over a year ago, and the saga of his estate continues."

Lorenzo, Leonardo, and Vincent all stand. She shakes each of their hands, introducing herself as Alessia Lincoln, confidently and more of a huntress than I have ever seen her.

Finally, her eyes meet mine, and I hate the disappointment that settles inside me when she smiles at me like a stranger. “Hello.”

I dip my chin.

“Diego Greco,” Lorenzo introduces me before I can find my voice.

“Is there a reason you’re standing over there, Diego Greco, and not seated with the rest of us?”

My jaw clenches. “Caterina and Salvatore’s nuptials are not my area of business.”

Please recognize my voice.

Please recognize something, any-fucking-thing about me.

Please put me out of my misery by recognizing our connection.

“Ah.” She smiles, and the white line of her teeth shines against the sun. “You’re an added layer of protection in case my brother and I decide to take revenge for the fact that you”—she points at Vincent—“stole Bianca Rossi and devastated my brother’s hopeful heart.”

Salvatore smirks.

“He looks positively heartbroken.” Vincent sips his whiskey.

“Oh, absolutely,” Alessia agrees. “But you can relax, Diego. There is no ill will. Take a seat. You’re making me uncomfortable.”

Everyone at the table turns to look at me.

“It would make me uncomfortable to sit,” I say before I can stop myself.

She stares at me, and I wish I hadn't said what I did, wanting nothing more right now than to move closer and stare into the golden flecks of her hazel eyes.

Fuck.

Her head tips to the side, and her stare doesn't falter.

"Diego, sit the fuck down," Lorenzo bites out.

I move toward the table, pulling out the chair directly across from Alessia fucking Lincoln. "After you."

My tesoruccio.

She settles into her seat, smiling when I do the same. "Good boy."

Rage stiffens my spine, and I grind my teeth loud enough to be heard across the balcony.

Leonardo pretends to rub his jaw, covering his smirk, and I plan to peel his skin from his body later when there aren't any witnesses to calm the immediate need to see blood.

Good boy.

Good. Boy.

Condescending bitch.

Hands clenched into fists, I hold them against my knees, my stare never leaving Bianchi's consigliera. His twin fucking sister.

This can't be happening.

She artfully avoids my murderous glare the entire meeting. She smiles casually, laughs easily, and speaks with little room for argument. I hear nothing about Salvatore and Caterina's wedding plans, my ears only piquing when the Irish are brought up.

“Diego has been effective in running facial recognition across our states and cross-referencing it against known Irish soldiers or known associates.”

The attention turns to me, and I dip my chin once to confirm what Lorenzo has just said. “No hits at this point. It’s not foolproof, but it’s a start. I’ll keep with it and advise both families if anything changes.”

“Is it feasible to widen your search parameters to our state border cities?”

Her voice is harsher here than in the forest, and it takes everything within me not to shake my head and reject the sound. Which version is an act? This formidable leader or the woman who whispers in Italian and smiles as she runs?

I clear my throat. “Yes.”

She waits, but I don’t speak again. “If Lorenzo has no argument with you implementing that change...” She looks at my boss for confirmation.

“Not at all.”

I nod.

“Wonderful. I would also like you to organize a meeting with the Rein and Shay conglomerate,” she says. “If they are to be an ally to both our outfits, it’s necessary that we are *all* comfortable with the arrangement.”

Vincent speaks evenly. “That can be arranged. I will liaise directly with you?”

“Please.” Alessia forces a smile.

The conversation swirls around me, but I only see her. Everyone else fades away, and I can’t see or think of anything

else. My mind is blank, with only her name pounding through my temples.

Without thinking, I pick up my phone and send an email I know I shouldn't—a request that is so far from appropriate I question my sanity. The right thing to do here is to cut ties with The Quest completely and pretend I have no idea what Chicago's *consigliera* does in her spare time. Instead, I recall her weight in my arms and how I wish I never had to put her down. How perfect she felt at my mercy. I want her there again. Only I don't want her to be oblivious to my identity.

“If that's everything, I have a table reserved for us all at my restaurant in the city”—Salvatore checks his watch—“in the next hour or so.” He stands. “Amadeo will provide you with the details.”

He leaves without another word.

Alessia stands, and I find myself mimicking the movement. She notices, a small smile playing on her lips. “I'll see you gentlemen this evening. Narciso will see you out.”

My heart pounds in my chest, loud enough that Lorenzo has to grab my shoulder to get my attention.

“What?”

His gaze is set in the same direction as mine. “She's pretty.”

My head turns in his direction slowly, my scowl bordering on pure rage.

He doesn't attempt to hide his smile. “Will you be joining us tonight?”

“It's the thirteenth.”

He dips his chin. “It is.”

It's the thirteenth.

I'll see you gentlemen this evening.

She'll see *me* this evening. Not them. Not fucking them.

“Diego,” Lorenzo calls, and I shake my head, returning to the moment. “Vin has gone to get the girls. I need you to drop us back at the hotel, and then you can do whatever you do.”

“Yes, boss.” I follow him out of Bianchi's home.

CHAPTER SIX

DIEGO



I stare at the email, reading the words for the eight-thousandth time today.

Red Treasure has denied your invitation to hunt. Please refer to the list below for alternate players.

Alternate players. Are they fucking kidding? I pay enough for my membership for them to know that it's Alessia or no one.

Denied your invitation.

She has *never* denied my invitation. Granted, I've only been an active participant a handful of times, but she's affected by me. It was evident in the surprised gasp and the way her throat bobbed as I held her in my arms.

Her refusal doesn't connect.

Well, it didn't. Maybe it was my quick-fired request sent while she sat across from me at her brother's home. The simple query as to whether she'd consider wearing gold *for me*. It was impulsive, but I wanted her to *see* me.

I clench my fist.

Did she recognize me at the meet today?

Fuck.

I bring my phone to my ear.

“I’m starting to think you have a thing for me, always reaching out instead of dedicating yourself to your virgin sacrifice on your special day of the month. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

Not for the first time in my life, I wonder why I actually like Leonardo Caruso. The underboss is cutthroat when he needs to be, but in the moments he’s not, fuck, he’s impulsive and joyfully antagonistic.

“You might have to be the most annoying person I know.”

“Aw. Diego, you’re so sentimental. Of course, I’ll let you suck my dick. You’ll just have to wait until after my dinner.”

I pull my phone from my ear, taking a deep breath before putting it back. “You’re still at dinner with Bianchi and his sister?”

“Alessia is about to leave. We’ll stay put. Bianchi has just pulled out a bottle of whiskey aged thirty years. Do you know how much that would co—”

Alessia is about to leave.

I hang up without saying goodbye.

I’ve compiled enough research since I left Bianchi’s mansion to know I could be inside Alessia’s house well before she made it home.

I told myself that my research was all for self-preservation and *not* the psychotic tendency of a man obsessed.

The woman who has claimed every crevice of my mind also sits in the hierarchy of an opposing outfit.

Coincidence or intentional?

Either way, I know what I should do.

Walk away.

But.

Coincidence or intentional?

What intention could she have? I'm no one. Not to her. If I was Enzo or Vinnie or Leo, *maybe*. But in her eyes, I'm a lowly capo. She called me a *good boy*, for fuck's sake.

One hell of a coincidence, though.

The restaurant is forty minutes from her home, and my hotel is fifteen, give or take.

I check the time on my cell.

I know what I *should* do.

Grabbing my mask and a few tools from my duffel, I stalk through the hotel lobby with my head cast downward, letting anticipation trickle up my spine. My little treasure is about to learn that I don't need to be in a forest to hunt her, and she's going to wish she had the protection of The Quest and her red fucking hood when I corner her tonight.



HER SECURITY SYSTEMS were so easy to disarm that it was laughable. And fucking dangerous. She's a *consigliera* for the

Chicago outfit, and any high school IT nerd could've overrun her setup within five minutes.

Once I work out why she's spooked away from The Quest, we'll discuss installing something to keep her safe.

The lock on her front door clicks with purpose, and I lean heavily against the wall in her living space, making myself comfortable.

After dropping her handbag and keys on her entryway table, she flicks on the lights and lets her back fall against the door. Eyes closed, she kicks off her heels, pushing the pad of her toes into the wooden floor before relaxing again.

The living area remains in darkness, and it's nice to watch her. So much so that I consider whether I want to confront her or stay in the shadows and let myself observe her longer.

I want to watch her pour herself a wine and relax in the safety of her home. Does she prefer silence, TV, mindless scrolling, reading, or music? Does she drink white or red, or am I altogether mistaken, and she's a whiskey or gin girl? Does she stay in the clothes she chooses for power or strip down for comfort as she decompresses from her day? Does she shower first, removing clothing items as she enters her bathroom, letting any creeps hiding in her home watch her?

Unfortunately, Alessia decides for me, turning on the rest of the lights in her house all at once, lighting up the entire space like the Fourth of fucking July.

She screams when she sees me, and I'm psychotic enough to admit that the sound of her distress sends blood straight to my cock.

She's not even seeing *all* of me.

I'm masked up and still a stranger.

Her predator from the maze.

Fear contorts her face for the briefest flicker, but she pushes it back, eyes narrowing. “What the fuck are you doing in my home, you fucking psychopath?”

She’s swearing to portray a wall of confidence she in no way feels. The skittish dart of her eyes and the heavy swallows of her throat tell me that.

“You refused my invitation,” I tell her calmly. “I wanted to know why.”

She all but spits when she speaks. “It doesn’t work like that. The Quest is anonymous.”

She gives me a wide berth, moving cautiously against the walls.

“You showed me your face,” I argue.

Her hands find her hips. “You were helping me.”

I stand straight. “Well, what is it? Am I a psychopath or a Good Samaritan?”

“I hardly think I need to answer that question. You’ve broken into my home because I said no.”

“Maybe,” I reply. “But I want to know why. Was it the request I made for you to wear gold for me? Or was it something else?”

She scowls. “I owe you no explanation.”

I gnaw at my bottom lip. “Which version is the real you, *tesoruccio*?”

She straightens her shoulders, continuing her very slow move into the living space. Each shift of her feet is small

enough that she likely thinks I haven't noticed. But she should know by now that I see everything, especially regarding her.

"This version"—I lift my chin—"strong and a little frightening." The smile in my voice is unmistakable. "Or the version in the forest. Playful and submissively *tender*."

One of her dark brown eyebrows lifts.

"Maybe both," I consider aloud.

She's now standing behind her sofa, staring at me with a mix of anger and alarm. "You obviously have no idea who I am."

Ah. I was waiting for this. The threat of the family. My feisty little sacrifice.

I smile behind my mask. "Alessia Bianchi or Lincoln, whichever you choose to go by. Consigliera to the Chicago outfit. Twin sister to the feared Joker, Salvatore Bianchi himself."

She lifts her chin. "You're a different kind of stupid, then." Without missing a beat, she lifts a gun she must have hidden in the back of her sofa and fires a shot into the wall beside my arm.

I don't flinch. "You missed."

She smiles. "It was a warning."

I shrug. "You like me."

She shifts her aim, directing it right at my heart.

"You could." I take a step closer. "Or we could play."

"Absolutely fucking not."

"I'll use my manners." Mirth sits heavily in my tone, and it deepens her scowl.

She considers me for mere seconds. Confident I won't come closer, she drops her gun at her side. "Get out of my house."

"Play with me," I say again, *almost* begging. "Run, *tesoruccio*, and when we finish, I'll tell you who I am."

She crosses her arms over her chest. "I don't give a fuck *who* you are. I won't ever see you again after this. Your membership to The Quest is as good as trash as well. Not that it matters. You'll be dead."

"*Oh.*" I step closer, laughing at her open threat. "But I think you *really* want to know who I am."

"I'll live with the suspense." She's lying. Her stare is too intent, her eyes searching.

She's cataloging the sliver of skin visible under my mask. Her gaze is set on the unwavering stare of my eyes. But still, no recognition flares in her pupils.

"What if I told you we've already met? You've seen my face, Sia. Just as I've seen yours."

Sia. It suits her better. It's powerful yet feminine and a little freer than the confines of her full name.

Her eyes widen, and I know I have her.

"If you hurt me, I will shoot you."

I shake my head slowly. "What did I tell you, *tesoruccio*? I only want to claim you."

She looks at her gun and then back at me.

"Keep it with you if you feel safer."

She flicks the safety on and shoves it into the back of her sofa again.

My eyes flick over her body and stop at the full-length skirt. She follows my gaze.

“You owe me. I fucking love this skirt.” Leaning down, she grabs the hem and tears a split from her ankle up to her upper thigh.

It takes everything within me not to groan aloud.

“You have me at a disadvantage,” she says. “I want a head start.”

I blink.

“Fifteen seconds,” she prompts.

“Ten.”

She scowls but knows better than to argue. Turning without hesitation, she runs past the open-plan kitchen and into the small office space to its right.

“Nine.”

I know that room has three exit points.

“Eight.”

The first she just entered through.

“Seven.”

The second leads outside into a small courtyard enclosed with a wooden structure she would have to climb over to access the backyard.

“Six.”

The third leads into a second sitting room that offers access to a guest bedroom and a hallway that connects back to this lounge room before she could make it down another

hallway that leads to more bedrooms or, of course, the front door.

“Five.”

She’s quiet but barefoot on the carpet. I expected nothing less.

“Four.”

No doors have opened, so I discount the courtyard immediately.

“Three.”

I don’t think she’d be silly enough to trap herself in the guest bedroom, so she’ll move toward the hallway and the front door.

“Two.”

My heart thumps with anticipation.

“One.”

I run, launching myself onto her sofa to jump over it. The three-seater tips as I stand on its backrest, slamming to the floor with an echo felt throughout the house.

She’s played enough to know not to make a noise, even if the sound surprises her.

I tread as quietly as possible toward the hallway, not wanting to give away my position. I studied her home’s floor plan while waiting for her to return. But she has to be somewhat aware of that.

I broke into her home.

I disarmed her alarm system.

She knows I’m no amateur.

I pause just before the turn into the hallway. The house is piercingly quiet, and I hold my breath to let my ears search the stillness for any sign of her presence.

Her heartbeat.

Her soft inhales or shaky exhales.

The gentle touch of her feet.

But it's as though I'm alone.

Her house screams out in silence, and I frown.

Stepping into the hallway, I look toward the guest bedroom, turning my body with my head.

I move with precision. One foot in front of the other. Heel first, the toe of my boot pressing down with the dedication of a panther stalking its prey.

I'm a mere three steps from the doorway when I hear the slide of the glass door to the courtyard.

I grin.

My silly little treasure.

This is more exciting than the forest. Sia should have a home advantage, but her confidence in her safe space has made her reckless.

I continue my unhurried pace through the guest room, moving toward the courtyard with victory coursing through my veins,

She'll know who I am.

This secret will be ours and no longer only mine.

The intimacy in that knowledge stirs inside my jeans, and I adjust the swell of my cock.

She'll be trapped. Cornered without hope of escape.

The light of the moon spills in through the open door. I'm at home, ready to see how the night sky glows against her skin.

But stepping into the small space, I'm alone.

My brow furrows.

No way did she make it over the wall in such a short period.

I spin on my heel in time to hear her stumble over the tumbled sofa.

She played me.

My treasure anticipated my every move.

My cock grows harder.

I race back into the living room.

Glancing over her shoulder, she crashes into a small table, the tempered glass of the lamp resting upon it falling to the floor in a flurry of broken shards.

She swears under her breath but doesn't stop. She rushes toward the front door, searching for an escape.

Darting around the sofa, I launch onto her coffee table, ignoring the way the wood cracks under my weight as I leap toward her.

Wrenching the front door open, she slams it shut behind her, but I slide my hand against the frame just in time. It crashes against my knuckles, but I don't feel the pain. I'm too focused on my prize. Too eager to seize and conquer. The door bounces back open, and I step over the threshold.

Sia hesitated for a second too long, head turning left and right. She's searching for safety, but that need has become her downfall. She pulls in a sharp breath, then darts to the right, but I'm on her heels.

And she knows it.

She grunts in pain when the soles of her feet meet the thorns of her rose bushes, but she keeps going, the delicate flowers collateral damage to our hunt.

"Tesoruccio," I whisper into the still night.

I have her where I want her.

She knows she can't outrun me.

She stops.

I'm close enough that she can feel my breath on the nape of her neck, and she shivers.

I'm flirting with my own demise and toeing the line of hell. But if Alessia Bianchi is the definition of purgatory, why does this private moment feel like a promised land built only for me? Our forbidden rendezvous have morphed into my very bloodline. Initially, I believed it was the desire for anonymity. Then I discovered her identity and conceived our interactions tasted so sweet because I was dancing out of bounds. But the world could stand behind me, watching on, Salvatore Bianchi with a gun aimed at the back of my head, and I wouldn't stop.

I need to touch her. I need to taste her. Even if it's the last thing I do.

Sia turns, and shocked by how close I am, she stumbles back.

She's trapped, and I smile under my mask.

She shifts to the left, and I move with her.

“Do you think you could outrun me, Sia?”

“No,” she answers honestly. “But I could scream.”

I lean closer. “That’s the plan.”

She pushes back, slamming herself into the brick of her home.

I step into her, close enough that every breath she takes pushes her tits into my chest.

“Are you uncomfortable, *tesoruccio*?”

Something flashes in her eyes. A mixture of recognition and confusion and the frustration of having your answer close enough to taste but far enough away that you can’t grab it. “I *do* know you.”

I hum low in my throat and lean closer until my lips meet the shell of her ear. “If you ever call me a good boy again, I’ll bend you over in front of your brother and your men and show you how fucking *good* I can be.”

I give her a beat of privacy before I pull back.

Her face flushes with realization, shock, and anticipation. Lifting a hand between us, she uses two fingers to slide down the black cover across my face. “*Diego*,” she whispers.

My name sounds so fucking good on her lips, and I can’t deny myself a taste. Without second-guessing, my hand finds her throat, and I push her back, enjoying the bite of pain that escapes her sinful mouth.

Dragging my bottom lip against hers, I inhale.

“I know the rules, *tesoruccio*. I know them, and I respect them. Say no, say it now, and it’ll kill me, but I’ll walk away.”

I don't even trust the words as I speak them. The underlying promise echoes my empty vow. We both know I'll never walk away.

"I'm not your fucking plaything. I'm a fucking *consigliera*." Her words are fierce, but her delivery lacks all conviction.

"You *are* a *consigliera*. You are also my plaything, and I think we both know which role you enjoy more."

Her shuddered breath caresses the shell of my ear, and before I can check myself, my tongue darts out, licking the line of her quivering jaw. I drag my lips against hers and stare into her eyes.

She stares back.

My teeth grab at her bottom lip, and I bite down.

A soft roll of pleasure vibrates against my palm at her neck, and her eyelids drop, her salacious thoughts screaming at me through her hooded eyes.

Take me.

Use me.

Own me.

I close my eyes, afraid of the way her silent pleas consume me. It's all too much and not enough.

The metallic taste of her blood dances along my lips, and my teeth release. Sucking my bottom lip into my mouth, I savor the taste of her submission. Her gaze doesn't move from my lips, a reticent demand to be kissed, and after what I've claimed from her already, who am I to deny her? My restraint snaps, and I surge forward, slamming my lips against hers.

Hands pinned against my chest, she takes everything I give her.

Like everything else about her, her mouth is graceful. She's soft and pliant, even with obsession on her lips and desperation on her tongue. I wanted a taste, but with sparks flying through my body with the smallest of samples, I don't know if once will ever be enough.

My hand remains at her neck, the racing beat of her pulse strumming a melody of desperation she won't dare speak aloud. But who needs words when the ballad of our bodies will betray us anyway? We can argue indifference, but she knows I can't deny her, just as she can't deny me. My straining cock pushing against her stomach unravels that truth. The feral growl coursing through my throat and into her eager mouth leaves me bare and open. Sia's licentious little moans do nothing but expose how easily she'd lay down to take *anything* I craved to offer. Our tongues drip in lust, and we're both far too zealous in our desire to overdose on the addiction igniting between us, even to pretend we're impartial.

I pull back, and the tip of her tongue chases my mouth. I lick out, teasing her, and she groans in frustrated pleasure. Her eyes are closed, and I seize the opportunity to take in the contours and freckles on her face while our tongues dance outside our mouths. She's exquisite, more beautiful than I ever thought possible. Claiming a woman like Alessia Bianchi would be inconceivable. Perfection like hers can't be owned. It can't be contained. It can't be tamed. She's dangerous in the same way she's delicate, and the line between both realities is indecipherably fine. She could moan your name in one breath and destroy you with the same.

“Why did you stop?” she breathes, eyes opening slowly.

I smirk.

Sucking her bottom lip into her mouth, she blinks. “*Kiss me.*”

If only she’d begged me to fuck her instead.

“Diego.”

“Sia.”

She tips her hips, pushing herself against my straining need.

I growl.

She grins.

I want her to beg.

She wants *me* to beg.

We’re both too stubborn to concede. We’re both too proud to relinquish power. So, we stand at a stalemate instead. Both overcome with need but blinded by our inflated sense of control.

I squeeze her neck, and she moans.

I wait until she opens her eyes, ready to drop to my knees and beg to bury my face between her thick thighs, but she changes the game when she opens her eyes and says, “Be a good fucking boy, Diego, and *kiss me.*”

My hand clenches at her neck, and a cloud of shock and desire swirls in her pupils. My outward anger and unprecedented pleasure at the snarky demand turn her on. Fuck, it arouses me in a way I didn’t think possible. So much so that I let her go and step back.

She bites at her grin, enjoying the jolt of excitement and surprise she elicited in me.

“You’re dangerous, *tesoruccio*.”

“Mm,” she agrees. “As are you, *Lupo*.”

Wolf.

A bark of laughter leaves me quietly.

My little treasure is resourceful. She knows it would be impossible to outrun me or to outsmart me. She’s standing her ground, showing me all the ways she won’t bow to my dominance, even if she does want me to pin her to the ground and fuck her the way she deserves.

“I’ll be seeing you, Sia.”

She crosses her arms over her chest. “You will.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

ALESSIA



I don't have the drive to pull myself out of bed.

It's after midday, and after Diego disappeared into the darkness in the *very* late hours of last night, I paced around my home until just before dawn, warring with my conflicted thoughts.

My house remains in disarray. I was too distracted last night to even consider tidying up the mess he made. I took stock and noticed my coffee and side table were broken beyond repair. My living area lamp was smashed into smithereens over my rug. My sofa was tipped over and the fabric torn. The rose bushes outside my door are nothing but crushed thorns and the remnants of petals that *used* to be. My usually kept home looked as though it had been ransacked, and I went to bed, refusing to contemplate it as last night's problem. A decision I'm now regretting because the reality of *what* caused the destruction is a lot more shameful in the light of day. I'm too scared to look, so I remain tucked into my bed and furious at myself.

Be a good fucking boy, Diego, and kiss me.

God. What was I thinking?

I taunted him for what aim? I should've shot him the moment I found him masked up and hiding in my home. Lorenzo Caruso could hardly seek retribution for me protecting myself against an intruder. It was the logical and most reasonable plan of action. Yet I gave in to temptation. I let a man manipulate me into *playing*, all for curiosity's sake. Diego Greco is a problem I have no idea how to handle. I'm out of my depth. I have too many questions and no answers.

First and foremost, how do I get him to kiss me again?

Fuck.

I yank my wireless earphones from my ears, freeing myself from the rain sounds that help lull me to sleep. I shove them into their case roughly and throw my blankets off. I stand before I'm tempted to do something stupid like bring myself to orgasm while replaying the feel of his teeth piercing my lip as he stared deep into my eyes and begged me for more.

I shake my body and release a horrible-sounding growl into the air.

Strolling to my bathroom, I pee and grab my robe, wrapping it around my body and tying it around my waist as I step from my room.

"You sleep later than I imagined."

"*Fuck.* What the fuck? I will fucking shoot you." I jump back.

"I found a few of your hidden guns." Diego gestures to the three weapons disassembled on my kitchen counter. "Self-preservation." He shrugs.

"What are you doing in my house?"

He rubs at his left earlobe. "Waiting for you to wake up."

Only then do I notice my broken coffee and side tables have been replaced. The lamp is different, too. All slightly different but in the same design vein as their predecessors. My sofa has been lifted back into place.

“A new sofa will be delivered in about two weeks. There is a tear in the backrest. I covered it with your throw.”

“Why?”

“I didn’t mean to ruin so much of your shit. Exact replacements would take too long. I assumed they were similar enough, but feel free to throw it all out and start again.”

“Diego.”

“I wasn’t sure where to buy the skirt you so eloquently decided I was required to replace. But I’ve left a thousand dollars on the counter. If that’s not enough, I’ll wire you more.”

I frown and start to shake my head.

“I reinstalled your security systems.” He cuts off the argument I’m moments away from starting. “I’ve been waiting for you to wake up to show you how it works. I have a flight to catch, so if we could get started...”

He walks toward the front door.

“Alessia,” he calls, and without conscious thought, I follow his path, my eyes focused on the coffee table.

“Where are the broken ones?”

“Huh?”

I point. “The broken furniture, where is it?”

“I had them removed.”

I nod absently, moving up beside him.

“Your front door now has three automatic lock mechanisms. Your thumbprint controls them.”

I stand quietly as he saves my thumbprint to the system, giving me short and direct instructions on how to use it.

“It’s the same for coming into the house as going out. When you walk through the door and close it, the locks will click into place.”

“What if someone cuts off my thumb to get into my house?”

His head turns toward me slowly. “If someone is comfortable enough to sever your thumb from your hand, they were likely going to kill you anyway.”

I tip my head in agreement.

“For the thumb ID to appear, you must also enter a six-digit code.” He gestures to the screen, waiting for me to input my numbers.

I flick my hand up, silently telling him to look away, and he does so with an eye roll.

I type in my go-to password, and the screen presents me with a green tick. “Done.”

He turns back toward me. “It has a camera as well, so at any point in time, you can open this app”—he holds up my phone—“and see who is at your front door.”

“How did you unlock my phone?”

“I’ve installed numerous security cameras outside the property.” He ignores me, handing me my cell. “The app on your phone has an alarm. If you feel threatened or there’s an intruder, you hit the button, and it alerts a security company on your brother’s payroll.”

I open the app, look him directly in the eye, and hit the alarm.

He smiles.

I don't know what we're doing.

I don't know why he's here.

I don't know why it means so much to me that he cares enough to ensure I'm safe.

I don't know why I feel the need to reject the kind gesture.

I don't know why I can't find the willpower to do it, though.

Within three minutes, four men approach my door, hands on the guns at their waist.

"Will they shoot you?" I whisper.

Diego smiles again.

"Miss Bianchi," one of the men yells through the closed door.

Diego steps toward me, inserts my password into the screen, and lifts my hand, pushing my thumb against the pad to unlock the door. My hand drops away, and I stand there stunned.

"Miss Bianchi."

I can't focus. "One second." I hold a finger up. "How did you know that code?"

Diego doesn't look at me. "I've just installed Alessia's security system for Salvatore. She was merely trying the app on her phone to see how everything worked. Apologies for the inconvenience."

“Miss Bianchi,” the man at my door implores. “Are you okay?”

I clear my throat. “It’s Mrs. Lincoln, and yes, I’m fine. As Mr. Greco explained, I was testing everything out. You took three minutes to reach my home. Try to be here faster if I ever hit that button purposely.”

The man dips his chin. “Yes, ma’am.”

I close the door and turn back to Diego. “How did you know that code?”

He shrugs, and I want to strangle him. I can feel the color draining from my face, and my hands are clammy, yet I’m shivering. My breathing turns shallow, and I’m suddenly uncomfortable and concerned with his presence. This man has chased me through a forest, and I’ve only ever been elated by the situation. He cornered me in my home, and I was thrilled by the challenge. Yet a simple date has rocked me to my very core. I’m frightened, and the last thing I want to do is show this man weakness.

“It’s human nature when selecting a password for people to choose something meaningful. It’s dangerous. Anyone who knows how to use a computer can discover any date important to you.” He speaks so easily, so nonchalantly. His simple statement of facts could be my undoing, *Chicago’s* undoing, and he throws the words around without consideration for what it all means.

I swallow audibly.

“Your wedding date was likely insignificant as it was arranged. Your brother’s birthday is your birthday, so I knew you wouldn’t be stupid enough to use that. From what I’ve gathered, you’re not close to your mother. You don’t have

children or a pet. The only *really* significant date in your life is the day your father died.”

I shake my head before I realize I’m doing it. “No.”

“Well, if it wasn’t your father, something else meaningful happened on that date.”

I’d always determined our secret wasn’t easily detectable. But the more I think about it, the more I have to be honest with myself. Grace Snow works for our organization, and a simple search would show her sister, Lucy, and I were in school together. A little more digging would unravel the fact that Lucy and I were as close as friends could be. Focusing on the date of my father’s death would also determine that Lucy was reported missing on or around that same day. No one has ever been stupid enough to question us outright, but what goal did Salvatore have by killing our father before he was of an age that would let him take power? Add that to the fact that Dino died only a few years later at my brother’s hand, and the world is happy to paint Salvatore as a ruthless villain willing to slaughter his own family for the throne. But sifting through the rumors would land you close to the truth, and that’s enough to fracture the very foundation of Salvatore’s and my reign and, more importantly, our lives.

I put a hand to my stomach. “I need you to leave.”

I’m offering him more insight into my psyche than I should. I should be agreeing with him. The date of my father’s death *is* significant, but not for the reasons he believes. But I’m frozen with fear, and I can’t think clearly. Empty noise reverberates through my ears. I can’t hear my thoughts.

“I said *leave*.”

His eyes narrow, and he looks closer than he should. I want to yell at him to stop. I'm too panicked to close the doors of my deceit, and he has an open invitation to secrets that aren't his to know. Especially because idiotically, for a split second, I wonder how freeing it would be to divulge my darkest secrets to someone who would offer them a sanctuary instead of using them to destroy me.

"You need to open the door for me," he says quietly.

My hands shake as I input the code, bile tickling the very back of my throat with every number. With my thumb pushed against the screen, the locks sound like bullets as they disengage, and I close my eyes.

Diego opens the door and steps through, his body brushing against mine on his exit.

"Next time you come into my home uninvited, I will kill you." My threat is veiled with trepidation, and I'm more uncertain of myself now than the day I murdered my father.

"I look forward to it."

He strolls toward a motorcycle parked along the curb of my home. I watch as he climbs on the bike and secures his helmet before revving the engine and taking off down the street. I take a deep breath and turn to walk inside, stopping almost immediately.

My trampled rose bushes have been restored. Gone are the flattened thorns, torn leaves, and mutilated petals. The soil has been replaced to avoid planting new buds in old dirt. He not only cleaned up the mess, but he did enough research to know how to grow fresh roses. A bag of fertilizer sits beside my door, not yet opened but ready for when the new buds bloom.

I don't know what to think. The man infiltrating my life in a hazardous way *replanted* my roses because he trampled on them. My only question is what he plans to do when he destroys my life in the same way, and the only soil he'll be playing with is the kind we have to bury him beneath to save our own skins.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ALESSIA



I send Caterina a text, telling her I'm on my way, and pull my front door closed behind me. The automatic locks click into place, and my mind wanders once again to the obscene kiss I shared with Diego, only steps away from where I currently stand.

If you could call it a kiss.

I stood there in complete and utter shock, Diego's hand at my throat, his teeth pinching my bottom lip, his tongue licking out to taste my surprise.

At his outward show of intimacy.

At his identity.

He drank it all in, growling in approval at the eager moan that escaped my open mouth. God, I'm loathe to admit it, but I wish he had pushed it further. I wish he had taken advantage of the desperate rip I had torn into my skirt and pressed his hand against me to feel *just* how eager I was for everything he could give me.

I shake my head, ridding myself of the thought. Today is a fact-finding mission and not an opportunity to delve into all the salacious ways I'd like to know Diego Greco.

As much as he lights a fire deep within my soul, I don't trust him.

It all seems a little too coincidental that my stranger from the hunt, the man who had personally requested me, is also a capo from a rival family.

Countless times I've considered talking to Salvatore about the quandary I've found myself in, to tell him the truth.

I think we've been made.

Bridges to peace have been erected, but that doesn't mean a monster isn't lurking below, waiting to destroy us as we tentatively make our way over.

I'm no longer certain that New York *are* our friends, and I'm starting to contemplate the idea that they're undermining us in our home-fucking-town.

Is Diego some elaborate plan set up by Lorenzo Caruso to destroy Salvatore? Are they preying on the helpless widow who they surmise is *so* deficient in intimacy and affection that she lets men hunt her for fun?

I should talk to Salvatore, but the saddest part of this situation is that even if I am a ruse to dismantle our outfit, I'll grieve the loss of what Diego and I share. Even if it's not real for him.

Because it has been real for me.

I'll always do what's right for my family. If there is a guaranteed threat, I'll eliminate it. *I have to.* Our world isn't made for hesitation. It's not just kill or be killed. It's the decision between saving your entire family or watching them die. If it was only my life on the line, I'd gamble a little longer and a little harder. But it's not. There are women and children,

and men I count as blood. There is no room for error. Not unless we want an outright war.

Before I decide either way, I need to figure out if New York has already brought that battle to our home ground. Salvatore is a protector. He'll execute a plan before thinking if he believes someone is a danger to the world he has worked so hard to build. Until I'm sure doubt on either side will ignite a fight I'm not confident we can win.

I pull up to Salvatore's gate on autopilot, not remembering the drive over. Francesco, Salvatore's head of security, waves me through with a dip of his chin.

I text Caterina again, telling her I have arrived, and let my car idle while I wait for her.

Caterina and I have lunch twice a week—just the two of us. In the beginning, it was a chore Salvatore gave me while he was still incarcerated. Initially, Caterina was a reluctant participant, preferring the company of her Kindle to anyone in the Chicago outfit. I don't blame the poor girl. She was pulled from one city and dumped into another without so much as an introduction. But as cautious or unwilling as she was, she showed up to every invitation I extended, and the more time we spent together, the more my affection for my future sister-in-law grew.

She's sweet and funny. She's shy and kind and has a warmth that could thaw the ice settled over my brother's heart.

Caterina has warmed to me as I have her. Our lunches went from stilted and awkward to something we both look forward to.

One day a week, I choose where we eat, and she chooses the second.

She spends time scrolling social media searching for up-and-coming hot spots, and I always choose tried and tested restaurants at the heart of Chicago.

I'm determined to make Caterina Rossi fall in love with our city. My hope is that if she opens her heart to Chicago, she'll be more inclined to open her heart to Salvatore.

"Hey." She opens the passenger door of my Maserati.

We kiss cheeks, and she pulls on her seat belt. The MC20 revs at my demand, and I watch Caterina's lips tip upward.

"When are you going to let me drive?"

I zip down Salvatore's driveway, watching him in my rearview as he watches our departure from his bedroom window. He's far enough away that I can't be certain, but for a man who refuses to speak to his betrothed, something resembling longing narrows his dark eyes. If I didn't know any better, I'd say my twin brother is jealous of the time I spend with his future wife.

"Never," I tell her honestly, shaking thoughts of my brother from my mind. "My baby is only built for me. Ask your future husband for one."

She scowls at me.

I wink at her.

We don't often, if at all, speak of her impending nuptials to my brother. She prefers to live in denial, and I'm happy to let her dance in there for complacency.

"I've been looking forward to today all week," she tells me, and guilt wraps itself around my throat.

I have an ulterior motive for spending time with her, and I wish I didn't have to stoop to this level. I wish I didn't have to

rely on the beautifully lost woman beside me for information. But I need as much intel on Diego as I can gather, and right now, she's the closest and most reliable source I have.

I let Caterina lead the conversation as we drive, her soft voice rising with excitement as she tells me about the farm-to-table Michelin-starred lunch spot where we're going.

I'm only half listening, my mind wondering about the best strategy to insert Diego into the conversation without raising suspicion. Not that I believe Caterina has been planted in Chicago to spy, but I don't know her enough yet to determine the strength of her loyalty to Lorenzo Caruso.

We've sat down and ordered drinks and appetizers when Cat reaches across the table to take my hand.

I startle.

"Are you okay?"

I force a smile, hoping it looks genuine. "Why do you ask?"

"You've barely said anything since you picked me up. If you're not up to catching up..."

I squeeze her hand. "I've just got a lot on my mind. I've been counting down the days to see a friendly face."

Her face lights up. "Work stuff you can't talk to me about?"

I like that about Caterina. She will happily listen if you want to talk but is equally comfortable filling the silence if you struggle with conversation. She's easy to be around and accepting of whatever version of you she's offered. She adapts, and it's an admirable quality.

“A little,” I answer. “I also wanted to ask you something, but I don’t want our time spent on others.”

Her head tilts with curiosity.

“Diego Greco has recently overhauled my security system at home.”

“Okay.”

“It’s nerve-racking having another family responsible for my safety.”

She raises an eyebrow.

Okay. Wrong choice of words.

I sigh. “You know what I mean. I want to know if I can trust him.”

She sips her water and shrugs. “He’s moved quickly up the ranks in New York. Lorenzo trusts him. I don’t see why you couldn’t.”

Naive girl. His loyalty to Caruso is *precisely* why I’m not sure I can trust him.

“I’m sure you’re right.” I sit back in my seat. “What can you tell me about him?”

A sinister smirk pulls at the right side of her mouth. “You mean you want to know if he’s a pervert and likely to have placed hidden cameras in your house?”

My eyes widen.

I didn’t even consider that. Would he do that? Would my unmasked hunter spy on me in my private space? Did I give my suspected enemy free access to my inner sanctum?

Cat laughs. “Oh my god. You should see your face.”

“That’s a horrifying thought.”

She settles her laughter. “Calm down. Diego is the last person I’d expect to be a pervert.”

I don’t entirely believe that.

“He’s a good person,” she assures me. “I don’t know him very well. He’s incredibly private or just quiet. I couldn’t tell you which.”

“How old is he?”

She pauses to think . “Early twenties. Twenty-four, I think.”

I pick up my water, taking a large gulp to dampen the sudden dryness in my throat.

The man who ravaged my mouth with the single most incredible kiss I’ve ever received is ten years younger than me.

“Why do you look so traumatized?”

I relax my face, mentally cursing myself for being so open. “He’s much younger than I thought and incredibly young for a capo.”

“Diego’s young for a capo, but I’m not too young to be a bride?”

I smiled softly. “Touché.”

Our meals are delivered to the table, and we eat in relative silence.

Her eyes focused on her food, she doesn’t look up when she speaks. “His persona is very unapproachable, but under his armor, I think he’s kind.”

I watch her, hoping she’ll continue.

She glances up at me through her lashes. “He told me that if Salvatore ever hurt me, he’d be here in a heartbeat.”

“Salvatore would never hurt you, Cat. You have my word on that. He’s not built that way.”

She shrugs, but I can see the tension coiled in her shoulders. I hope she hears my promise and doesn’t think I would reassure her of something so crucial without wholeheartedly believing it.

“I didn’t tell you that for reassurance. I was merely pointing out that Diego is protective. If he’s reconfigured your security system, it’s because he wants you to *be* safe and, more importantly, to *feel* safe.”

The conviction in her statement brings tears to my eyes, and I clench my jaw to swallow the lump in my throat.

I duck my head, not comfortable showing Caterina the unexpected display of emotion claiming me.

He wants you to be safe.

He wants you to feel safe.

The depressing reality is that I could never imagine trusting a man to keep me safe.

My brother would lay down his life for mine. But he also believes me to be unwavering in my strength. He sees me as formidable and steadfast in my power. I love that about him, but I crave a connection so resolute that my reinforced shields could drop. I want someone I can be vulnerable with. I don’t always want to be Alessia Bianchi, consigliera. Sometimes, I just want to be Alessia. I want someone to *want* to protect me and my heart. I want a soul partner to share the burden of life with.

Up until this moment, I believed that affinity couldn't possibly exist. But Caterina has planted a seed of doubt in my pessimistic assumption.

If she's right, and Diego wants to make me feel protected, this situation just got a whole lot more complicated.

"Alessia," Caterina calls loud enough to tell me it's not the first time she's said my name in the last few seconds.

"Hm?"

"You don't tell him, do you?"

I frown. "Tell who what?"

She massages her hands awkwardly in her lap, avoiding eye contact. "Salvatore," she clarifies. "You don't tell him about our conversations, do you?"

I shake my head. "Of course not." It's the truth. I would never betray her confidence in that way. "Our friendship is important to me, Cat. If Salvatore has questions, I would tell him to ask you directly."

She nods. "I don't want to be used as a pawn here. If Chicago is going to be my home, I want it to *feel* like home. I don't want to feel like betraying my family." She looks at me directly. "This one or New York."

"Your secrets are always safe with me. I won't ever ask you to betray the people you hold close."

Caterina looks at me as though I've grown a second head. "I don't have any secrets."

"Everyone has secrets," I argue.

She shakes her head. "Not me. Alessia, you, of all people, should know that skeletons don't belong in our closets, not in

our world.”

“Secrets rarely belong,” I reply. “That’s why they’re secrets.”

“Hiding things in our world will only cause death and heartache.”

“Some things are best left hidden, though.”

Her eyes turn sad. “*That’s it, though,*” she stresses. “Something that is best kept hidden for you is the key to success for another. Secrets will always find a way to reveal themselves. That’s why I refuse ever to let a secret claim me. In the end, they own you. As a boss—”

“I’m not a boss.”

She snorts. “Alessia, you are *consigliera* to the most *powerful* family in Chicago, to one of the most powerful families in the country. You’re a boss, and you should own that. Women don’t hold positions of authority in Cosa Nostra. You’re an inspiration to us all.”

Warmth and pride spread through my chest.

“But, being so powerful, you have enemies. One, because of your position. Two, because you’re a woman. The men in our world want to see you fall. If you have secrets that could destroy everything you’ve built, Alessia, you must find a way to bury them forever.”

My vision blurs, and the room begins to spin.

Caterina has forced my greatest fear into my line of sight. I sat on mine and Salvatore’s sovereignty, confident our crown was impenetrable. Only two people outside me and my brother know the truth—our mother and CJ.

My mother fears her son's wrath. She loves and respects him, as she was taught to do. He is a male and, therefore, her superior.

CJ reaps more benefits from our connection than we do from him. It's in his best interest to keep the status quo. He wouldn't breathe the truth to another soul. One, he knows he'd be a dead man. Two, he's my friend, and I trust him.

Diego is a wildcard. An unknown that may or may not have discovered our secret. The crown I was certain was impenetrable could already lay broken at my feet, and if that's the case, I'm a dead woman walking. Even if I take full responsibility for our lies, Salvatore's reign will be questioned. Everything the world knows about him would be upturned, and I can't be sure he'd live long enough to fight for his crown.

CHAPTER NINE

ALESSIA



age seventeen

I call Lucy for the eighteenth time in a row, but like the last seventeen attempts, her voicemail picks up before it can ring. Her phone is off, and a silent scream of panic echoes through my ears.

“Fuck, Lucy. What have you done?”

I grab my phone, currently nestled between my shoulder and ear, and throw it onto the passenger seat of my car. I weave in and out of traffic, willing the other vehicles to move out of my way with the power of my mind. It doesn't work, and the harder I pray to move faster, the slower the traffic moves.

I pick up my phone again, eyes moving between the road and the small device as I search for Grace's number in my contacts. I lodge the phone between my ear and shoulder once again.

“Hi, Alessia.”

A sigh of relief courses through me. “Hi, Grace. Is Lucy with you? I've been trying to reach her, but her phone is off.”

“No,” she says. “She mentioned earlier that she had something to take care of. I assumed you picked her up

because her car is still at home. She must have taken a cab.”

“Oh—” I clear my throat. “Okay. I’ll keep trying her. I have her chem notes, and we have an exam tomorrow.”

“When I see her, I’ll let her know.”

“Thanks, Grace.” My voice cracks, and I camouflage it with a cough. “Bye.”

“Bye.” She hangs up.

Lucy called me last night, her voice singing with happiness and hope. It set my panic stations alight. I’ve been on high alert ever since I discovered her illicit affair with my father. The whole situation is a time bomb ready to explode in all our faces. I don’t know how to fix it. I don’t know how to protect my best friend.

Lucy has been oblivious to the imminent carnage. She’s idealistically hopeful, and no matter how many times I tell her that her life isn’t going to play out as an ultimate romance fantasy, she laughs. She’s convinced she’s *already* living the dream.

My father is a handsome man. An older version of Salvatore. A striking man who oozes power and control. He’s wealthy and connected, and as a woman, I can imagine his appeal is strong. But he’s all darkness on the inside and not in a way that entices or intrigues. He’s dangerous, and the outside world twists his menace into one of adventure and the delusion of excitement and obsession. In reality, Edoardo Bianchi is a monster who doesn’t care to hide. Tying yourself to such a man offers only the assurance of a life broken with hate and violence.

Lucy’s phone call last night was to share news of her pregnancy.

Pregnant.

By my father.

My best friend wanted me to be the first to know that I would have a baby brother or sister.

I sat on the line, stunned into silence.

Lucy didn't like that. She wanted me to be happy for her.

I was rude and uncaring when I told her that it was hard to feel that way for a dead person.

We spent the next forty minutes arguing. Lucy had convinced herself that my discontent was based solely on my refusal to accept her relationship with my father.

She was right, and I admitted that freely. Only my reasons differed from her assumptions.

I begged her to see reason, but she was of the opinion that I didn't *know* Edoardo.

Ultimately, the only concession I could get her to agree to was to meet me this morning for coffee *before* she told my father.

But she never showed.

And her phone is off.

My phone rings, and I grab it. "Lucy?"

"No," my brother responds. "Are you talking on your phone and driving?"

"Salvatore," I whisper.

"What's wrong?" His voice changes immediately.

"Lucy didn't meet me for coffee, and her phone is off."

"Fuck."

I rang my brother immediately after Lucy and I hung up last night and filled him in.

“Go home and wait there. I’ll go to Lucy’s place and see what I can work out. It’ll be fine, Alessia. Lucy is smart. She would’ve listened. I’ll see if I can talk sense into her, too.”

Salvatore hangs up, and while I should feel reassured by his comfort, dread has overcome me, and I know it won’t go away until I can put eyes on my best friend.

I pull up outside our home with a screech of my tires. Only my dad’s car sits in the driveway, and I breathe a sigh of relief. He’d have more of his soldiers here if he were doing damage control.

Walking through the house, I pace back and forth, trying Lucy’s cell again.

“Why aren’t you at school?”

I startle at my father’s voice. Swallowing, I turn toward him. “Lucy wasn’t at school, and I can’t reach her.”

Edoardo doesn’t think I know he’s a predator. He’s unaware of the fact I know he’s guilty of the most heinous of crimes.

I watch his face carefully when I speak Lucy’s name, but he remains impassive.

He shrugs. “I wouldn’t worry yourself with her whereabouts moving forward. She was always bad news. Get back to school.”

He dismisses me by walking away, and while I know I should be wary, I follow him.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

He turns on me at the threshold of his office. “I told you to leave.”

There is no room for interpretation. My father is giving me a direct order, his voice laced with irritation and impatience.

I ignore the threat in his tone.

“And I asked you what you meant.”

A dark snicker breaks from his lips, and he moves into his office, expecting me to follow. “I knew when we found out that we were having twins, and one of them was a girl, that I should’ve forced your mother to terminate.”

I stare at his back, rage consuming me.

“I never imagined you’d be so insolent. But you seem to have adopted a stupid notion that you have a voice. I give your brother freedoms that you idiotically believe belong to you as well. You’re nothing, Alessia. Your thoughts, feelings, and threats are inconsequential.”

I knew this was the way my father felt, but hearing his horrible words still cut like a serrated knife to the heart.

“Where is Lucy?” I reject my own feelings and my fear.

He ignores me.

“I know you’re sleeping with her,” I divulge. “You’re disgusting. She’s a child.”

He stalks toward me, and it takes everything within me not to cower at his fury. Rage widens his eyes and tightens the grimace of his lips. A vein in his forehead pulsates with the chaos of his temper.

“If your friend wanted to open her legs for me, that’s her business.”

I'm shaking, but I keep my spine straight. "You're a pig."

He slaps me hard enough that my head swings to the side, and my ears ring with pain. But I swallow down my tears and turn back to face him. Before I can speak, he moves again, this time backhanding me.

The heavy square ring on his index finger slices into my cheek, and the force of his hit is so significant that I stumble.

Grabbing my hair, he yanks it backward, and I scream.

"You disrespectful little bitch." His spit slides over my skin as he yells.

It's not impassioned or empty. The way he screams drips with his want to cause me harm, to inflict pain for daring to question him.

He pushes me to the ground, kicking at me until I'm flat on my back. Placing a foot against my throat, he pushes down. I should fight, but I don't doubt for a single second that he would kill me. My surrender is self-preservation, but I still feel weak, and I hate that my want to survive has outweighed my will to fight the man holding my life in his hands.

"I could kill you, Alessia. Just like this and get away with it," he whispers. "No one fucking questions me. No one, least of all my daughter."

He lifts his foot, and I suck in a breath.

"I hate you," I scratch out.

I should keep my mouth shut, but my hate for my father runs deep. I needed to say the words for sanity's sake.

He kicks me in the face, and I twist my body into a ball, shielding myself from his assault and stifling the groan of pain caught in my throat.

My jaw and nose throb. Blood coats my hands as I cup my face.

“You’re pathetic. You can’t even fight back.” He walks away. “Speak another word to me again, and you’ll be living in the past tense like your whorish friend.”

I choke back a sob. “You killed her.”

He ignores me.

I lay on the ground, a storm bubbling deep inside.

He killed her and his unborn baby.

Bile rushes up my throat, and my skin burns with bitterness.

I pull myself to my feet, swaying on the spot.

His back is to me as he pours himself a drink.

My chest heaves, but a sense of calm overtakes me.

Using the back of my hand, I wipe the blood from my face, brushing it against my thigh. I hobble toward his desk and use it to stand straight.

He expected me to run away, and an exasperated sigh escapes his lips.

Still, he ignores me.

I pick up the first thing in my reach and move closer to him.

“I hate you,” I whisper.

He takes a breath to speak, but before he can, I stab the letter opener in my hand deep into the side of his neck.

Blood spurts from the wound, and he paws at the metal spike in shock. I take the opportunity to move again, grabbing

the crystal decanter before me. Using both hands, I smash it over his head, jumping back as he falls to the floor.

Eyes wide with shock, he stares at me.

The broken end of the decanter sits in my hand, and before I let myself hesitate, I crouch down and stab it into the side of his neck not currently decorated with his letter opener. Blood spurts up like a fountain. I fall back in shock but fumble back to my feet as quickly as possible, afraid he'll attack. I know he couldn't possibly. He's bleeding out in front of me. I'm confident I hit his carotid artery if the river of red gushing from the wound is any indication, but I need to be sure.

I place my foot against his neck, pushing my weight against his windpipe to cut off his air supply. It makes no difference since he's choking on his blood.

“How does this feel? Your life at the mercy of your *daughter*.”

I can't be sure he can even hear me, but still, I smile.

Blood stains his lips. His life seeps away one torturous second at a time. But my conscience remains clear.

I'm killing my father.

No. That's not right.

I'm *murdering* my father. The term *killing* opens itself up for interpretation. There are no muddied waters.

Edoardo Bianchi's death isn't an accident. I can't claim self-defense. I can't even argue I'm lost in a cloud of insanity. My mind feels clearer than it ever has before. The truth is, I want my father dead, and I have the opportunity to make that desire a reality.

I don't believe I'm a psychotic killer who craves bloodshed. I *know* deep in my heart that this is a one-time thing. I don't know if that makes it any better. Whether you take one life or a thousand is inconsequential, though. If you murder one person, you are forever stained with the ultimate sin.

Still, I'm not an evil person. But I'm also not decent. An honorable human couldn't look life in the eyes and extinguish it like they deserved that power. Not evil, but not honorable, a mere mist in the middle. No guaranteed place in heaven, but also not deserving to spend an eternity in hell. All this I contemplate as I watch my father bleed out and suffocate under my weight.

My father *is* an evil man. He rules our family with the threat of his fists and will only smile when we cower under his gaze. I hate him. I despise him.

When I'm confident the man on the floor below me is dead, I lift my foot, touching the toe of my shoe to his cheek. I push his head, waiting for a stirring of life to shock me into panic. But it doesn't happen. His head falls back to where it was, and my bottom lip turns out in contemplation.

Killing someone is a lot easier than I thought it would be.

I move to my father's drink cart. Picking up a fresh glass, I pour myself a sizable nip. I swallow it down in three deep gulps, grimacing at the burn in my throat.

"Alessia." Salvatore's voice carries through the house.

"In here!" I yell back, surprised at how calm my voice sounds.

His footsteps are hurried, and he slams his hands against the frame of the door in shock when he takes in our father's

lifeless body.

“I killed him.”

He steps into the room. “No shit.” He looks up at me. “Are you hurt?”

“No.”

“You’re bleeding,” he argues.

“He hit me,” I concede. “I think my nose is broken. But it also might be his blood.”

I glance down at the seeping stain of blood beneath my father growing with every second.

“You’re hurt.”

I look back at my brother. “I can’t feel it.”

“You’re in shock.”

“I’m fine.” I deny his claim with a quick shake of my head.

“You’re shaking.”

He gestures to my hand, and I look down. He’s right. The whiskey glass held tightly in my grasp quivers with the tremor in my hand.

“*Huh.*”

“Lucy?” he asks.

My bottom lip shakes, and I pull it into my mouth. “He killed her,” I whisper, and my voice cracks.

His eyes close in something likened to acceptance. He knew that’s what I would say, and a burst of anger hits me.

“You told me it would be okay.”

“I thought she’d listen to you and stay away until we could convince her to run.”

My legs tremble beneath me, and I sit down heavily on the floor. Or I collapse, I don’t know. But one second, I’m standing, and the next, I’m cross-legged on the carpet, lifting my drink to my lips.

“How long do teenagers get for murder? Life? I don’t think Illinois has the death penalty. Is the state allowed to request capital punishment for someone who isn’t eighteen? It seems silly that I’m legally not allowed to drink, but they could put a needle in my arm to put me to sleep forever. What do you think? Should I call our lawyer? Should I run away? I guess Dad’s lawyer would likely not want to represent me, considering I killed his client.”

My words run into one another, soft hitches of breath mixed in the sentences and questions with no beginning and end.

“Alessia. Shut up.”

I nod, but continue. “Have you ever killed someone? Actually, no, stupid question. You would have told me. Should I feel worse than I do? I know I robbed someone of life, but instead of feeling guilty, I’m pleasantly numb. Not sad, but not happy. Maybe this is how I’ll feel forever. Maybe when you take a physical life, your soul dies as penance.”

“Alessia!”

I startle. My brother stands over me. “Hm?”

“Shut up. Stop speaking. Breathe. Let me think.”

Salvatore has his hands braced on the back of his head. His focus travels between our father, brutally murdered on the

floor, and me, rocking back and forth in uncertainty, biting my nails.

“I killed someone,” I whisper.

Shock has claimed me, but culpability has found its way inside my head.

“I know,” my brother responds. Dropping down to his haunches, he brushes my hair from my face. “Don’t let guilt or regret overcome you in here.” He taps my temple lightly. “Some people deserve to die, Alessia. The world knows it, but few are brave enough to act on it.”

I stare into his dark eyes, drinking in the refuge only my brother can offer me. Peacefulness settles deep inside me, and I stop rocking.

“The world is a better place without Edoardo Bianchi. You’ve done the world a favor. You’ll save countless lives with the sacrifice of his.”

“What have you done?” Our mother’s soft voice catches on the question she in no way needs an answer to, garnering both Salvatore’s and my attention.

My brother stands slowly. I scramble to my feet.

Positioning himself in front of me, Salvatore attempts to shield me from view. But it’s too late. She saw me. She saw me covered from head to toe in her husband’s blood.

“What did you do?” she screeches, moving into the room and dropping to her knees in front of my father’s lifeless body.

“He attacked me,” I whisper, peering out from behind Salvatore’s shoulder.

It’s almost humorous that I murdered my father with a smile only minutes ago. But in the face of my mother’s

disapproval, I still cower.

“Alessia,” Salvatore warns.

She won’t care. He knows that. I know that. But I *want* her to. I want her to choose us for once in her fucking life. I want her to be the mother she was supposed to be. Not one of us had my father’s love, but we could have had one another’s. We would have loved her unconditionally had she offered us the same. But she couldn’t. She hated that we were just another failure on her journey to make Edoardo love her.

“He beat me. He threatened to kill me. He killed Lucy!” I scream.

“You stupid little girl.” She stands.

“Don’t say another word.” My brother blocks her path to me. “Don’t you *dare* say another word.”

“You’d protect her?” She recoils. “You’d protect her after she did *this*?” She points at the bloody form of her husband.

“Always,” Salvatore answers.

“I—You—*She* will never get away with this. They will kill you,” she spits. “The family will kill you.” She smiles right at me.

Smiles.

My own mother just smiled at the thought of my death.

“They will do no such thing,” my brother says quietly, his voice morphing into one of menace and violence. “Because *I* killed him.”

My mother frowns.

“I killed that worthless piece of shit.” He kicks the toe of his boot against Edoardo’s leg. “I saw him attacking Alessia,

and I stepped in.”

“She’s covered in blood.”

“I also didn’t like the way he ruled.” He ignores her. “He was old and obsolete. He was ruining everything our family has built. His death means that I’m next in line.”

“You’re seventeen.”

Salvatore shrugs.

“They’ll kill you both.”

“Then so be it,” he answers.

“You won’t get away with this.” She points a finger in my face. “I’ll make certain of it.”

“Mama,” I start, but Salvatore lifts a hand to silence me.

Our mother turns on her heel and rushes from the room.

“Salvatore,” I murmur. “Why did you do that? This is *my* sin.”

“We’re a pair.”

My vision blurs, and I don’t attempt to wipe the tears from my eyes.

Dropping to a crouch beside our father, my brother grabs his jaw, turning his head one way and then the other, his brow creased in thought.

“What?”

Moving to straddle the body, he wastes no time in lifting a fist and slamming it into our father’s face.

“What are you doing?”

“Making it more believable,” he says evenly, punching him again.

He stares at our father for a moment longer before reaching down to his ankle. Lifting his trousers, he removes the combat knife he keeps strapped to his body.

“Salvatore,” I whisper.

Holding the knife tightly in his grasp, he slides it into the corner of Edoardo’s mouth, resting it for a split second before using his might to slice upward.

I gasp.

He repeats the action on the other side.

Throwing the weapon to the carpet, he grins. “Now, who’s smiling, fuckface?”

He rises, rolling his shoulders and standing in front of me.

My eyes remain on the body on the floor, shock lacerating through me at the hideous smile carved into his lax face.

Salvatore grabs my chin and shakes it. “Look at me.”

I do as he asks.

“Hit me.”

I frown. “What? No.”

“Alessia,” he pushes. “Hit me. It needs to look believable. There is no way Dad wouldn’t have fought me.”

I shake my head.

“Hit. Me.”

“No.”

“You will die.”

I shrug. I don’t care. Honestly, I don’t. As long as my brother is safe and unharmed, I can die peacefully.

“They will kill me too.”

I reject his declaration with a shake of my head.

He laughs. “Alessia. As a pair, we’re formidable. I have no one else in this family. Our mother would sell us out the first chance she got. Our father is dead, not that he would’ve offered us a haven anyway. We’re powerful together. Hit me.”

“I don’t want to.”

He smirks. “Sure, you do. Think about all the times I’ve annoyed you. Every time you’ve lost a friend because I fucked them and never called them. It’s a few free punches. You likely won’t even bruise me.”

That makes me scowl, and he laughs.

I pull back my fist and slam it against his nose.

“Fuck, Alessia. I didn’t say break my nose. I said bruise my face.”

I punch him again, in his right eye this time.

“More?”

He wipes blood away from his nose, his glower coming on darker and darker as the blood continues to fall. “That’ll do.”

Silence falls between us, and our stares clash.

“Will we die?”

He shakes his head. “I’ll do whatever we need to make sure we survive.”

“Smart.” Uncle Dino steps into the room, our mother on his heels.

Salvatore, like before, steps in front of me.

Dino, our father's second-in-command, holds his hands up in surrender. "I come with no ill will toward either of you. I think we can make this work for all of us."

"What?" my mother screeches.

"Giuliana, leave us, please. Your children and I have business to discuss."

CHAPTER TEN

DIEGO



I was up until three in the morning working on the added facial recognition expansions Alessia suggested we make. It was a smart idea, and I'm annoyed at myself for not thinking of it before her. I'm confident I've programmed the systems right, but I will triple-check them later today after a few more hours of sleep and at least three cups of coffee.

Lorenzo is certain the Irish have something planned. At first, I thought it was paranoia. Now that he's loved up, he's not as detached as he once was. He has something to lose, something irreplaceable, and that has to fuck with your head. I put it down to an overwhelming need to protect his wife. But my nonchalant attitude has wavered over the past twelve months. The Irish are acting strange. Shit, they're not acting at all. It's not normal for a family to go dead silent. There are no whispers, no underhanded business arrangements or bodies showing up with their signature. The underworld speaks of the Irish in the past tense, believing they've just up and left.

It's not true.

A conglomerate like Oisin's doesn't fade into oblivion. The man has fought for power over too many territories—and won—to give up like this. He's plotting, and with how fucking quietly they're doing it, we should all be worried. The only

comfort I'm taking for now is that my intel hasn't picked them up in our cities. Expanding to the border states will ease my anxiety on the matter further.

Rolling over in my bed, I pick up my phone, ensuring I haven't missed any crucial calls or messages from the boss. There are a few messages from my dad checking in and Dante asking for help with something. I ignore them both and fall onto my back.

The blackout blinds in my bedroom keep me rested in complete darkness, and I adjust the brightness of my screen, saving my eyes from the blinding light. Using my free hand, I pick up the dark cross that hangs around my neck, dragging it against the chain a few times before resting it between my lips.

Flicking between apps, I enter my password for my hidden photo albums and pull up Alessia's pictures. I'm a psychopath. A man hellbent on losing his mind to an obsession I now no longer have control over. Not one of the photos of the woman in question has been taken by me. That should tell me enough to stop. They're all screenshots of images I found while googling her. She's in the media enough. She's a ranking member of a prominent family and was married to a billionaire. She's also beautiful, and the world zones in on beauty like Alessia Bianchi's. They want to know *how*—what products she uses and what regimes she follows to make her look the way she does. Deep down, everyone knows Alessia's allure is unattainable. Yet the world continues to feed off the snippets of her life the media allow them to have in hopes of more. Kind of like I'm doing. The tabloids want her to fill their socialite pages, but they settle for catching a glimpse of her wherever they can, considering she's not outwardly fond of social engagements for publicity's sake.

She's a class fucking act. She never leaves her house looking anything but impeccable. Her hair is always styled, her face always made up, and every item of clothing that covers her skin looks tailored to her frame. She has two markedly different styles.

She wears fitted jeans and oversized sweaters that likely cost more than my monthly mortgage payments to the drawing class she frequents. She attends three days a week and always leaves with charcoal-stained hands and a smile.

Every other day, she's dressed to kill. Pantsuits with lace bodysuits clinging to her curvy frame underneath. Skirts that look painted onto her shapely ass and blouses that cuff at her wrists and button to her neck. She always wears heels. Stilettos at least six inches high. She seems as comfortable in them as I feel in my trademark boots. I'd love to test the theory and chase her through her home while she wears them and only them.

Everything about the consiglieria of Chicago screams power. The photos plastered across gossip websites have her face set like stone. The fierceness in her eyes portrays her as a ruthless Mafia leader. Even the smiles they catch are sly and underhanded. It's not an act, not entirely anyway. I've seen that woman. I've sat across from her after she insulted me in front of my boss and hers.

Be a good boy.

My blood boils at the mere thought.

But there is more to the woman who holds herself as a queen in a city that would be as giddy to see her fall as they are to see her succeed. They preach their love of a woman destined to rule, but in the same breath, feel it necessary to remind her that while she may be some form of superhero boss

bitch, she's alone and will likely remain that way because "she can't have it all." Her marriage was a farce. Everyone with eyeballs and a heartbeat knew that. Nothing is available in the media about her extracurricular activities like the hunt, so I have to wonder if the loneliness brush they seem intent on painting her with is as misguided as their research.

Be a good boy.

I close my eyes in frustration, hating how my cock pulsates at the sultry way she taunted me the other night. She knew I wouldn't beg, but she thought she could push me into snapping. Fuck, I wanted to. I was seconds away from pushing her up against the side of her house and fucking her so good she'd be the only one begging.

My dick is hard, and I throw my phone to my mattress to wrap my hand around it. I bite down on the cross between my lips, muting the soft growl that crawls up my throat the moment my palm meets the granite touch of my erection.

I've been forced to jerk off daily. It wasn't always this way. Not before Alessia steamrolled into my life. Shit, even when I watched her in the woods, I clung to a semblance of self-control. I could go days, weeks even, without needing to fuck or masturbate. Sex felt good, but it never consumed me. Now, I can't focus on a single task without jacking off before I pull myself out of bed. The woman has bewitched me, and I grow more frustrated each day I fail to break her fucking curse.

I fantasize about watching her come all over my cock, then begging—on her hands and knees—to lick me clean. I dream of eating her pussy and letting her orgasm cling to my lips as I kiss her, forcing her to taste how hard I can make her come. I crave the feeling of her tight cunt and rigid asshole strangling

my cock. I daydream about my hand at her throat and my handprints on her ass. I want to mark her, claim her, and destroy the illusion of love the men before me have offered her.

My hand is flying up and down, my grip hard. I'm panting and grunting and hating myself for wanting the infuriatingly sexy woman the way I do. I'm so fucking close. My balls are heavy, and my spine is tight, and I wish she were here so I could show her the way she's fucked me up.

I want to hurt her and punish her for making me want the things I do.

It's not right. My obsession is dangerous, and I'm out of my depth with trying to figure out how to fucking tame it.

I close my eyes, readying myself to blow when my doorbell sounds.

I pause, and my cock protests by throbbing in my palm.

My necklace drops from between my teeth, and I frown. No one turns up at my house unannounced.

No one.

Not even my fucking mother.

Cock still standing at attention, I use my other hand to retrieve my phone and open the security app to check my front door camera.

My hand starts moving again before I can register the thought. My nostrils flare, and my grip tightens enough that I growl aloud. Within seconds, warm spurts shoot from my dick as I come, ribbons of cum landing against my hand and stomach as the object of my very desire stands at my front

door, adjusting her hair and reapplying lipstick while she waits for me to answer.

I consider ignoring her for all of five seconds before I launch out of bed. Grabbing a hand towel from my bathroom, I wipe roughly at my stomach and hands, cleaning the physical evidence of my climax from my skin. Not ready to completely part from it, I throw the towel over my shoulder. Grabbing the jeans I removed last night before bed, I zip them up and move toward my front door with purpose.

I should calm whatever storms inside me before facing her—nerves, shock, anticipation, irritation. Each emotion swirls deep in my gut and slams against my rib cage, resembling my heartbeat. My need to look her in the eye outweighs my usual ability to find indifference and clarity. Entering my PIN and pressing my thumb against the panel beside the door, I yank it open, enjoying the way she gasps at the ferocity with which I come into focus.

Her pantsuit is a deep forest green, and I know she picked it out especially for me. Tailored pants slide down her legs, and a fitted jacket hugs the heady curves of her waist. The bodysuit has intricate patterns of lace the same color as the suit, only it holds accents of gold woven through the lines.

She enjoys the way my eyes travel over her body, pushing her jacket back to slide her hands into her pockets with a sly grin.

“Are you going to invite me in?” She keeps her focus on my face, the faux show of confidence in her tone not entirely hiding the way her voice shakes.

I grab the cross at my neck, sliding it against the chain as I consider her. The move forces her eyes away from my face and down to my chest. Her nostrils flare as she pulls in a

breath, her hazel eyes widening as they take in my naked torso.

“What are you doing here? And how did you get my address?”

That makes her smirk, and it takes everything within me not to wipe it off her face with my tongue.

“You’re not the only one who can use a computer.”

“Amadeo?” I push.

She shrugs, confirming what I already know. *Fucker*. The loyal little soldier needs to be taught a lesson about involving himself in my business.

“You’re being very rude. Invite me in or slam the door in my face, but hurry up and decide which path you want to take.”

“Who says I don’t have company?”

Jealousy flashes through her eyes before she can stop it. “Oh...” She lifts her shoulders in an indifference she in no way feels. “I’m sure you could send whoever they are on their way. This is rather important.”

“You can push that green-eyed little monster back into its cave,” I taunt. “I’m alone.”

I step aside to invite her in.

She steps through my door tentatively, testing her footing and assessing the threat before she lets me close the door behind her. She jumps at the automatic lock mechanisms. “I’m still not used to that.”

Standing this close, I can smell her, and it takes every ounce of willpower not to lean forward and savor the scent

with an audible inhale.

“Is your visit for business or pleasure?”

She takes her time answering, letting her gaze swallow my apartment with eager eyes. I’ve never once considered what my home looks like to another. My mother and father aside—and that’s on obligation—I don’t invite others into my private space. I’m a happy loner, and nothing offers intruders more access into your inner sanctum than where you are safe to be your most authentic self.

I allowed Alessia access only because I breached hers without permission. It’s only fair that I offer her the same courtesy.

“I like the exposed brick,” she comments. “I imagined your residence to be more bachelor pad than homey, though.”

My house is lived in. Books line the coffee table, and washed dishes are stacked beside the sink. A basket of laundry I’ve been too lazy to fold has taken residence on my couch, my keys and wallet are thrown messily on the dining table next to one of my laptops, and my unopened mail is being used as a coaster from last night’s coffee binge.

“I wasn’t expecting company.”

She nods once, checking the kitchen counter is dry before placing her handbag down. “What pleasure could I have interest in entertaining with you, Diego?”

I want to roll my eyes. I envisaged her more mature than to deny what was building between us.

“I don’t know. Maybe you wanted to do a little show-and-tell on how wet you were when my hand was on your throat and my tongue was tasting your lips.”

Alessia offers no reaction to my vulgar words.

“Do you forget who you’re speaking to?” she asks. “Or do you speak to all ranking family members with such indecency?”

I snort.

My treasure is wearing her Bianchi armor with fervor, and instead of being offended by her forced disdain, I bite the corner of my lip to hide the accomplishment I feel at her needing to approach me with her guards erected.

“I’m here on business,” she clarifies.

“Then you came to the wrong address. I can take you to Lorenzo. I assume you don’t have a scheduled meeting, considering you turned up at my home unannounced, but I’m sure he’d be obliged to meet with you, seeing as you traveled so far to see him.”

Her pretty eyes narrow.

Eyes that I imagined staring into mine while she lapped at my cock only minutes ago. I grab the towel at my shoulder, remembering how hard she made me come with her fantasy alone.

“My business is with you.”

“Our business could only be pleasure.”

She inhales so significantly through her nose that her shoulders rise with the effort. “It’s too early for this, and I’ve yet to have my morning coffee. Stop.”

I smirk, sauntering past her and letting my naked torso brush against her hand. She lifts it quickly, moving to rub her neck in embarrassment when she sees I noticed.

“Let me make you a coffee.”

“Only if you have espresso.”

“Now, who is being rude?”

“*Please,*” she corrects her manners.

I pull a mug from my cupboard and meet her eyes. They’re set on my movements, her lips flattened into a thin line of regard. It pisses me off. She forces her way into my house and speaks down to me. She reprimands me on words that in the forest she’d gasp with lust at. She built a wall of disregard around her and welcomed herself into my inner sanctum. For what? To end whatever is building between us. This isn’t a friendly visit. She’s too rigid. Even playing the role of Mafia boss, she’s more respectful. She’s playing a part out of duty, and I hate that she’d even pretend to be someone she wasn’t with me for a second.

My lips turn down in disapproval, and she turns her face away, rejecting my objection.

I clear my throat, and she turns back, raising a pretentious eyebrow. I suck my bottom lip into my mouth, enjoying the way her pupils expand with lust. Keeping her stare, I use the towel I used to clean away the cum she forced me to spill to wipe down her mug.

“While I understand that all of this may be fun for you,” she says with my back toward her as I busy myself making espresso. “I’m done with whatever game you believe you’re playing. You either respect me enough to tell me what the fuck is going on, or you don’t. I’m hoping my assumption that you’re an honorable enough man means you will.”

I’m confused and thankful as fuck that my back is turned to stop her from seeing my chagrin.

“I chase you through a forest wearing a mask with the ultimate goal of capturing you. In what world is that honorable?” My shoulders are tense, but I don’t attempt to relax them.

A sigh of annoyance drifts through my kitchen. “Your extracurricular activities have nothing to do with your character.”

I tilt my head.

“*Why* you chose *my* hunt and *me* as your subject, on the other hand, has everything to do with your motive and, in turn, who you are as a person.”

I turn, walking casually across the kitchen to place her coffee in front of her.

“Thank you.”

Crossing my arms over my chest, I watch as she lifts the glass, placing it against her lips to sip. “Mm,” she praises. “That’s good.”

Victory blooms through my chest, and I let the grin I attempted to contain spread across my face. It wasn’t the *exact* way I envisaged painting my cum on her lips, but it will suffice.

For now.

“Our presence in the same hunt is purely coincidental.”

She raises an eyebrow. “You expect me to believe that?” She spits the words like venom.

“I don’t give a shit what you believe. It’s the truth.”

They talk about the line between love and hate being a fine one. They’re irrefutably wrong. The line between *lust* and hate

is hairline. My need to fucking ravage this woman is unprecedented. Yet the more she fires arrows of disrespect my way, the more my disdain grows. It has me perplexed. Her position and power turn me on because I like the women I fuck to be self-assured enough to be confident in their vulnerability. I know why she has to be the way she is to the outside world. But to me? To the man she lets hunt her, she should know better.

“What is Lorenzo’s motive for your placement in my life?”

I ignore the question.

“Did you draw the short straw? Or did you believe me to be easy pickings?”

“Easy pickings?”

“The lonely widow,” she whispers.

“You hardly fit the grieving stereotype.”

Fire blooms in her eyes.

“I’m not stupid.” She clenches her fists. “And you’re not the first group of men to underestimate me. My own fucking outfit does that regularly.”

My surprise must show because she shakes her head. “It’s no secret. I have stood up against men like you and your boss more times than the years you’ve been alive. You want to know something, Diego Greco?”

I lift my chin. “What’s that?”

“They’ve never stood long enough for me to consider them a worthy competitor. I win. Every fucking time.”

“I don’t doubt it.” My voice is barely audible, but not with fear or disbelief, with admiration.

“I don’t know what you know—”

“About what?”

Her head tilts.

“Whatever you *think* you know.” She changes tactics.

“About what?” I push.

“If you come for my family, I will come for you. Our roles will reverse, and *you* will become my prey, Diego.” Hands on my kitchen counter, she leans forward. “Only unlike you, I don’t play with my target. I will destroy you before you see me coming.”

Salvatore and Alessia have a secret they believe could unravel their outfit.

Interesting.

Placing my elbows on the marble counter, I angle my face as close to hers as I can manage. “I have no fucking idea what you’re talking about. *You* have confessed to sins I want no knowledge of, *tesoruccio*.”

She swallows.

“I *watched* the hunt because it’s my version of porn. I *joined* the hunt because *you* bewitched me to the point that I needed to hear the raggedness in your breath myself. I needed to chase my Red Treasure. Imagine my surprise when I attend a meeting in Chicago and discover my greatest fantasy is none other than the *consigliera* of a rival fucking family.”

Her eyes scan my face, searching in desperation for my lies. Does she want my truth or hers? I can’t be sure.

“Lorenzo would kill me if he knew I was fraternizing with the enemy.”

“Salvatore will kill you.”

“Mm,” I agree readily. “I have no doubt Bianchi would happily slice a smile into my face for the thoughts I have about his twin sister and all the ways I dream about degrading her.”

I can taste her breath. It’s shaky and warm, and it would take nothing to close the space between us to drink it in. But I refrain.

The woman before me doesn’t trust me.

She didn’t come here for me to fuck her like I initially thought.

She came here to confront me about planning her demise.

There is no doubt in my mind that I could fuck her so thoroughly that she’d never recover from the imprint of my cock. But doing so while she’s uncertain and confused doesn’t entice me. Not in the fucking slightest.

I stand straight. “You’ve threatened to kill me every time we’ve come face to face. I would’ve killed any man who dared do the same. I laughed off your last threats as I believed they were your way of hiding how much you wanted me to pin you to the ground and fuck you senseless.”

She straightens her shoulders.

“I’m a loyal fucking soldier, Sia. I’m a capo who cares for nothing and no one. I respect your position in Chicago, but if you ever come into *my* home to threaten me again, this conversation will go very differently.”

“That sounds like a threat.”

I lift a single shoulder. “I wouldn’t be stupid enough to do something so reckless to a boss. But unless you’re ready for me to fuck you, I suggest you leave.”

She turns on the spot, grabs her handbag, and walks toward my front door. I follow her. She waits for me to open the door and pauses at the threshold.

“Like the hunt, I want this conversation to remain between us. I know you owe me nothing—”

I move into her space, dropping my lips to her ear. “Your righteous little visit was admirable. You’re protecting your family. I’m happy for us to remain deceitful for our own personal gain, Sia.”

I step back, and she breathes a sigh of relief.

“I just hope it doesn’t fuck us both in a way that has us buried in the forest instead of chasing one another through it.”

She leaves without another word, and I know the right thing to do, the *loyal* thing to do is to call Lorenzo right away. Sia all but confessed to a secret that could be their undoing. I don’t know whether the boss would use it to destroy their outfit or sever ties completely to save our family. Either way, I’m not willing to play that card yet. Each path leads to cutting Alessia Bianchi from my life, and while I’m not convinced our connection is safe for either of us, I’m not ready to give it away. Not yet, anyway.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

SALVATORE

“*A* madeo,” I greet warmly as my younger cousin raps his knuckles against the open door of my office. “Did we have a meeting scheduled?” I sit up straighter, reaching for my phone.

“No. Do you have a minute, though? I need to discuss something with you.”

I gesture to the seat across from me. “Shut the door. My reluctant future wife likes to explore the house periodically.”

He closes the door softly, takes the seat I offered, and lays a large envelope across his knees.

“Are you in trouble?”

“No, boss,” he answers easily, and relief courses through me. I have enough on my radar right now. “But I need you to know I come to you with nothing but respect. You have a right to know—”

“Amadeo,” I cut him off quietly.

He gulps. “It’s about Alessia.”

I lean into my desk, my attention caught. “What about Alessia?”

“A lot of talk about her is circulating through the ranks.”

My anger spikes unintentionally. A few, not a lot, but enough of our outfit can't stomach the idea of a woman sitting higher in the hierarchy than they do. I don't trust another soul more than I trust my twin sister. She is loyal to the family, yet they still question her abilities. I want to slit every doubter from ear to ear and carve my sister's name into their foreheads for their disrespect, but Alessia quietens my disdain, assuring me their lack of faith means nothing to her.

I raise an eyebrow. "About her, what exactly?"

He clears his throat. "Indiscretions, boss. Their words, not mine. There's talk, unrest about her lifestyle."

I despise riddles. I reject the notion of talking in circles to make a point. Owning our words and actions is our only real strength in this world. But people second-guess themselves, afraid of disapproval.

"Amadeo," I snap, and he clamps his mouth shut.

Nodding vigorously, he sits up straighter. "You want me to get to the point."

I smile, the gesture anything but serene.

"She's been spotted with two different men in as many days. It's not the first time. Rumors are swirling about what your motives are regarding her matrimony. They'll begin circling, expecting you to pair her off."

I scratch my chin. "I don't understand. What men?"

"The first is Charles Junior Lincoln."

"CJ."

"Hm," he confirms.

I frown. "He's her stepson, for fuck's sake."

“That’s where it gets sticky.”

“*Sticky?*”

“She entered his office recently and stayed for hours. When she left, the two looked inebriated.”

I shrug.

“The family believes them to be involved.”

“Because she went to his office?”

“Because the moment she entered his office, CJ closed his blinds and locked his door.”

“That doesn’t mean they’re fucking.” Stupid, certainly.

“It doesn’t mean they’re not, either.”

I can’t imagine my sister letting her late husband’s son fuck her, but I can’t deny it unequivocally. As close as Alessia and I are, we don’t talk about sex.

“That’s not all,” Amadeo continues. “She’s been spotted many times with Diego Greco.”

“Should I know that name?”

“He’s one of Caruso’s capos.”

I clench a fist.

“I understand we’re brokering peace with their outfit, but it looks bad. Mere months ago, we were rivals.”

“We’ll always be rivals.”

He nods once. “They want her married, Salvatore. They believe she’s disrespecting our ways.”

My eyes narrow. “They all keep whores.”

“Their whores aren’t billionaire stepchildren or rival family members,” he argues quietly.

My nostrils flare as I force an inward breath. “What’s in the envelope?”

“Proof.”

My eyes close in frustration. How could she be so stupid? I reach out, silently requesting him to hand me the *proof*.

The envelope slides into my palm, and I open my eyes reluctantly.

“Another thing.”

My stare penetrates his skull, my irritation bubbling under my skin.

“Alessia approached me recently and requested all contact information for Diego Greco, address included. The photos in your hand include ones of her in New York City. Entering Diego’s home.”

I clear my throat. “Is Caruso aware of their relationship?” Whatever it may be.

“Not to my knowledge, boss.”

I flick through the pictures, the first few of CJ Lincoln and my sister greeting one another with a warm embrace. The next few are stills captured from security footage in Lincoln Tower. CJ closing the blinds in his office, ensuring complete privacy.

They could be explained. I know they’re still dealing with the clusterfuck of Charles Lincoln’s will.

The following images, however, leave little room for argument.

My sister and Diego at her house, *and* his. She flew to New York City without my fucking knowledge to visit her little fuckboy. There are photos of them in a forest, him wearing a mask, but his identity is unmistakable. One of him carrying her, their stare caught in an intimacy no one has any business looking in on. And then there's the kiss. Alessia's skirt is torn, and the rose bush at the front of her home is trampled by their feet. Diego's hand holds her throat roughly, his teeth pulling at her bottom lip in a caress that bleeds unhinged lust—an obsession he's overcome by. I could argue this has been all against her will, but looking at the wanton need on her face diminishes that reasoning before it begins.

I blow out a long breath, throwing the pictures onto my desk. Leaning back heavily in my chair, I rub a hand over my chin. "Is Narciso aware of the unrest among our men?"

Doubtful, my second-in-command is as loyal as they come. If he were aware of any disharmony, I would know by now.

Amadeo shakes his head. "No, boss. Not to my knowledge. I keep my ear very low to the ground. Their chatter has been very hushed up until this point. But their anger grows. A few of the older, widowed soldiers believe they're an obvious choice for marriage. She's..."

"Not pure," I surmise.

"Exactly, boss."

I think for only a moment. "I want names of the family members talking shit about my sister. They're not only disrespecting *my* family, they're outwardly undermining their fucking consiglieri. There will be consequences."

“Of course. You’ll have that information by the end of the day.”

I tap my fingers against my desk. “Bring Narciso up to speed on everything, but tell him I’ll be handling this personally.”

Grabbing my phone, I activate the speaker system in the house. “Caterina,” I speak into the mouthpiece, my voice echoing through the cavernous walls of my house. “Come to my office.”

Amadeo’s eyebrows are pushed toward his hairline. “That’s convenient.” He smiles.

I switch off the system. “Not particularly. She won’t do as requested.”

He looks confused.

“My future wife hasn’t spoken a single word to me since I came home. There is no way she’ll voluntarily wander into the lion’s den merely because she’s been summoned.”

He stands to leave. “I’ll be in contact.”

I don’t bother saying goodbye.

“Salvatore,” Amadeo calls before walking through the door. “I took it upon myself to research who sourced these photos, you know, to work out who is having her followed. I hope that’s okay.”

I dip my chin. “Who?”

“Your mother.”

Shock clamps itself around my spine, but I keep my face impassive.

“I like Alessia,” Amadeo says. “I think she’s integral to our outfit and its strength. I know I don’t need to tell you that her own mother undermining her is causing more problems for her authority than she already battles. Your mother is making her look dispensable when she’s not.”

I swallow the acid climbing up my throat. “You can go.”

He leaves without another word.

I know you’re supposed to love your mother, but fuck, that woman inches closer and closer to death every day. The way she despises her only daughter causes Alessia more hurt than she lets on. But putting her in harm’s way has put her directly in my sights, and after everything my sister and I have put up with over the years, her punishment will have to be inventive.



I WANDER through the house lazily, knowing exactly where to find her.

The library door is closed, and I open it quietly. If she hears me, she doesn’t let on. She lies on the three-seater sofa in the center of the room, both legs thrown over the backrest, the thumbnail of one hand caught between her teeth, the other hand holding an e-reader of sorts, a small smile playing at her lips.

“What are you reading?”

Her body locks solid, and she slowly places the e-reader face down on her chest, twisting her head to locate me in the room.

I tap my ear, gesturing to her headphones. “Not noise canceling, then?”

She sits up, sliding the headphones from her ears to around her neck.

Everything about her is delicate. The way she moves, the features on her face, and the petite curves of her body.

“I called for you.”

“You summoned me. I’m not one of your soldiers.”

I let my eyes slide over her body purposely. “No. You’re not.”

She scowls, and I move farther into the room.

“You didn’t answer my question.” I point at the small device resting in her lap.

“A book.”

I smile.

“What’s it about?”

“If you need this room...” She stands. “I’ll find another spot to read.”

“I need to talk to you.”

She eyes me warily. “About what?”

“Diego Greco.”

She sits back down. “What about him?”

I move toward the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, running my hand over the spines of the books as I walk. “All these books and you read on an e-reader. Isn’t part of the experience to feel the heaviness in your hand and the smell of the pages?”

“Physical books aren’t for reading. Their spines get cracked and their pages worn.”

I tip my bottom lip out in consideration. “That means they’re loved. You can’t be loved without feeling its broken effects a time or two.”

“Plus, those books aren’t what I like to read.”

I turn toward her. “What do you like to read?”

“Diego is quiet,” she says instead. “Loyal. Protective.”

I wait, but she says nothing further. “That’s it?”

She shrugs. “I said he’s quiet, which means he doesn’t talk much. I don’t know him very well.”

“Girlfriends,” I prompt. “Hobbies.”

“He had a girlfriend years ago, but then her father arranged her marriage, and to my knowledge, she and Diego ended. I don’t know anything about what he does in his spare time.”

I nod.

“I do know that he never wants to get married.” She stares at me for a beat. “Might be the smartest thing I’ve ever heard.” With that, she stands and leaves, not offering me the courtesy of saying goodbye.



THE ELEVATOR to the top floor of Lincoln Tower is quicker than I expected, and I stand to full height as the doors slide open.

I stroll from the metal box, taking in my surroundings. I've been here once before when negotiating my sister's union with Charles Lincoln. It doesn't take a genius to assume his eldest son would have commandeered his corner office upon his demise.

The receptionist opens her mouth to speak as I meander past her but thinks better of it, closing it again without saying a word.

CJ's office door is closed, and I open it without knocking.

He looks up from his computer, his words of reprimand pausing on his lips when he sees me.

"Bianchi, I'm busy."

"Good to see you too, Charles."

He smiles sourly. "Charles was my father's name."

I kick the door closed behind me, moving toward the bar cart beside the leather sofa without an invitation. Lifting the first decanter to sniff the amber liquid, I tip my lips in appreciation. I pour myself a sizable nip.

"Do you think parents adopt stupid nicknames like CJ after they realize naming their child after themselves is the dumbest fucking thing in the world? One moment, Mama Lincoln screams the name Charles while your dad's cock slams inside her, and the next minute, she's cooing the same name while pinching your chubby baby cheeks."

"Is there a point to your visit?"

I move to sit down but pause. "Was it this couch that you fucked my sister on, or that one?" I point at the leather settees.

"What the fuck?"

His reaction was appropriately shocked, so I can surmise the rumors have no truth.

I sit down, and he stands.

Pouring a drink, he walks back to his desk, leaning against it.

He waits quietly, sipping his drink and watching me.

“Alessia was here recently, blinds closed, door locked.”

He lifts a brow.

“If you’re fucking her—”

“I’m not.” He cuts me off.

“Why was she here?”

He smirks. “We’re family.”

I laugh softly. “I don’t have time for games.”

“And I don’t have the patience for disrespect,” he bites back. “You waltz into my office without an invitation, accusing me of god knows fucking what and demanding information about a situation that has nothing to do with you. You don’t scare me, Salvatore. I run a billion-dollar enterprise, and I’m threatened daily by men who have more of a vested interest in my demise than you. So tell me what you need or leave. As I said, I’m busy.”

I’ve always liked CJ, and I know Alessia does too.

“Vested interest is very different to having the stomach and means for murder.”

Mirth hits his eyes. “I’m more at risk of being shot by a stranger on the street than you.”

“Is that so?”

“You’re on parole. Security cameras track the entire building and its surroundings. If you wanted to kill me, Bianchi, you’re not stupid enough to do it here.”

I look at my drink, turning the crystal tumbler in my hand. “What were you and Alessia meeting about?”

He sighs, placing his whiskey on his desk to cross his arms over his chest. “Shouldn’t you be speaking to Alessia directly about this?”

“She’s my next visit.” I swallow the last of my drink, sliding my glass onto the coffee table.

I lean back into the sofa, crossing my ankle over my knee.

“My father’s will has stipulations. I want a way around them.”

Alessia mentioned this to me already.

“Stipulations?” I ask dumbly.

“Alessia currently holds controlling power over our business until she dies or remarries.”

I growl low in my throat. “What else?”

“Alessia has the power to sign everything back to me as long as I meet certain conditions.”

“Such as?”

“If I fall in love.”

I frown. “What?”

“My father was a sick son-of-a-bitch. He wants me to find happiness, apparently.”

“How does that involve Alessia?”

“I asked her to marry me.”

I wasn't expecting that.

"We're friends. It's only a matter of time before you force her to marry some other geriatric to solidify power. I thought my solution was a win-win for us both."

"She didn't see it that way?"

He shakes his head. "Nope."

My brow furrows, and my mind wanders. Why the fuck would she reject a proposal like this without discussing it with me first? CJ's right. It's a win-win. Our relationship with the Lincoln conglomerate remains secure, and she saves herself from any future need for her to marry.

It has to be this Greco kid. Diego is the only roadblock I can think of. The young capo is tapping my sister right under my fucking nose. *Fucking hell*. Out of anyone she could have tied herself to, she chooses a capo from another fucking outfit. I'm going to kill him. I'll gut him like a fucking fish and carve his face up until it's unrecognizable. And if Caruso bats a single fucking eyelash, I'll declare war on New York City. The audacity to come into my fucking territory and pretend we're *friendly* only to disgrace my sister in her own goddamn city and treat her like a fucking whore instead of the *boss* she is. I'll kill them all.

"Why are you here, Bianchi?"

I look at CJ. "Ranks are circling," I tell him honestly. "They want her married."

He tips his head back, the groan of disgust and frustration echoing toward the ceiling.

"You'd marry her?"

He looks me dead in the eye. "In a heartbeat."

I stare at him.

“I love her. Not intimately. But I love her.”

I stand. “That’s as much as anyone can hope for in our world. Let me talk to her.”

I’ve reached his office door when he calls my name. I glance over my shoulder.

“Next time you want to see me, make an appointment. My time is more expensive than yours.”

I flip him off as I walk through the door.

CHAPTER TWELVE

ALESSIA



I'm shredding chicken to add to my salad when my front door handle rattles. A loud knock follows. "Alessia." Salvatore's voice carries through the door, and I move toward it.

I flick the three locks Diego installed—overkill, in my opinion, necessary in his—and open the door.

"Why the fuck is the door locked?" My brother kisses my cheek and brushes past me.

"I had my security systems redone. The lock mechanisms are automatic."

"What if there's a fire?"

I walk back into the kitchen. "I'll break a window. Do you want lunch? I'm making a chicken salad."

"If you throw that chicken and salad between two slices of bread, sure, I'll take two."

I sigh but retrieve a loaf of bread.

He busies himself with my coffee machine. "Espresso?"

"Please."

We work in silence and eat in the same way. His visit isn't unusual, but his demeanor is out of sorts. We spend a lot of

time together, and conversation always flows effortlessly between us.

He finishes eating before I do and pushes his plate away. “What happened to your roses?”

“My what?” I pause with my fork at my lips.

“The rose bush outside your front door. The flowers are gone.”

Oh, Diego Greco trampled them when chasing me through my house in a mask.

I shrug nonchalantly. “They’re seasonal. I had to replant.”

He looks around my living and dining area, his gaze snagging on the new coffee and side table Diego had replaced after breaking into my home.

An observant Salvatore is the *last* thing I need right now.

“Everything okay?” I bring his attention back to me.

Heaviness has settled on his shoulders, and he rolls them to release the coil of tension. He’s frowning, which isn’t unusual for my twin brother, but worry creases in prominent lines around his eyes.

“I have a matter I would like your advice on.” He shifts his chair backward, giving himself room to cross one leg over the other. He picks at the invisible lint on his dark pants.

I put my fork down. “Of course.”

Dragging his bottom lip into his mouth, he’s quiet for a moment. “I have a ranking member keeping secrets.”

That piques my interest, and my concerns about Salvatore looking too closely at my new furniture abate immediately. “What kind of secrets?”

“They’re flaunting their affairs across the country.”

Confusion settles on my face, and I’m quiet as I consider what he’s said and how I should respond. “We don’t tend to concern ourselves with extracurricular affairs of family members.”

He dips his chin in silent agreement but says nothing further.

Salvatore doesn’t talk in riddles. He speaks with full transparency and is known for his directness. He demands the same within his outfit. Yet he’s skirting around the issue he has brought to me, and it tells me everything I need to know. He’s uncertain, and my brother is never anything but absolute.

The ranking member causing disharmony is someone he trusts, and he trusts *very* few people in this world. For obvious reasons.

“Narciso?” I test. “Because if he’s fucking around on Elizabeth, I will personally castrate him.”

He shakes his head. “Not Narciso.”

“Salvatore.” I sigh. “Tell me what’s going on.”

“I came here to ask you the same fucking thing.” He’s shifted from contemplative to furious in a blink of an eye. The leg crossed over his knee has moved, both feet planted on the floor, his elbows braced on my dining table, his face looming as close as he can manage with the inanimate object between us.

My brows kiss with surprise, and I rear my head back. “*Me?*”

His jaw ticks in anger. “Tell me why I’m dealing with disharmony *within* my ranks because of the fuck buddies you

choose to keep.”

“Watch your tone when you speak to me,” I grit through my teeth.

His eyes darken with rage.

My chest heaves with fury.

“How dare you come into my home and accuse me of something so preposterous? How dare you come into my home and speak to me with such blatant disrespect,” I yell.

“How dare *I*?” he bellows. “How dare I come here with questions? How dare *you* undermine what we’re building for a quick fuck?”

Anger might have claimed me, but hurt pulsates through my chest. My brother has *never* spoken to me with such animosity. He’s never looked me in the eye with censure and disgust.

“I have photos, Alessia,” he grits, fighting to regain control of his ire. “Black and white fucking stills delivered to my office of you with not only CJ Lincoln but *Diego fucking Greco* as well!” he roars.

Fuck.

I stand, unsure what else to do. A single heartbeat and sweat clings to my skin. My stomach churns, my lunch begging to come back up. I swallow, ignoring the way I’m shaking.

Fuck.

I pick up my bowl and reach for Salvatore’s plate.

He grabs my wrist.

“Take your hands off me. To the world, I may sit beneath you, but you and I know the fucking truth. I am your equal. Your twin fucking sister, and you know damn well what happened to the last Bianchi who laid his hands on me.”

He releases my wrist, holding his hand up in surrender. “We’re threatening one another now?” He speaks quietly, but I can taste the hurt in his words.

I yank my arm away, picking up his plate and storming into the kitchen.

“I paid CJ a visit.”

I drop the dishes into the sink, the sound echoing through my house. Hands braced on the kitchen counter, I inhale deeply. “If you hurt him...”

“I know you’re not fucking CJ, Alessia.”

I breathe a sigh of relief.

“I know that,” he emphasizes his point. “But the rest of the family doesn’t. They see what they want to see.”

“I don’t care.” I turn my back.

His chair moves, and his footsteps move slowly into the kitchen. He stands across from me with his arms crossed over his chest and feet shoulder width apart.

He’s preparing for battle.

“You have to care, Alessia. You’re right. We’re equals, which means this family is as much yours as it is mine. So you understand that disquiet only gives opportunities to threat.”

I want to refute him, but I can’t.

“I know you’re not fucking CJ,” he repeats. “But I do believe you are fucking Caruso’s guy.”

“Well, I’m not,” I state indignantly.

Eyes closed over in irritation, Salvatore inhales deeply. “If you’re not fucking him.” He opens his eyes. “I move to my first instinct.”

He’s quiet, and I scowl.

“Which is?”

“If you’re not fucking, I cross lust off my concise list of reasons why you’re flying across the country to see a twenty-four-year-old mafioso who, by my understanding, you’ve *only* just met. The only thing as potent as lust is fear. You’re entangled because it’s the safest option. He’s blackmailing you,” he declares. “Which means he *knows*, Alessia, and I’m going to kill him.”

Panic strangles me, and all I can do is shake my head.

I should come clean and admit that I, too, thought Diego knew our secret, but I was wrong. He’s oblivious. Our connection is one fucked-up coincidence, and short of telling my twin brother that I enjoy being chased through a forest by a masked man, none more so than Diego Greco, I don’t know what to do.

“No? Then tell me what the fuck is happening.”

I don’t know, I want to scream.

But I can’t tell him that, so I choose my silence.

“You need to marry.”

My heart stutters in my chest. *No*.

“Absolutely not.” I find my voice, proud at how strong it sounds. “I did that, Salvatore. I’ve paid my dues.”

Confusion scores along my brother's face, and he pinches the bridge of his nose. "Alessia, don't act like a fool. You were born into the life. You're one of the most powerful members of our family. You know better than anyone that your argument is a load of shit."

I shake my head. Tears sting my eyes.

"If this were anyone else, you, as my adviser, would have already picked out a suitor."

"I don't want to do it," I whisper. *I lived through one loveless marriage. I don't think my heart can do it a second time*, I don't add.

He rubs a hand down his face. "You think *I* want to get married? No one in our fucking world *wants* a husband or a wife. The men demand it because they believe a wife is their right, and the women remain agreeable because they believe it's their duty."

"Then change it," I implore. "*We* can change that."

He growls. "As archaic as it is, it's required. Power, respect, and advantage are built with well-placed nuptials. We haven't overcome what we have to step away from the power we hold over Chicago, Alessia."

I turn my back on him, shoving our dirty dishes into the dishwasher and slamming it shut.

"Why did you deny CJ's proposal?"

"That sniveling rat, I'll keep his company on principle now." I turn back to face him.

An almost smirk touches Salvatore's lips.

I sigh. "Many reasons."

“Explain them.”

“He’s my stepson. It’s unsavory.”

He scowls. “For fuck’s sake, Alessia. You can’t be serious?”

I remain quiet.

“No one believes you loved Charles *or* that Charles loved you.”

Salvatore just stabbed me right in the fucking heart, and whether he’s oblivious to his attack or careless to my pain, I hate him a little more all the same.

“You and CJ make much more sense to the world.”

I avert my eyes, playing with a button on my jacket. “Grace is in love with him.”

“Sorry?”

I lift my head. “Grace is in love with him.” I speak clearly, enunciating every word. “With CJ.”

“Who the fuck is Grace?”

I’m disappointed. While I’ve spent years blaming myself for the harm and heartbreak our family forced upon the Snow family, Salvatore moved on with little regard. “Lucy’s sister.”

He pinches the bridge of his nose. “You are being moronic. I’m not in the business of shielding people from broken hearts, and neither are you. I don’t give a flying fuck if Grace wants to sit on CJ’s cock.”

“We’ve taken enough from that family,” I whisper. “I won’t take her chance of happiness away too.”

“*We* didn’t do anything. I won’t take on Edoardo’s sins. You shouldn’t either.” He blows out an exasperated breath.

“You can’t see reason right now. I can’t trust your judgment.” He looks positively broken by the statement. “Who the fuck are you right now?”

He walks from the kitchen, making his way to the front door. “Cease contact with Diego Greco. *Immediately*. You’re lying to me about something, and I don’t know what his game is. I don’t fucking trust him. He’s a fucking dead man for whatever he thinks he knows. He’s now a greater risk to Chicago than the advantage any union could promise to build. You’ll marry CJ Lincoln. I won’t hear anymore on the matter.”

He’s a dead man.

“I love him,” I yell out in panic, and my brother’s feet pause.

Fuck.

What am I doing? I’ve never lied to my brother. *Never*. I’ve kept things from him and omitted small details about *my* life that do not affect our business. But I’ve never outwardly lied. Until this very moment.

“I love him,” I repeat more calmly.

Salvatore turns.

“Diego,” I choke out. “We’re involved. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. I should have said something when it started. I wanted to make sure it was real. I love him.”

He stares at me, and my deceit bubbles deep within my gut.

What am I doing?

Saving Diego’s life, I tell myself.

Protecting Grace’s heart, I argue.

Keeping my promise to Charles, I conclude.

It's a little white lie that will forever alter multiple lives, but deceit can't be condemned if it's forged in righteousness. I just hope Diego sees it that way.

Men in our world pick their wives all the time. If I'm being forced into matrimony again, why can't I do the same? Diego is my safest bet.

I think.

I hope.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

DIEGO



I pause on the threshold of Lorenzo's office. My face gives nothing away, but concern settles in my stomach, and I despise the feeling. I like control. I live it every day. I don't let any situation panic me. I take in the threat and react after careful consideration. Deliberation may take five seconds or five days. It's all dependent on the urgency of the risk staring me down. I act calmly, never leaving room for error.

The split second of hesitation has shown too much to the three men before me, and even though I would trust each of them with my life, my strength is my obscurity. The fewer people who can read me, the safer I am in the world I've built my home.

"Door open or closed?"

"Open. Gabriella isn't home."

It's no secret that Lorenzo Caruso doesn't keep secrets from his wife. His ambiguous comment, therefore, tells me more about this meeting than I knew only seconds ago. It revolves around me and only me.

Dipping my chin, I take the only seat left in the room, directly across from Lorenzo.

The room has been renovated since I was last here. Granted, the last time I stepped foot in Lorenzo's office, the windows had been shattered by gunfire, and two bloodied and lifeless bodies decorated the carpet.

The flooring has been replaced, the walls repainted, and the windows repaired.

Vincent sits on the large sofa on the edge of the room, one ankle resting on his knee, his elbow leaning on the armrest, and his head resting against his palm. His middle finger moves back and forth over his bottom lip in quiet contemplation.

Leonardo has taken the seat beside the one I've just settled myself, his chin lifting in greeting. I ignore him.

"I need you to go to Chicago." Lorenzo puts me out of my misery and starts talking almost immediately.

I work to hide the tremor of anticipation that slides through my body when he mentions Chicago. But Lorenzo smirks, so I know I didn't hide it well enough. My guard has lowered too much around him. My loyalty to the boss is fucking with my head, and I roll my shoulders in irritation at the realization.

"Of course." I clear my throat.

Leaning back in his chair, he pinches his bottom lip with his thumb and forefinger. "You'll be making wedding arrangements."

I sit up straighter, ignoring the mirth that dances along Leonardo's face. "Sorry?"

"Did I mumble?"

My jaw clenches, and it takes everything I have inside not to grind my teeth. "Wedding arrangements?" I echo his words. "For who?"

“You,” he answers easily.

My clothes are too tight, and sweat dots the nape of my neck. I lean forward. “What?”

“The one-word responses are already starting to grate on my last nerve. I know you hate talking, Diego, but fuck, say what you mean to say.”

I glance at Vincent, then back at Lorenzo. “I don’t understand what is happening.”

“You’re planning your wedding.” Leonardo laughs, and I want to take the knife he’s forever playing with and stab it into his jugular. “I thought Enzo made that pretty clear.”

I growl. “Who and why?”

“Ah.” Lorenzo claps his hands together, the smile on his face too manic to be joyful. “Your blushing bride is Alessia Bianchi.”

“*Sia?*”

“Aw. He calls her Sia—so cute,” Leonardo teases.

I stare at him directly in the eyes.

“He’s planning your murder,” Vincent murmurs.

“It’s his love language,” Leonardo responds.

I ignore them both as they continue talking shit. “Am I allowed to ask how this came about?” I ask Lorenzo, my voice quieter than I wished it.

Lorenzo frowns. “You tell me, Diego. Tell me why the boss of the fucking outfit, who I’m working to keep on our side, called me, raging at the fact that one of my capos is fucking his sister. In his fucking town, right under his fucking nose.”

Fuck.

I shake my head. “I’m not. We’re not.”

“Not what?” he spits. “Involved? Fucking her? Explain it, Diego. You put your hand up for every errand that lands you in Chicago. You take personal time, and Leonardo, remind me where he goes?”

“Oh, that would be Chicago.”

“You’re having me followed?”

The air in the room has changed. Lorenzo’s impatience is taking up too much space. “Don’t insult me like that. I know where my guys are at all times.”

I rub a hand over my shorn head. “It’s not like that,” I argue weakly. “It’s not what you think.”

“It wasn’t like that when I was head over dick for Gabriella either.”

Vincent makes a warning noise in his throat, but the boss ignores him.

“It also wasn’t like that when Vincent *helped* the family by marrying Bianca.”

My thumb brushes against my nostril, and I deny him, my head shaking.

Lorenzo slides an envelope toward me. “Open it.”

My fists clench. “*Lorenzo.*”

“Open. It.”

Sighing, I grab the envelope from his desk, ripping it open to pull out a collection of photographs.

They’re all of Sia and me.

“We’re talking.” I flick through each of them, all stills of us caught in conversation. “I didn’t realize that was against Bianchi’s rules.”

“Keep going.”

I swallow.

“Oh, that’s cute,” Leonardo teases. “Look at you carrying her, scary mask on your face and all.”

The night she sprained her ankle on our second hunt. The night I knew I could never let her go because my mind was broken, a large section sliced open and claimed by the red-haired beauty. But it was supposed to be on my terms, a possession I held that no one else knew about.

I look at Lorenzo, and he flicks his index finger, silently telling me to continue. I drop them back to his desk when I get to the final shot.

“That’s my favorite,” Leonardo comments. “Your hand on her throat, your teeth claiming her bottom lip. The eye contact. If you’re not fucking her, Diego, your dick thinks otherwise.”

I growl, but it only encourages his stupidity.

“I did my research. *Sia* goes by *Red Treasure*. That means you’re not supposed to touch her, Diego.” He *tsks* me. “You dirty rule breaker.”

“Do you ever stop talking?”

Vincent laughs, and Leonardo winks.

Lorenzo scowls at his younger brother. “I need Salvatore on our side if shit goes down with the Irish. But I don’t fucking trust him. He killed his father and his father’s successor. His loyalty is as secure as Leonardo’s celibacy.”

“Fuck you,” his brother snipes.

“Be my eyes in his house.”

I sit back in my chair, my hand rubbing roughly against the unshaven line of my jaw. “You’re asking me to pledge my life to a family to *spy*?”

“I’m not asking. I’m giving you a direct order,” he corrects me. “And, no, I’m not telling you to tie yourself to someone you despise to *spy*. You like this woman, Diego. You wouldn’t offer to go to Chicago as often as you do if you didn’t. I believe you when you tell me that you haven’t fucked her, which means you fucking feel something for her. All that aside, your union offers us an in with Bianchi. You’ll be married to his fucking *consigliera*. I don’t need his diary, but I want some dirt I can use if I ever need it. If you happen to find that while you’re fucking his sister, I’d say we both win.”

“They’ll kill me if I double-cross them.”

His bottom lip tips out in consideration. “He could kill you for disrespecting his family by dishonoring his sister.”

I open my mouth to speak but stop myself.

“You promised me your loyalty, Diego, and you have mine in return. But when you back yourself into a corner, certain deals with the devil must be made.”

“I thought you were the devil,” I embarrass myself by saying.

He smiles. “Even the devil is limited in power when you put your dick inside someone’s sister.”

He avoids Vincent’s stare when he says that, and I can’t say I blame him.

“I’m not fucking—”

“No,” he cuts me off. “But you want to, and considering you’re about to marry her, I guarantee you will.”

Denial sits heavy in my mind, but I can’t form words or reason. I was never under any preconceived notion that I’d fall in love and marry the traditional way. But I did envision having more freedom with the decision. If I’m being honest, I had hoped I’d be useful enough to Lorenzo as a nomad that he may have considered letting me remain single forever.

“Alessia.” I make sure to say her full name. “Wouldn’t want this. She’s a fucking consiglieria. She has more freedom in this decision.”

“Alessia,” Lorenzo all but purrs her name, “is the person responsible for this union. She confessed your love to Salvatore. You’re right, Diego. She is a fucking consiglieria and seemingly has you in her sights.”

My brow furrows. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“It doesn’t have to.”

I wait a beat, swallowing the roar of anger that has constricted my throat. “If there is nothing else.”

Lorenzo dips his chin, and I stand to leave. I’ve made it to the door when he stops me. “Diego,” he calls, and my nostrils flare in irritation. I don’t turn around.

“Maybe you want this more than your ego lets you believe. You never once said no and didn’t even consider asking for a way out of it.”

I turn then, but he holds up a hand to stop me from speaking.

“Don’t insult me by telling me you didn’t think that was an option. We’ve worked together long enough. You have your

own moral compass and personal limits, and you express them when you feel it's necessary. The idea of marrying Alessia does not repulse you, and that should tell you enough.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ALESSIA



We chose Salvatore's sprawling mansion for our wedding venue. Or I did. Diego hasn't spoken to me since Salvatore told me he was made aware of our upcoming nuptials. I tried to call and explain, but he wouldn't answer. I considered turning up at his home, but in the end, I decided the least I could offer him was space.

I haven't seen him since I left his Brooklyn apartment over a month ago. I can't be sure he'll turn up today. I could be left standing at an altar in a white dress with no groom. Fuck, my haters would love that. The men in our ranks who continue to wait for me to fail or fall would celebrate the humiliation.

Security crawls over Salvatore's home—men in black suits and earpieces with cautious eyes and tension in their shoulders. The only people approved to carry weapons. Guests were forbidden. Nothing screams a *family* wedding more than gunfire after too many drinks between rivals.

Sipping my champagne, I stare at the wedding dress hanging on the back of the bedroom door so hard that my eyes blur. It's a beautiful dress with a sweetheart off-shoulder cut that showcases my ample cleavage. The bodice is lace, the skirt a silk chiffon. It hugs my generous curves. My red hair has been styled in an updo consisting of at least a million and

one bobby pins that will take me hours to remove. I did my makeup, wanting to feel as much myself today as possible.

A soft knock on the door pulls my watery gaze from the dress, and I clear my throat. "Come in."

Salvatore steps through, smiling softly. "Aren't you supposed to be dressed?"

I shrug. "It's common for a bride to be fashionably late. You look handsome."

He glances down at himself. "I dress like this every day."

I smile warmly. "You always look handsome."

"Are you okay?"

"Have you seen him?"

Is he here?

He nods, pouring himself a glass of champagne and swallowing the whole glass in one gulp. "He's standing far enough away that no one can talk to him, glaring at the guests."

Relief settles through me.

"So acting normal for him."

I smile.

"Are you sure you want to do this, Alessia?" he asks. "None of this sits right with me. There is more going on than you are telling me. I'm certain of it."

"*This* doesn't sit right with you, but me marrying an eighty-year-old man did?"

"I knew he wouldn't hurt you."

I smile sadly. "Diego won't hurt me."

“Looking at you, I think he already has.”

I tighten the tie of my silk dressing gown. “What do you mean?”

“I’m not an idiot, Alessia. I know you’re not in love with Diego. But you have feelings toward him. Men like him can’t feel what you want him to. You know that, right? You knew Charles would never love you, and you were content with that because you would never love him either. I think you could love Diego. What happens if he can’t feel it back?”

My beautifully insightful brother. I stand, leaning up on my tiptoes to kiss his cheek. “I’ll be fine.”

“I don’t want you to be fine. I want you to be happy. You deserve to be happy.”

The thickness in my throat stops my ability to swallow, so I turn away from him, moving toward my dress. “I need to get dressed. I’ve made him wait long enough.”

“Alessia.”

“I love you, Salvatore. Thank you for giving me this. I know your preference was CJ.”

He sighs. “I’ll wait for you outside the door.” He pauses. “I love you, too. I’m sorry you have to do this again.”

I can’t acknowledge his words because my throat has closed in emotion.

He closes the door softly behind him, and I refuse to give in to my tears the way they long me to. I inhale deeply, exhale purposely, and blink rapidly.



PINK and white roses have been placed in a messy formation along the grass. They're softer than the grass under my pearl Jimmy Choos, and I mourn their beauty as they wilt beneath every step Salvatore and I take down the aisle.

Diego keeps his back to us the entire time, staring past the priest and into nothing as he waits. His black suit fits every angle of his body, and the tension in his frame is palpable to every person watching him. His hands sit fisted at his sides, and I wish I'd had the chance to apologize to him before this unfolded.

Salvatore kisses each of my cheeks when he reaches the end of our path, and Diego turns.

He's so handsome. Somber features and disapproving lines make me want to reach out and soothe his irritation. Only I know I'm the one responsible for the look on his face.

He dips his chin at my brother, then turns the full force of his gaze on me. A bite of lust hoods his eyes as he takes me in, but it doesn't warm the flat line of his mouth. His jaw still tics with anger as he reaches for my hand and brings me onto the platform where we'll become husband and wife.

"Diego," I whisper, but the priest begins speaking, and I'm left to apologize with my eyes.

I recite the words the priest tells me to, and Diego does the same. I slide an onyx ring onto his finger, and he flexes his hand, uncomfortable at the feeling. I want to cry, but I refrain.

Goose bumps break over my skin when he lifts my hand. He shows no reaction and slides not one but two rings onto my finger. First, a gold band with round sculpted diamonds across the entire circumference. Each diamond shares prongs with the one beside it, the brilliance of each cut shining with perfection. It's exquisite. But it's the next ring that robs my breath. The gold band is centered with an internally flawless cushion diamond that must be at least three carats. A pear-shaped purple sapphire sits on either side of the exquisite rock, and I look up at him in surprise.

He meets my eyes, and fire burns deep in his pupils.

He chose or designed this ring so I'd know what I'd tied myself to.

Purple.

Indigo.

The cape that promises no rules.

Diego Greco just branded me with a color that opens me up to be hunted in a way that gives him full access to whatever he desires.

And I let him.

I stare at the rings in shock. He would've spent well into six figures on the shackles now forever branded onto my hand. I don't know whether to be petrified or impressed.

The rest of the ceremony passes through my ears with a hollow echo. Then the priest pronounces us man and wife, and the single kiss we've shared slams into the forefront of my mind with the ferocity of a punch to the gut. I've daydreamed about his lips. But this is different. Over a hundred people are watching, and this kiss won't be of Diego's free will. He's

been forced to press his mouth against mine in a kiss that will signal our new forever.

I expect him to place a chaste kiss on my lips, tasting his acidity before his lips are close enough to feel. But he shocks me when he steps into my body, placing his newly ringed hand against the side of my neck, resting his thumb against my chin.

“Big mistake, Sia.” He pulls at my chin, opening my mouth before slamming his lips to mine in a soaring kiss that leaves no room for debate. My new husband has threat on his tongue and danger in his eyes.

I’m fucked.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

DIEGO



I walk a step behind her, hands stuffed into my pockets, my mind racing.

Does she expect me to fuck her?

Do I want to fuck her?

Yes. Of course I do.

But not like this. Not with expectations raining down on me.

She's stunning. I couldn't watch her walk down the aisle, afraid my mind would play tricks on me and convince me that I wanted this. I wanted her. I wanted a fucking *wife*.

My head pounds.

I've killed men. I, myself, have looked death in the eye. I've watched friends die. I've skirted the lines of the law too many times not to have been incarcerated. Yet I've never felt as apprehensive and out of my depth as I do now. All because of a legally binding contract, a circular piece of metal, and a woman who, in the eyes of the world, I now fucking *belong* to.

Her hand tightens on the heavy material of her skirt, lifting it to allow her to walk easier. The move emphasizes the split at

her thigh, and I look away before I'm tempted to do something stupid like touch her.

We shouldn't be here, walking toward the presidential suite of the Four Seasons like a happy couple ready to celebrate their forever. We should be sitting the fuck down to talk about what the hell she was thinking by confessing the ridiculous notion of our love to her brother and forcing us into this predicament.

I want to know why.

But I also don't believe anything would be significant enough to *make* me understand.

I stood by myself the whole reception. The wedding party was in full swing—drinks were flowing, and food was abundant. I despised every moment of the circus. The smiles and laughter looked aimed *at* me and not *for* me. I, a capo of one of the most powerful families in the States, was played like a fucking fool.

Anyone from New York knew me well enough to leave me the hell alone, and anyone from Sia's side gave me a wide berth the moment they took one look at my face. *Fuck off*, it screamed. Thankfully, everyone fucking listened. Even Leonardo, which is a feat in itself.

I watched my new wife the entire time. Every torturous second was spent searing my fury into her profile. I want it tattooed against her temple as a constant reminder of her biggest mistake. I searched every crevice of my brain, trying to understand what unfolded from when she turned up at my house, accusing me of attempting to undermine her family, to now, us legally tied together for eternity.

Alessia Bianchi is a chameleon if I've ever seen one. She has many faces, and she chooses each one with care and consideration. Gone was the formidable leader tonight. My tender prey was also nowhere to be found. Instead, a seemingly glowing-with-happiness bride stood in her place. She laughed and danced and accepted congratulations with a hand to her heart and a soft smile. It was all an act. Her need to avoid me at all costs was the giveaway. She wouldn't even meet my eye.

“What were you talking to CJ Lincoln about?”

She stumbles but rights her footing before I catch her, continuing as though nothing had happened. “Hm?”

Avoidance. Interesting.

“CJ Lincoln, your stepson. What were you talking about?”

She shrugs. “He was congratulating me.”

I grab her arm, swinging her around to face me. “You've lied enough, don't you think?”

She swallows audibly but not in fear or discomfort. She's buying time, thinking about what answer will curb my curiosity.

“I can't do any more fucking lies. You were arguing. About what?”

She brushes a thick lock of auburn hair from her face, tendrils having fallen out as she danced through the night. “CJ asked me to marry him recently. I said no. He was questioning how I ended up married to you.”

My stomach twists with fury, and I choose to ignore why.

“He's in love with you?”

“God no,” she says, flipping a hand in front of her face with easy dismissal. “It’s business. He’s irritated at some conditions of his father’s estate. He assumed I’d help him *fix* them.”

“And you won’t?”

She shakes her head. “No.” She turns, breaking my hold on her arm, and begins her path toward the hotel suite again.

“Why the hotel suite?” I ask. “Surely Salvatore isn’t waiting around to ensure we consummated this farce of a marriage. Not that he’d be able to tell. He knows the ship sailed on your virginity after the first marriage he forced you into, right?”

She ignores me, but her fist clenches at her side, and her shoulders tighten without releasing.

I smile to myself.

I should be telling my wife how beautiful she is and how no bride before her has ever compared. It’s the truth. Sia is a fucking angel to look at. Out of this world exquisite. I’ve never encountered beauty quite like hers. I look at her, and something deep inside me aches with feelings I’ve never felt before. She smiles, and I have to close my eyes to the violent perfection, afraid I’ll do something stupid like beg her to look at me and only me like that for the rest of her existence. Her skin glows, her curves are robust and indulgently enticing. Her body is the sweet sin of sugar, a vice you know will kill you when your gluttonous nature overdoses on the high of succumbing to something so dangerous.

I should be peppering her body with kisses and promises of all the ways I plan to make her come tonight. I’ve thought about it. *Fuck*. I have fantasized about how I’d make her body

bend, quake, and detonate. Instead, I'm purposely baiting her, hating her a little less and myself a little more with every stab that escapes my lips. But I can't stop it.

I'm angry.

I'm fucking furious.

My body and mind might be caught up in all that she is, but something deeper inside me knows this wasn't supposed to be my life.

She should've fucking talked to me first. If she had sat me down and discussed why she needed this to happen, I don't think I would have denied her. But she *played* me. She used me like a fucking pawn in a game I don't know the fucking rules of. Worse, I don't know the aim. I have no goddamn idea what she's trying to achieve.

We arrive at the suite door, and she pulls a key card from her small purse.

My mouth goes dry, and I attempt to swallow.

She enters before me, and all I can think about is there better be booze inside.

My feet freeze when I step into the living area of the apartment.

Rose petals are dusted along the floor, trailing a sensual path into what I can only imagine is the bedroom, and my scowl forms before I can stop it. "What the fuck is this?"

"I—" She begins to speak, but I talk over her.

"You can't be fucking serious."

She stares at me wide-eyed. I wish she'd close her eyes. I can't think straight when the hazel pools of uncertainty and

hope lock on me.

“What are you playing at?” I sneer. “You force me into marriage. You take the one fucking thing I keep for myself—my independence. You plan a fucking circus of a wedding, making me look like the world’s stupidest and most gullible cunt. Everyone laughing at how easy it was for the consiglieria of Chicago to play a capo of New York.” I clap slowly. “Bravo, Alessia. Brav-fucking-o.”

She shakes her head, and I ignore the tears that spring to her eyes.

“Then this? What about our union screams romance? Do I look like a hearts-and-flowers kind of guy to you? Because I’m not. If I had my way, *wife*, I’d pin you down in a forest and fuck you raw for fucking me the way you did. I will never give you this.” I throw a hand out toward the rose petals with disgust at myself, at her. I’m losing it. I’m fucking crumbling under the weight of something I don’t understand, and I’m letting this woman witness it.

I walk away before I give more of myself away.

I walk away before I’m tempted to pause enough to see the pain and regret in her beautiful eyes and do something stupid like comfort her.

I slam the door as I leave, taking a full breath and storming down the corridor, ready to inflict violence.

After a few searches on my phone, I call an Uber and pace out front of the hotel as I wait for it to arrive. The car ride is silent, the driver taking one look at my expression and choosing silence over mindless conversation. Likely saving his life with the way my mood is spiraling.

He pulls to a stop outside the address I gave him, and I exit the vehicle without a word.

No one questions me as I walk into the building and toward the reception. A guy not much older than me smiles serenely. “Can I help you?”

“I’m here to see CJ Lincoln. Tell him it’s Diego Greco, and it’s important.”

He nods once.

Within seconds, he tells me CJ is expecting me and walks me over to a private elevator to take me to the penthouse.

CJ waits just outside the elevator when the doors open. He’s only just arrived home, still dressed in his tuxedo, car keys still in his hand.

“Is Aless—”

I walk forward and slam a fist into his face without preamble.

He stumbles backward.

I wait for him to right himself before clocking him once more.

“What the fuck?” he screams.

“If you ever question my *wife* on why she married me and not you again, I don’t care who you are or how many connections you have, I’ll kill you.”

He stands to full height slowly, rubbing the back of his hand against his broken nose.

“I don’t know what game you’re playing with Alessia,” he starts.

I hold up a hand. “None of your business. Alessia and I are none of your fucking business. Hear me?”

He remains quiet.

“Do. You. Hear. Me?”

He dips his chin once.

I move to leave, stepping into the elevator. He holds his hand against the doors, undisturbed by the blood dripping over his face. “If you hurt her, remember that I have enough money to make sure the world forgets you ever existed.”

I stare at him.

“Do you hear me?”

I remain quiet.

“Do. You. Hear. Me?”

I dip my chin, and he lets go of the elevator doors. “Tell Phillip he’s fired for letting you up.”

I flip him off.



IT’S EARLY AFTERNOON, and I’m counting hundred-dollar bills out in lots of a thousand in preparation for this evening’s poker game in the club. Women dance, shaking their bare asses and perky tits, but I take no notice.

We’re tucked into the back of the club in a booth not visible to the clientele. Leonardo’s supposed to be helping, which means his eyes are set on swinging tits and thongs that

are one move away from showing off some dancer's waxed labia.

As soon as he sees hard nipples, he's like a child begging for candy. Anyone would think he's never seen a pair before. I roll my eyes and make another line on the notepad as I pile another grand away.

When Bruno was killed a few years back for plotting to kill Lorenzo's wife, Lorenzo promoted me in his place. Bruno ran point on our illegal gambling ring. Poorly, I might add. The books were a train wreck, and he'd pissed off so many suppliers and players that it's taken years to build it back up to where it's thriving. When I'm in town, I help out where I can, but Lorenzo knows I'm better placed for work that takes me around the country when he needs a ranking member to take care of business. I've taken to keeping my feet firmly planted in New York City since Alessia Bianchi became Alessia Greco, which means Lorenzo has expected my ass to deal with my charge.

"How's the new wife liking New York?" Leonardo reluctantly turns his attention away from the girl near our table after tucking one of the Benjamin Franklins I'm counting into her underwear.

"Should I tell Enzo you're stealing from the family?"

He flips me off, refilling his glass of bourbon. "You didn't answer my question."

"What?"

"Alessia. New York. Does she like it?"

My lips twist in distaste. "How the fuck am I supposed to know?" Hundreds finished, I tuck the tidy piles into the metal

box on the table and drag the fifty-dollar bills toward me, beginning the same task again.

“I don’t know, ask her?”

“Who said she was in New York?”

His chin hits his neck, and I wish all the women drooling over him in this club would take a look at his two chins to kill their little obsession.

“She hasn’t been here? *At all?*”

I shrug, counting. “Not that I know of.” I band five hundred dollars.

“But you haven’t been to Chicago once in three weeks.”

“What’s your point?”

He pushes the fifty dollar bills out of my hand, and my nostrils flare in anger.

“You’re married, dickface. Why are you avoiding your wife?”

I grab the money again. “Because I never wanted to be fucking married. Make yourself useful and count some fucking money if you’re going to sit here.”

His stare penetrates my skull. “Eighty-six. Twenty-one. Seventy-two. Three. Nine. Fourteen. Twelve. Ten. One hundred and five. Thirty-five. Five.”

My fist clenches, and he smirks.

“You should really ask your wife to suck your dick next time you see her. You’re so wound up and need a release.” His shit-eating grin spreads across his face.

“I could release a bullet into your ball sack.”

“Always thinking about my dick.” He grabs the batch of fifties I just banded and stands. “It’s something we have in common. I, too, am always thinking about my dick. Now, excuse me while I go and tuck these dead presidents into some skimpy waistbands and gift one or more of these women the ride of their life.”

“I hope you catch herpes.”

He pouts. “Don’t be jealous. I’m sure *Sia* would shake that thick ass for you if you asked nicely.”

“Don’t—”

“Don’t talk about my wife like that,” he grumbles, hands on his hips. “Before you go making threats like that to defend her honor, *testa di cazzo*, try acting like her fucking husband.”

With that, he’s gone. I throw the cash I was counting against the table and scratch my fingers roughly over my shorn head.

My phone vibrates against the wooden table, and I retrieve it with a sigh.

To: *dgreco@gmail.com*

From: *inquiry@thequest.com*

Subject: *Red or Gold*

Mr. Greco

Red Treasure has invited you to a single hunt.

Your subject has chosen to wear gold.

The hunt is set to begin at 10 p.m.

Please respond if you wish to accept the invitation.

I stare for so long that my eyes begin to blur.

Your subject has chosen to wear gold.

She's invited me to catch her. To claim victory with my hands on her body.

I pinch my nose in shock.

Why?

An apology. I've ignored my new wife for three weeks, and this is her olive branch. I wish I were a big enough asshole to deny her. I wish I respected us both more to say no.

But I don't, so I accept the invitation without blinking, then stand and rush the few feet over to where Leonardo sits with a dancer perched on his lap.

"I'm needed in Chicago. You'll have to finish up for me."

"Your manners are impeccable, Diego. How could I possibly say no?" He's pissed, but he taps the naked ass of the stripper and sighs sadly as she retreats. "You really are a horrible friend," he says. "I have no idea why I say yes when you beg me to hang out."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

ALESSIA



The night feels darker. The stars hide themselves from sight. The moon is cut like a thin crescent, and I stare up at it, trying to find my bearings.

Our hunt has only just begun, and a sheen of sweat clings to my skin.

At first, I was nervous he would deny me.

Now, I'm skittish with the unexplored notion of who Diego is when you remove his chains.

The gold is an apology, sure. I'm removing my armor so he knows he's not the only one bared in this relationship. I've cornered myself into a trap with a man I know little about. But I've made my bed, and I need to find a way to invite my husband to lie in it with me without expectation or judgment.

The gold is also for me. When I found myself embroiled in The Quest over ten years ago, I believed I did it for Charles. I was trying to please him. I wanted him to love me, whatever that looked like. But as I grew comfortable in the forest, Charles ceased to exist among the trees. A power I have to push forward in my everyday life engulfed me with the simplicity of a red cape. I knew I was being hunted, but *I* felt

in control. I was the shepherd, my hunter nothing more than a sheep.

Until Diego.

His dark mask and elusive style of hunting changed The Quest for me. I *longed* for him to find me. I wanted the snippets of interaction we shared, even if it skirted on breaking the rules. The way he moved, the way he watched me, the way he hunted... It was the first time my control between the trees was questioned. I wasn't a sheep, but I was no longer a shepherd. The game morphed into something else. *I* wanted something else. I craved the day he stepped into the forbidden and claimed me because I wanted to be caught.

By him.

Only him.

I move quietly, moving my sight between the ground and the immediate vicinity. He's not close. I'd feel him if he was. I'm alone, and I'm disappointed and elated all at once. I keep moving slowly. My feet are light, and the fresh air tickles my nose. My hair brushes my naked shoulder blades, and goose bumps break over my skin.

I'd be lying if I said I'm not nervous to see Diego. The last interaction we had was in the presidential suite of the Four Seasons. The hotel had thought they were doing us a favor with the rose petals and champagne. But my new husband took one look at it, and the color completely drained from his face. He masked the shock and discomfort with anger, but I saw the panic in his eyes. Not only had I tricked him into marriage, but he believed I expected him to offer me something he couldn't find within himself. His words hurt me, but I also understood the pain of being launched out of your depth and into a situation that strips your control.

A twig breaks to my right, and I pause, turning my head in that direction. Quiet screams at me, and I roll my shoulders. I'm statue still, afraid to breathe too heavily in case I give my position away. I wait for a full minute before relaxing my stance. I move forward but stop again when heavy footfalls sound to my left. I frown. Diego always hunts quietly. Like a panther, he only gives away his position at the very last second. I shrug away my intrusive thoughts. I'm wearing gold. We're married. The game might be completely different now in all aspects.

I squint into the darkness, making out the silhouette of a body standing beside a tree.

I open my mouth to speak, but it catches in my throat when the breeze of someone's breath touches my neck. I stumble forward and turn quickly.

A man I don't recognize smiles down at me. His hair is reddish brown and slicked back against his scalp, his eyes staring a little too intently at the silk slip that covers my body. Grabbing my cape, I wrap it around my body to shield his leering gaze.

“Who—”

The man from the shadows steps closer, and my head turns left and right, trying to keep my eyesight on them both.

“Who are you?” I manage to say with a voice strong enough to camouflage the way it shakes. “This is private property.”

A third man grabs my shoulder, and I surge forward, removing his grasp. Back against a tree, I'm surrounded by three strangers who smile with sinister intent. I can't see their faces because of the trees' shadows and the moon's limited

light. They also chose one of the few places in the maze that doesn't offer manufactured light.

"Who are you?" I say again, a demand that makes them chuckle.

"Ye bruduh made a mistake sidin' with de likes of Caruso."

His thick Irish brogue is enough to send me into a panic. My throat is dry, and I force myself to swallow.

I slide against the trunk of the tree, freeing the obstacle from the path I need to escape. I know this forest. They don't.

"Whe'r ye goin'?" The same man speaks.

I take a step back.

"Em. I don't tink you should be doin' dat."

No fucking shit, asshole. But I'm outnumbered—three to one. Running is my best chance.

I turn and begin running. I move between the trees, my heart thundering in my chest.

"Diego!" I scream.

I can feel the men right on my heels. My feet pound against the earth, and I ignore the sharp pain that hits when I step on a broken stick or a sharp rock. The skin of my legs and arms catch on the bark of trees as I rocket past them, slicing into my flesh.

"Diego!" I yell again, hoping like hell he can hear me wherever he is in this fucking maze of trees.

I can't let myself get lost on how these men found me. My focus remains on the pattern of brush before me. I zigzag between trees and jump over logs. My deafening heartbeat is

drowned out by the heaviness in my breath. But the footfalls behind me are what have me pushing faster and faster.

“Diego!”

There is terror in my voice, and I hate it. I hate that these Irish assholes chasing me down know how fucking scared I am.

Fuck.

“Alessia,” one of them calls, and I strangle the sob in my throat by biting my bottom lip.

I glance over my shoulder, trying to ascertain how close they are when I run full speed into something solid. For a split second, I think it’s a tree until its hands grab my biceps and squeeze.

“Gotcha.”

A broken whimper breaks through my clamped lips. “I will kill each and every one of you.”

They laugh.

It’s not the first time a group of men have laughed at me, but it’s the first time I’ve wanted to cry at the humiliation and panic of it all.

“Diego!” I try again, but the stutter in his name stops it from echoing into the night like I need it to.

“Yer man won’t find ye in time.”

The man holding me lets my arms go to brush his hand down my cheek, and I spit in his face. He backhands me, and I let the impact throw me to the ground. Crab crawling backward, I move until my palm finds a solid rock.

Standing slowly, I eye the three men surrounding me, then throw the rock with every ounce of power. It connects with the jaw of the man closest to me, and he growls.

“Cunt!”

I lean down and pick up as big of a branch as I can manage. “Fuck off,” I screech.

“We woulda left yer alone, Bianchi. But ye hadta align wit’ New York. We gotta senda message, and we’re gonna use you to do dat.”

I shake my head.

“You tink ye little stick will stop us?”

“I will hunt your whole fucking family down,” I vow, my lips twisting in rage. “I will kill everyone important to you.”

The red-haired man smiles. “I’m gonna fuck you so hard right now, yer blood will be replaced wit’ me cum. Den, I’m gonna slit ye throat and let ye brudha find yer sprawled out like da whore ye are.”

I step back, still holding the thick branch clenched in my hands in front of me.

He moves to grab the wood, and I swing it, scratching his hand. He moves toward me again, and I stab the makeshift weapon forward. He laughs but lifts his fingers, signaling his minions to move. They circle me from the side, and my gaze jumps rapidly between them.

I swing my weapon at each of them as they step closer, but I know it’s only a matter of time before they have me. Both men at my sides run at me, and I can’t move quickly enough. Their ringleader rushes forward, taking advantage of my panic, and rips the wood through my hands.

With a hand on my shoulder and one gripping my wrist, two men lift me and slam my back against the closest tree. The third moves closer, but I lift my legs, kicking at him. I land one or two kicks before he presses his body against mine, his breath on my face and his hand around my throat.

I try to scream, but his grip on my neck is too tight.

He sniffs me, and I attempt to headbutt him.

Pulling back, he looks me in the eyes as he undoes his belt. The grip the two other men have on my wrists is agonizing, and I fight their hold with everything in me. But it's no use. They're stronger.

Bile rushes up my throat, and my stomach hollows out. Tears fill my eyes, but I beg them not to drop. I don't want to give them that. I don't want to give them my defeat.

I feel him before I see him.

Something settles inside me out of nowhere, and the man ready to rip apart my soul falls to the ground.

Diego stands behind him with a rock clenched in his fist, the stone dripping with blood.

Letting me go, the other men step toward him, and he smiles.

"I'm gonna gut you," he promises.

Dropping the rock, he reaches into his jeans and pulls out a simple pocket knife. Suddenly, I don't feel so safe. Three men against one, and all he has to protect himself is a measly pocket knife.

The man on the ground is out cold, and I watch the way Diego taunts the two other Irish soldiers. He's enjoying himself. He has bloodshed in his eyes and violence in his

stance, and the fear I held for him moments ago fades in the blink of an eye.

One man runs at him, but he's no match for my husband. Diego manages to stab the guy in the throat, and he stumbles back, holding his neck in shock.

The tiny knife dripping with blood, Diego beckons them closer again. Bleeding from the neck, the man roars in anger as he runs and launches forward. Two quick punches to the face, and he falls to the ground. The second man takes his chance and throws a fist against Diego's jaw. They struggle for all of thirty seconds before the guy is pinned with his stomach to the ground. Sitting on his back, Diego yanks at his hair. Lifting his head and eyes on me, he slits the guy's throat from one ear to the other. Pushing his face to the earth, I try to ignore the hideous gurgle mumbled against the dirt.

Standing, Diego moves to the man he stabbed in the neck. The man is unsteady on his feet, so it takes no time for my husband to knock him back on his ass. Straddling the guy's waist, he uses the bloodied blade to tear open his shirt. He slams the blade down with ferocity, piercing the guy's upper abdomen. Muscles pulsing, he drags the knife down, opening his stomach and keeping his promise of gutting the soldier.

I watch on in awe, shock, and, quite frankly, a little fear. The man I only weeks ago forced into marriage has just managed to subdue three Irish mobsters in less than ten minutes.

A groan hits my feet, and I look down. The man threatening to rape me grabs my ankle, blood rushing over his face.

I kick him off, glancing at Diego to let him know this guy is still alive. But he's preoccupied. His knife still works inside

the man's stomach. "You think you can put your hands on my wife? You think you could touch my fucking wife and not die, asshole." He's speaking quietly, but the words carry across the silent breeze. "I told you, fuckface. I'm going to gut you like the pig you are." He saws back and forth, blood coating his hands and arms. The man is dead, but Diego doesn't stop.

I glance down again, watching the asshole at my feet attempt to stand. Lifting my leg, I kick him in the face, and he falls back down. Strolling toward the rock that Diego knocked him out with, I pick it up and, taking a page out of my husband's psychotic playbook, I lower myself onto his back. He grunts in protest, and I lift the rock high in the air and slam it down with all my weight. The crack of bone and the squelch of blood vibrate through my hands, and I gag. He's still beneath me, but to make sure, I repeat the move, throwing the rock to the side when blood sprays up my arms.

"Sia."

Diego stands beside me, and he reaches a hand out. I take it, and he helps me up.

"Are you okay?"

I look around at the bodies surrounding us. Blood and mangled flesh stains the beauty of our forest, and I smile sadly. "Better than them."

A soft grin touches his lips. "Let's get you home."

Fingers entwined, he moves to walk away, but I pull back. He pauses, looking over his shoulder at me.

"Thank you for saving me."

He shakes his head. "I think you did a pretty good job of saving yourself. You're a fucking queen, Sia."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

DIEGO



I pace back and forth in Alessia's bedroom, the faint sound of the shower echoing from underneath the closed door of her en suite bathroom. Blood still coats my hands, and I stare at it, reminiscing about slicing my knife against the throat of the fuckers who dared to lay hands on my fucking wife.

Wife.

Fuck.

This is all my fault—every last second of it.

She felt compelled to wear gold for me. Expecting it was a way toward forgiveness. She shouldn't even want my grace. I'm an asshole. Sure, I'm still mad as fuck that she orchestrated something I not only didn't see coming but also didn't want. But had I not been such a dick, she wouldn't have put herself in danger like she did tonight.

Not only that, I turned off all my devices. All ways to contact me were voided. Which means I missed the notifications that known associates of the Irish were present in her fucking city. All because I wanted to chase her around a forest like the selfish prick I am.

Lorenzo has tried to call me at least fifteen times, but he'll have to wait. Alessia is my focus. If she wants to speak to me.

Shit, she has every right to kick me the fuck out on my ass.

A loud bang ricochets through the house, and I move with purpose toward the sound, annoyed that it's taken me away from where I *want* to be. Close to Alessia.

The front door handle jiggles with impatience, and I don't have to check the security footage to know who it is. I input Alessia's access code and place my thumb against the digital reader.

Salvatore Bianchi storms in without invitation the moment the locks disengage. His chest heaves with the seething breath that escapes his body. His eyes are black with rage, and his hands, fisted at his sides, tighten with a need to feel useful.

"Where is she?" He pushes past me, and I close my eyes in irritation.

I do not need this right fucking now. Sia doesn't need this.

"Showering. Why is he here?" I point toward Narciso. "Who is on clean up?"

"Amadeo," he answers. "I need to put my eyes on my sister." He pauses at the threshold of her bedroom when he hears the shower. "Get her out here."

I shake my head before he's finished speaking.

"Don't fucking shake your head at me," he snarls, stepping closer, but I keep my ground, lifting my chin in invitation. "I want to see my sister. I want to see for myself that she's okay. *Go and get her.*"

"No."

He lifts a fist, pushing it against his forehead. "You mean nothing to me. Killing you will not remove my ability to find

sleep. I have given you an order. Get me my fucking sister,” he bellows.

“You forget that I don’t work for you.”

He inches forward, our noses almost touching. His fury is potent, only diluted by the frantic worry widening the pupils in his eyes. I’m trying to remain understanding, but him being here removes my ability to have Sia alone. *I* want to be the one to make sure she’s okay. He forfeited his right when he twisted himself up in her plan to marry me.

“Salvatore.” Alessia’s voice reaches my ears before her brother loses all self-control and attacks me, and I’m disappointed. I would’ve loved to go head-to-head with the motherfucker.

“What the fuck were you thinking?” He storms past me toward his sister.

She’s wrapped in a thick white robe, her red hair still dripping water from the shower.

“What has he involved you in?” He gestures back to me. “A *hunt*? Do you understand how much danger you put yourself in?” He’s yelling, and I move slowly toward the twins, placing myself between Alessia and the bristling anger of her brother.

“You may be her boss.” I speak very clearly, making certain the threat in my words can be heard loud and clear. “And I know you’re her brother, so I read well enough that you’re scared and angry, but let me be as transparent as possible. When you speak to my wife, you do it with fucking respect, and you sure as shit don’t raise your fucking voice in her face.”

He opens his mouth to speak.

“I know who you are,” I cut him off. “I know where I stand in the hierarchy of *this* family, but in these four walls, *in our home*, you are nothing but my brother-in-law, and you disrespected my wife in a way that will never happen again. You have questions for Sia, and it’s up to her to decide whether she wants to answer them *when* she is ready.”

There is murder in his eyes—white-hot fucking rage—but underneath that burning fire of hate sits respect. Enough that his fists loosen, and he steps back.

“You can see Sia is safe. I’m taking care of her. You can leave us to it.”

Salvatore’s eyes flick to his sister, waiting for her to confirm my claims. She does so with a quick nod. He looks back at me. “Call me tomorrow, Alessia.”

“I will,” she says softly, walking back toward her bedroom.

Salvatore turns on his heel and moves toward the front door without another word. He pauses at the threshold, where Narciso remains, holding the door open. “One small insignificant detail, these four walls”—he gestures around the room—“are mine. I own this fucking house, so *your* home, Diego, is fucking mine. Best you remember that next time you feel like disrespecting me.”

He slams the door behind him, and I wait for the locks to slide into place before turning back toward the bedroom. Sia leans against the doorframe, watching me quietly.

“Tomorrow, when you’re feeling up to it, we’re going to sit down and find a new place to live. When we’re here in Chicago, I’m not suckling from your brother’s teat.”

“When we’re in Chicago?” she asks.

“I discussed it with Lorenzo to make sure it was doable before I brought it up, but Bianchi and Caruso are comfortable with us splitting our time between Chicago and New York. If that is what you want. You’re obviously free to remain here permanently if you prefer.”

“I like New York,” she says.

“How are you feeling?”

She shrugs. “My wrists and feet are a bit sore, but I’m fine, all things considered.”

I swallow thickly. “I keep thinking about what would’ve happened if I hadn’t found you in time. I could hear you yelling my name, but I couldn’t get there fast enough. This is my fault, Sia. Salvatore’s right, the danger...”

“No,” she bites out, standing straight and shaking her head definitively. “Don’t you dare. I have been a part of that hunt for over ten years. Nothing like what happened tonight has ever remotely happened. It’s safe. I’ll speak to CJ to see what happened with their operations. Someone hacked either their scheduling systems or my personal emails. But the three men who we...”

“Killed,” I answer for her.

“Yes, killed.” She sighs. “Are not part of The Quest. Diego, you know it’s safe. You wouldn’t be a part of it if it weren’t. Don’t let one small incident ruin something that means something to me. *To us*,” she whispers.

I rub a hand along my jaw. “I’ll rub your wrists and bandage up your feet. Go lie down.”

She does as she’s told as I move into her en suite. I hit the sink first, scrubbing my hands and cleaning the dried blood from my skin. I hate washing away their death, wishing I

could have their blood splatter tattooed onto my hands so I could relive the moment their eyes went blank forever through my lifetime. Hands clean, I rifle through her medicine cabinet to grab what I need.

When I return to her bedroom, she's sitting cross-legged on her bed, running a large comb through her hair.

"I'm sorry."

Her head tips to the side.

"Had I not turned off my phone, my software would've alerted me to their presence in the city."

"It wouldn't have made a difference."

My brows pull in confusion.

"I wanted tonight, Diego. Even if I knew that those men were in my city, I would never have imagined they would have targeted me. I would have still invited you to hunt."

That declaration shocks me enough that I don't say anything further. Sitting on the side of her bed, I take one of her hands, and she lets me. My thumb brushes over the red bruises cuffed across her wrist. My nostrils flare, and she ducks her head to meet my eyes. "It's a bruise. It'll fade, then be gone and forever forgotten."

"I'll never forget." Squirting a dollop of Arnica cream on the inside of her wrist, I begin a slow and gentle massage against the bruising.

Dropping back against her pillows, she closes her eyes with a soft groan. "Your hands are surprisingly gentle for being so calloused."

I pause. "Fuck. They're all rough. Does it feel like shit?"

“Don’t stop.” She opens one eye. “It feels nice.”

I continue, stopping only to switch to her right wrist. She sits so quietly as I work that I consider she’s fallen asleep, but glancing up at her face, I find her watching me intently.

“You’re very handsome.”

I raise a single eyebrow, thrown at the sudden change in our line of conversation.

“Do you have a girlfriend?”

“What?” I place her wrist softly on her lap.

“I know you didn’t want this, Diego. I’m sorry if you were already involved with someone else. I didn’t even consider that. I know we kissed, but that doesn’t—”

“I don’t have a girlfriend.” I cut her off, not enjoying the unease creeping into her voice and making it shake.

“Oh,” she says. “I just assumed that’s why you didn’t want to...why we didn’t...*you know*...on our wedding night.”

I suck my bottom lip into my mouth to stop myself from smiling. “Fuck?”

“Mm,” she agrees, the freckles on the bridge of her nose darkening with the way her face shades.

“That’s not why.” I shift down the bed, gesturing for her to stretch her feet out so I can look at them. She moves without argument, and apart from a slight scratch on her heel, her left foot looks fine. “Any pain?” I ask, moving her foot back and forth to test the movement in her ankle.

“No.”

I move to her right foot, and she hisses when I touch the gash stretching the length of her arch. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay. How bad?”

“Long but not too deep,” I tell her. “I’m going to put some antiseptic on it, which might sting a bit, and then I’ll bandage it up. We’ll keep an eye on it to make sure it doesn’t get infected, but I think it’ll be fine.”

“Okay.”

She sits quietly as I work, a soft grunt of pain the only sound she makes when I apply the alcohol to the cut.

“Why then?”

“Hm?” I look up at her.

“Why?” she prompts.

“Why what?”

“If it wasn’t another partner, why didn’t you want to sleep with me on our wedding night? Are you not attracted to me?”

I lean back, shocked at her reasoning. I frown at her. “*Sia*. You know that’s not it.”

She pulls her bandaged foot back into her body. “Then what?”

I sigh. “A few things, I guess.”

“Will you tell me?” This is another side to Alessia again. Shy, unsure, and lost in the dynamics of intimacy and relationships.

“First and foremost, I didn’t want to get married,” I tell her honestly, holding her stare when I do so. “You deceived everyone around you for reasons I have yet to work out. I felt played. I was pissed.”

“*Was?*”

I lift a single shoulder. “Was. Am. Does it matter?”

Her bottom lip tips out in indifference. “And?”

“And what?”

“You said a few things. What else?”

I look away, scratching the back of my neck. “*Sia.*”

“*Please* tell me. I want to know if I can fix it.”

I rub my left eye. “I’m an asshole, and it doesn’t matter.”

“It matters to me.”

“*This* shouldn’t.”

“Diego.” She leans forward, coming up onto her knees in front of me. “Please tell me.”

“You’ve already had a wedding night,” I rush out. “I’m not a hearts-and-flowers kinda guy, which is probably what Charles Lincoln gave you. I didn’t want a comparison of how little I offered you in contrast to him.”

“The flowers weren’t me,” she tells me, but I already knew that. She was as surprised by the whole fanfare as I was. “And that doesn’t make you an asshole.”

“I hated that another man had you first.” There, I said it. “I didn’t imagine I’d get married, but if I had to, I assumed I’d own every one of my wife’s firsts. I want to claim you, *Sia*. I’ve told you that. But you’ve already been claimed, and it made my blood fucking *boil*. It still does.”

“Diego,” she murmurs. “I...it’s not...you should know—”

“What was I going to do?” I continue, not letting her speak. “Ask you if he fucked you in the ass and then demand you let me fuck you there as a way to claim you as mine and only mine?”

Her eyes widen, and I hate how my cock hardens, knowing the shock in her stare tells me everything I need to know. Her anal virginity remains untouched and mine to claim.

This is bad. I should get up and leave before I'm tempted to do something stupid.

But I don't. Instead, I push forward, and she drops back. Climbing over her body, I look down at her pretty face, and she stares up at me, her breathing quick and sharp under my scrutiny.

“Would you have given it to me, my deceitful wife?”

She opens her mouth, but I slide two fingers between her lips to stop her from talking.

“Would you have let me play with the ass I've fantasized about for over a year? Would you have let me drag my tongue over your tight hole until you were panting my name? Would you have let me stretch you with my fingers and make you find pleasure like you never imagined existed before I stuffed your sweet ass full of my cock and made you choke on your own fucking breath?”

Her tongue pushes against my fingers in her mouth, and I groan.

“Yes or no?”

She nods, and I tip my head back, growling at the ceiling. “You can't say shit like that, Sia. You say shit like that, and I might be forced to act on it.”

I right my neck, staring into her hazel eyes.

Hand circling my wrist, she pushes my fingers deeper into her mouth. Then without missing a beat, she sucks.

I drag my fingers out of her mouth, drawing them over her lips and down her chin.

“Do it,” she whispers. “Take what you want from me, Diego.”

Something snaps inside me. The thread of control I held, the bridge of resistance I forced between us, buckled under her throaty plea.

Take what you want from me.

Everything, I want to fucking scream. I want everything. I wanted everything.

Hand at my shirt, she pulls me toward her, and I go without resistance. Our lips touching, she smiles. “Kiss me.”

My mouth crashes against hers without delay. This kiss is not unlike the one we shared outside this very house. The panicked need for gratification pushes us together in a flurry of lust and the sheer relief of finally being able to taste something we’ve been craving for months. And maybe a little dose of betrayal because under the layer of carnal need lies something darker. This woman deceived the most formidable of men to force my hand, and as much as I want her, I can’t help but hate her a little bit, too.

She tastes like everything I wanted her to. The forbidden bite of passion I didn’t believe existed. An obsession so fucking deep, I doubt I’ll ever truly rid myself of its affliction. Because now that I’ve had a taste, it’s morphed into something dangerous. I’m dangerous. I’m fucking possessed. Possessed by Alessia Bianchi. *Alessia Greco*. Forever mine, she’s about to learn how fucking dangerous that title can be.

Biting her bottom lip, I pull hard enough to taste blood, and she cries out.

“Still willing to let me take everything I want?”

“Yes,” she answers without a beat of hesitation.

Kneeling high above her, blood smeared over her bottom lip, I keep her stare, but my fingers move to the tie of her robe, undoing it slowly. Her breathing stops, and mine comes on harder. Pushing the thick material out of the way, I reveal her naked body and pause before letting myself look. Because I’m afraid of where my infatuation will lead when I give in to temptation. Not if but *when*. Fully clothed, Alessia Bianchi was an enigma, a fantasy forever out of reach. But bared and open for me and only me, my imagination and reality will collide in an explosion so potent I might believe we are a possibility.

I close my eyes when they touch her skin, letting them roll back in my head with a rough groan that scratches my throat. “*Sia.*”

I blink my eyes open and stare at her face. Lost in the uncertainty flushing through her as her teeth gnaw at her bottom lip. She’s worried.

“I want to be enough for you.”

I can’t speak. My throat has closed over. In shock, in disbelief. How can someone as perfect as the woman laid out before me doubt herself?

A flush of color rises on her neck, and I refrain from reaching out to touch it. To press against the rose shadow and watch it blanch.

Her tits are heavy, and her nipples wide and round and pink and fucking *hard*.

I crack my neck one way and then the other.

She's plush. I can't see her ribs, and nice, thick creases sit where her upper thighs meet her apex. I want to squeeze her and bruise her and taste her.

"You're like a fucking dream, Sia. I fantasized about this moment more times than I want to fucking admit. I imagined how thick you were and how good your curves would look with my fingertips pushed into them."

"*Diego*," she whispers.

"Did you know? Did you know I watched you on my phone running through that maze and knew all this would be here, waiting for me if I ever got the chance to strip you naked? Did you know how hard you made my dick? Can you see it?" I grab my cock through my jeans, framing it in my hand so she can see what she does to me.

I can't see her pussy the way I crave to, so I grab her right knee and push it upward, then I do the same to the left knee, exposing her.

I'm fucking crestfallen that I won't feel the inside of her pussy tonight, but tonight is about claiming her, nothing more, nothing less.

"I don't know whether to use my fingers to make her weep or my tongue. If I use my fingers, I can see your body and face and drink in your pleasure. But if I use my tongue, I can fucking taste it. Tell me what to do."

"Fingers," she says. "I want to look at you, *all of you*, while you touch me. Will you take your clothes off?"

Hand at the back of my shirt, I rip it over my head. She sucks in a sharp breath, her hand moving up and fingers trailing over the colorful ink stained across my abdomen.

Licking the pad of my thumb, I glide it over one lip of her pussy and then the other, avoiding where she wants me most.

“Please.”

I continue my teasing, my free hand working my belt and unbuttoning my pants. I don't stop enough to remove my pants completely. I yank at my jeans and boxers just enough to free my cock. It's what she wanted.

I want to look at all of you.

Sucking in a sharp breath at the sight of me hard and straining in front of her, she drags her tongue slowly between her lips. “Pretty,” she whimpers.

“Pretty means delicate, Sia.” I grab my cock and squeeze. “There's nothing delicate about the way I plan on fucking you.”

She stretches her thighs open wider, inviting me to deliver on my vow, and I let my smirk free.

Her pussy glistens in the lamp-lit room, and unable to refrain any longer, I slide two fingers down her slit, groaning at the warm, wet touch of her.

“Yesssss.” It's a plea, a breath, a prayer. All of it melded into a single sound of salacious need.

Leaning over her, I maneuver my hand, two fingers ghosting over her clit, making her buck into my touch. “Sensitive.”

“Starved,” she retorts, and I laugh.

My mouth is dry, and a hint of nerves buzzes in my fingertips. I've conjured up countless images of Sia naked while I stroke my cock. Every pornographic montage was violent with passion and ended with me tearing her clothes off

to fuck her raw and rough in the dirt. Yet here I am, slowly stroking her slick pussy, my eyes afraid to blink in case I miss even a single second of her pleasure. I could do this for hours. I could suffer through the ache in my dick without the relief of climax, all to watch her come with my name on her imposturous lips.

I tickle her clit once or twice more before reaching down to slide my fingers inside her. She gasps at the intrusion and arches up to swallow me deeper.

“Greedy,” I murmur.

She’s snug around my fingers, and I massage her in and out, letting my thumb dance along her clit to watch her squirm. She’s so fucking receptive. Less than two minutes, and her excitement is slick against my hand. Her pussy walls thrum around my fingers, and her clit swells under my attention.

“Fuck, Sia. You like having your pussy played with.”

“Yes,” she whimpers. “Diego, I think...I’m...”

I drop my lips to her neck, licking and sucking at the skin just below her ear. The heavy beat of her pulse vibrates against my mouth, and I growl.

She screams out my name, her thighs closing against my hand and keeping me captive. I smile into her neck.

“Oh wow,” she breathes. “That was... it was... quick. Was it too quick? I’m sorry. I—”

I pull back, pushing my lips against hers to stop her from speaking. Ghosting my fingers over her clit one last time as I draw them from her body, I smile against her mouth at the way her whole body shudders.

“I’ve never come that quick,” she whispers.

I shrug. “There are no rules when it comes to sex. Stop freaking out.”

She nods in a way that tells me she is still one hundred percent freaking out, and I want to stop that. I want to rid her of her doubts and let her *feel*.

My fingers are damp with her release, and I lift them slowly, enjoying the curiosity of pushing her lips apart as she watches me.

My necklace hangs loosely around my neck, and the dark cross rests comfortably against my sternum. Using the fingers covered in her cum, I follow the line of the cross, transferring her climax to the metal.

“Do you trust me?”

“Right now?” she asks. “Yes.”

Okay, so not always. I can work with that.

“You’re going to remove your robe and flip over for me.”

She nods.

“*Now, Sia.*”

Sitting up, she divests her arms of the fluffy material, leaving it on the mattress. She looks at me in the eyes, takes a single breath, and rolls onto her stomach. Glancing over her shoulder, she asks, “Like this?”

“Come up on your knees for me.”

She does as she’s told.

“That’s my girl,” I murmur. “Now push your tits into the mattress.”

Dipping her spine, she slides her arms out and adjusts the placement of her thighs to accommodate the stretch in her

body. The thick globes of her ass cheeks rest on the balls of her feet.

“Are you uncomfortable?”

“Physically or psychologically?”

She can't see my smile. “Physically. Psychologically, you should know that I'm so fucking hard at how beautiful you look, and I wish I could keep you here forever.”

“My muscles are stretched,” she whispers, her voice softer than I'm used to. “But I'm comfortable enough.”

“Alessia,” I call and wait for her to look me in the eye. “I only want to make you feel good, but if it's too much, tell me right away.”

She remains quiet.

“Let me know you understand that.”

“I understand.”

Palming her ass cheeks, I squeeze her. “Your ass is so sweet. I'm dying to fucking taste it.”

She lets out a shaky breath, and I maneuver myself to where I long to be—lying on my stomach, face lined up with her perfect ass. The tight pucker of her untouched hole begs for attention. Stretching the tip of my tongue out, I tickle her asshole. She coughs out in surprise, and my dick, pressed between the mattress and my stomach, twitches in anticipation. I do it again, soft circles dancing over the forbidden ring. Letting saliva drip over my tongue, I lap it between the tight seam of her ass, enjoying the way she squirms. She moans out my name, and I increase the pressure.

“Holy. Fuck.” She grunts, her pleasure hitting her unexpectedly.

Testing her, I pull back and growl my approval when she pushes back, chasing the feeling of my mouth. “*Sia.*”

“Diego,” she answers, the gruff bite of my name making me want more. “I need... I want...”

“Is your pussy slick?”

“So wet,” she rushes out.

“Good. Touch it. Do you have lube?”

“Bedside table,” she whimpers, her body falling more forcibly to the bed when her fingers find the coiled nub between her thighs.

One last lick, and I climb over her body, ripping open her bedside table in search of lube. A nice collection of sex toys sits comfortably in her top drawer, but I ignore them all, grabbing the discreet tube of silicone-based lubricant that boasts a silk-like feel and long-lasting effects.

Settling on my knees behind her, I squeeze a thick droplet of clear liquid into the crease of her ass. “Keep playing with your pussy, baby.”

She moans out my name.

Squirting lube into my palm for good measure, I rub my hands together, smiling at how slick they feel. Soon enough, my fingers will push into her ass, and this lubricant’s silky touch will have nothing on the hot and firm pressure of her untouched ass.

I start with my thumb, rubbing soft circles against her hole. She relaxes into the gentle stroke. Her hand starts moving faster between her thighs.

“Slow down. We don’t want you coming before I’ve stretched you open.”

She sucks in a large breath and lets her arm relax, her hand moving in lazy circles over her clit.

“That’s my girl,” I praise and push my thumb against the tight muscle. There is little resistance as I breach the threshold of her ass.

Her neck tips back, and I take the opportunity, threading my free hand into the hair at the crown of her head and yanking.

She screams out.

“How do we feel, Sia? You playing with your cunt, my fingers teasing your ass, and your body laid out like a fucking sacrifice for the husband you lied to claim?”

“*Diego.*”

“That’s right, baby. You may have orchestrated this whole fucking mess, but it’s me who pulls your strings. You tied yourself to the wrong man, sweetheart.”

She groans as I push my thumb in and out of her ass. “It doesn’t feel wrong.”

I laugh, pulling my thumb away. She cries out, pushing back to seek the pressure I’ve taken from her.

Picking up the lube, I drop more on her ass, circling the pads of my middle and forefingers against the place my thumb just exited.

“More,” she begs.

I push my fingers forward. “Like this?”

She grunts out a cough of discomfort, but I ignore her, pushing my fingers in deeper.

“I bet you already feel full.”

“Yes.”

“Your virgin ass pretends it doesn’t want more, but it does, doesn’t it, Sia? It wants to be so fucking full you don’t know if you want to cry out in pleasure or pain. You want to ache with how full you feel. I’ll erase any trace of any cock that has come before me. Your entire body will only recall the feeling of the biting pleasure *I* bring you.”

Her asshole has relaxed while I’ve been running my mouth. I pull my fingers out and push them back in, opening them up to stretch her wider. She doesn’t notice the extra pressure, and I open them farther, enjoying the way her ass widens for me.

She’s slick, my hand moving in and out of her body with ease. I wish I had a toy to spread her with, but the more she backs up on my hand, the more confident I am that she’s ready for more. I retract completely from her body.

“No.” Forehead falling to the mattress, she whimpers.

“Shh,” I whisper, twisting my hand to allow a third finger to join. “Back up, baby.”

She does as she’s told, pausing at penetration.

“You’re doing so fucking good, Sia. Push back and relax.”

She thrusts backward at the same time I drive forward, sliding past the resistance. Her muscles relax within seconds, and she begins fucking her own ass with my fingers. My dick is leaking. It jerks and pulsates with the need to be strangled, and I don’t know how much longer I can wait.

“Diego, baby.” She looks over her shoulder. “I want more.”

“*More?*” So caught up in what we’re doing, I can’t think straight.

“Your cock. Will you fuck me? Please.”

Please.

My wife just said please to my dick in her ass.

This woman.

I pull my hand from her body without delay, grabbing the lube and squirting a line the entire way down my cock. The wet sound echoes through the room as I slide my hand up and down, wetting my shaft.

I’m not going to last long. I’m hanging on by a thread.

The woman I’ve been fantasizing about for the best part of a year, the woman dangerous enough to force a man like me into a contract she can’t escape from, is begging me to claim her the only way I know how right now. The only way I thought I wanted her. But by baring her soul to me in an intimacy that offers me a sliver of the desire I can only dream of—her being mine and *only* mine—I can sense the obsession inside me moving away from a simple physical attraction and morphing into something of a connection I was determined to reject on principle alone.

Palm clamped around the base of my cock, I press the thick head to the relaxed ring, feeding my dick into her ass.

She breathes purposely as she swallows my head. “Fuck. I know it’s just the tip, but it feels like I have your entire cock in my ass right now.”

I laugh, and the shake in my body pushes me forward, making her cry out softly.

“Why does it feel achingly gratifying? *More.*”

I thrust forward another inch.

“Mmm,” she chokes out.

“Play with your pussy.”

She shifts, swallowing more of my dick as her fingers meet her cunt.

“*Tesoruccio*, your ass was made for this. Nothing is as pretty as your pussy, but fuck, your virgin ass stuffed full of my dick...” I groan.

“Diego,” she moans.

“Baby, you’re taking it so well.”

The initial tension in her body has eased off, her soft curves rolling tenderly to explore the way I’ve stretched her. I stop from burying the rest of myself inside her. I let her play, watching how she edges more and more of me inside.

She’s unlike anything I imagined. Her body is built for pleasure, I’m certain of it. The way she undulates her hips. The pronounced arch of her back. The slick touch of her pussy and the tight pull of her ass. The generous sway of her hips and tits and ass. The throaty moans and desperate pleas. My wife is every wild fantasy curated into a single being.

And she belongs to me.

My cock surges at the thought.

Gripping my necklace, I lift the cross and balance it on my lips for a second before sucking it into my mouth. The taste of her explodes along my tongue, and I grab her heavy hips to stop myself from falling over her body.

Pulling back, I slowly glide myself forward. I move in and out of her body gently.

“Harder,” she begs.

My nostrils flare, and I give her what she asks for.

“Yes.”

My breathing echoes through her bedroom. I’m fucking panting as I stave off my climax. My dick begs me to give in. It jerks inside her and leaks with every forward thrust.

“Sia.”

“Diego,” she answers my prayer, her body shaking and her hand moving faster and faster against her clit.

“Sia,” I growl. “Baby. *Tesoruccio.*”

My fingertips bruise her skin, and the knowledge only turns me on further. I’m *fucking* her ass, slamming in and out of her in punishing strokes. *Just* like she begged me to.

She comes, her scream muffled into the fluffy material of her robe caught beneath her.

It’s my undoing. I surge forward one last time and come on a roar. “*Sia!*”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

ALESSIA



“*H*ave you ever been in love?”

We showered after Diego blew my mind by claiming my anal virginity. All I ever hear is how horrible anal sex is and how it is more of a chore that women do to please their men. They obviously don't have the right partner because *fuuuuccck*. Sure, certain moments were uncomfortable to the point of pain, but those split seconds were easily overpowered by the exquisite pleasure that clawed its way through my body and claimed my climax in a way that I thought I'd never come down from.

I made a late dinner, and we sat in relative silence, the intensity of what we shared still coursing over my skin.

Honestly, I expected him to leave the moment it was all over. Not only did he stay, but he walked out to his rental car and brought in a hard-case luggage filled with computers and his belongings.

Diego stops chewing and lifts his head slowly to me. He shakes his head. “No.”

“Have you been in a long-term relationship?”

“Yes.” His focus drops back to his food.

This is the Diego I know. Mr. Conversation and the man of the indecipherable mask.

I want to know whether what unfolded has changed *anything* between us. And I'm not just talking about the sex. We killed together. I watched him brutally murder two men who threatened me with horrible violence. He witnessed me slam a rock into the back of another man's head until it resembled mush. We're connected in a way that most people will never understand—a relationship forged in blood and human sacrifice.

Still, just because I believe our relationship has moved forward, I can't be confident he thinks the same, and I'm not prepared for his rejection. So, I've settled into conversation topics that will hopefully give me a better understanding of my new husband.

“But you didn't love her?”

Placing his knife and fork down, he rubs his hands together, balancing his elbows on the table. “I thought I loved her. But I was young. Time has passed, and I now realize that what we shared wasn't love.”

“What happened?”

Mouth pushed into a thin line, I can tell he's considering not telling me. “She's connected to the family.”

Understanding courses through me. “They married her to someone else while you were dating.”

A small smile teases at the corner of his mouth, but he bites the corner to stop it from spreading. “They married her to someone else *because* she was dating me.”

“*Oh.*” Of course. I would advise Salvatore to do precisely the same thing. I've never spent too much time considering the

feelings of young love. If a relationship threatened to damage the progression of the family business, it had to be stopped. “Was that hard to watch?”

He shrugs. “I guess.”

“Because she was happy with you, and seeing her marry someone else and be miserable hurt?”

“No, *tesoruccio*, because I thought she loved me, and then I watched her fall in love for real with another man.”

“She fell in love with her arranged husband?” Neither of us misses the softness in my voice. The fairy tale of his ex-girlfriend falling in love with a man she was forced to marry is too uncommon in our world.

“She did.”

“That would have been hard to watch.”

He shakes his head. “At first, but then common sense prevailed. Margot wouldn’t have fallen in love with another man if she loved me. And if I loved Margot, I would have fought tooth and nail, to the fucking death, to claim her as mine. I wouldn’t have stood idly by while she married another man. I would have made sure I was the only man her heart beat for. I didn’t do that. I didn’t want to do that. Seeing her in love made me happy, not murderous.”

“Love is messy.”

“The messiest,” he agrees. “If I’m not willing to lay down my life, if I’m not willing to watch another bleed to protect what’s mine, then it’s not the type of love I want.”

Neither of us needs to mention he did exactly that for me tonight. That I did the same for him.

“Obsession,” I whisper.

“Obsession,” he concurs.

“That sounds nice.”

He picks up our empty bowls and walks the short distance to the kitchen. He loads my dishwasher and returns to wipe the crumbs off my dining table.

“It sounds fucking horrible, Sia.” He moves back to his luggage, pulling three separate laptops out to use the dining table as a desk. “Imagine every minute of every day being hijacked by someone who has the ability to destroy everything that you are. Imagine needing another person to be able to breathe properly. Imagine your heart aching when you can’t see them. Imagine the fear you’ll live for the *rest* of your life, worrying you’ll outlive them and knowing for a time they don’t exist in the same realm as you. Or worse, them outliving you and you knowing you fucking failed them and broke them in a way that the rest of their life always feels empty because you’re no longer there.”

He doesn’t take a single breath through his monologue, his voice trailing off into silence on the last word as he sucks in a breath.

We stare at one another until he blows out a shaky breath, widens his eyes, and turns his attention to plugging in cords and attaching additional keyboards and hard drives to his setup.

“Imagine being able to breathe *properly* for the first time in your life,” I combat quietly. He doesn’t stop what he’s doing, but I know he’s listening. “Your lungs are finally opening wide enough to let in the life you were always supposed to live. Imagine your life being complete. Imagine having someone to share every high and low moment of your life with. Imagine the flutters you’ll feel in your heart when

you're reunited after a time apart, no matter how long or short. Imagine knowing that you only had a short period to enjoy and share your life with that person. How grateful you'd be for every moment. Imagine knowing that even after that person passed, someone loved you for their *whole* life. Imagine them living without you but not needing to search for love again because you loved them hard enough in life, and they know that no love would ever compare to what they shared with you."

He stares at me blankly.

"You can look for the negatives, but that's not what love is. Love has to be greater than fear. Otherwise, we'll all end up alone."

The buzz of his system booting up vibrates along the table, and I lift my arms to fold them into my lap.

"Maybe that's how we're supposed to be. We're born alone. We die alone."

I shake my head. "You're not born alone. You're nurtured inside another human willing to sacrifice a part of themselves to create you, and if you live your life right and find people to love and who love you in return, you don't die alone. You die having brought others joy and happiness, which lives on forever."

"You're a romantic."

I shrug. "Maybe."

"Definitely." He smiles, and it's a pretty view.

"I'll leave you to it. I'm going to call Salvatore and ask him how Amadeo went with the clean up. Then I will call CJ to have his IT department look into potential hacks."

He clears his throat.

“What?”

“Nothing. Tell CJ I said hi.”

I frown at him, but I’ve already lost him to his laptops. His fingers fly across his keyboards, and then he’s talking on his phone. Seconds later, Lorenzo Caruso’s voice fills the room.

“Diego. Where the fuck have you been?”

“With Sia.”

“Bianchi said she was hurt.”

“You should see the other guy.”

His boss laughs, and pride blooms in my chest. He didn’t feel the need to speak of me like a victim. He took his boss’s concern, which was unnecessary, and made Caruso realize that. I didn’t get where I am by sheer luck. Sure, my family name means something in Chicago, but I’ve only succeeded in my rank with pure grit and my ability to compartmentalize trauma. Diego offered me affection and concern in private but gave me the same respect he’d show to his fellow soldiers in public.

Leaving him to discuss what he needs to with his sector, I move into my bedroom and call Salvatore. Our conversation is quick, with a promise that we’ll see each other the next day. Bodies were removed, and the forest has no active signs that three heinous murders took place. Lorenzo and Salvatore took it upon themselves to send the ringleader’s severed head and crushed skull to Oisín as a declaration of war, which I wish they would have discussed with Vincent or me first, but I don’t think anything would’ve changed their minds.

Next, I call CJ.

“Alessia, are you okay?” CJ’s concern leaks through the line.

I let my voice smile. “I’m unharmed.”

“Fuck,” he spits. “I’ve had my team going through our systems with a fine-tooth comb, but we can’t see any evidence of a breach.”

“Must be my personal emails, then.” I sigh. “I’ll get Diego to look into it.”

“Diego?” he questions. “He’s with you? Even after what happened?”

My lips turn down. “He had nothing to do with it.”

He scoffs. “You were wearing gold. You never wear gold.”

“CJ,” I scold. “The men who attacked us couldn’t give two shits what color I was wearing.”

“You wouldn’t have been hunting off-schedule if it weren’t for him,” he argues.

“I don’t know why you’re putting all this on my husband. He was at risk in that forest, *just* like me. He protected me. He saved me, and then I saved myself.”

CJ is quiet on the line for a beat. “I was worried.”

“Well, your worry sounds a lot like blame. Don’t be so narrow-minded. I’ll come by the office next week and sign the paperwork to restore ownership of Lincoln Incorporated. I’m married now, and the stipulations are what they are. I do wish you would have gotten married before I did, though. Maybe you wouldn’t be so heartless.”

“Alessia.”

I hang up and walk back out to the living area. Diego has finished his conversation and sits silently, his face creased in worry as he works. His eyes move as fast as his fingers, flicking between screens.

“What did Lorenzo say?”

“Not much,” he answers absently. “Told me to find him something he can use, called me a few inventive insults for prioritizing my *little games*, as he called them, over the safety of the family, and hung up.”

He doesn't seem concerned by Lorenzo's disapproval.

“Salvatore told me they'd agreed to send the head of the man's skull I crushed to Oisín as a declaration of war. I told him I'd update him tomorrow with anything you find. I assume New York isn't planning on gatekeeping information?” I ask.

“No.”

“Good. CJ also confirmed that their systems haven't been breached. It looks as though I was targeted directly.”

Diego's fingers pause, and he inhales heavily before closing his eyes on an exhale. “I don't like that. Are your passwords as easy to guess as the one to unlock your phone?”

I frown at him. “Jesus. Okay. I need to overhaul your cybersecurity as well. Until I have time to do that, don't send anything important via email or text. And turn off your location services.”

I nod once and grab my phone to do as he says. “Coffee?”

“That'd be good.”

I remain silent while I make coffee, afraid to disrupt him. He's different when he works. More stoic and outwardly

unapproachable. He erects a guard that is impossible to maneuver around. He speaks very little, and the few words you can pry from him are sharp and reluctant. I saw it the first time we met face to face, and I can see it now. He lets work become his whole focus, and while admirable, it puts me on edge.

He doesn't look up as I place his coffee beside him. "Thank you," he murmurs.

"You're welcome."

"I'll leave you to it."

"You don't have to," he shocks me by saying. "My search parameters are on auto. I won't look at you because my eyes need to be here, but I'm listening."

"Can I look, too?"

He shrugs. "Go for it."

I pull up a seat beside him and watch as photos flick through at an alarming speed. "Gosh. How do you do this? I feel dizzy already."

He barks out a laugh. "You get used to it."

"How did you learn all this?"

He gifts me his trademark lift of his shoulder. "School. Friends. Self-taught. The software also helps."

"Does your dad help with this type of work for the family too?"

"Fuck no. My dad wouldn't know how to turn a computer on. He runs point on another facet of our business."

Limited details, fair enough.

"Are you close?"

“I guess.” He finishes his drink. “Good coffee.”

I smile softly. “Are you close with your mom too?”

“I’m as close with her as I am with my dad.”

“You don’t want to talk about them,” I surmise.

He shakes his head. “It’s not that. I care for my parents, and I’m sure they care for me. But the love of my mother and father was lost in translation.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“My mother, being the dutiful Mafia wife she is, assumed I was my father’s responsibility once I reached a certain age. He needed to shape and craft me into the perfect soldier.”

That’s not uncommon for the men in our world. They’re only boys but are forced to become hardened soldiers to ensure they’re an asset to the family. Their value is directly linked to how lawless and menacing they are. Feelings aren’t allowed to exist for them, not unless they’re fueled by violence and fury.

“She became unavailable to you?”

His lips twist. “She was busy. She was a ranking member’s wife, so she entertained, welcomed newcomers, and helped younger wives and mothers understand their roles and responsibilities. She was a mother, just not to me.”

“And your father?” I push.

“Cosimo has been capo since I can remember. He didn’t have time to babysit his child. He dragged me to work, but I was to sit, watch, and remain silent. So that’s what I did. I sat silently and watched. Leonardo Caruso was the only other boy around my age.”

“The underboss of New York?”

He nods once. “Leonardo grew up differently. His dad put Lorenzo in charge of his younger brother. I assume that because Lorenzo never had a proper childhood, he tried to give that to Leonardo as much as he could.”

“He wasn’t around, sitting and watching like you were.”

“Sometimes parents think they’re loving you how they’re supposed to, but they’re pushing your needs onto the other parent, not realizing that parent is doing the same thing. You grow up in a home, but it doesn’t feel like it.”

“No siblings?”

He shakes his head. “Just me.”

There is no sadness or longing in his words as he speaks. He’s reciting facts, ones that don’t seem to bother him at all. I want to wrap him up in a hug and show him that love does exist in the world. I can’t speak from personal experience because Diego’s parents look like the goal when considering mine. But still, like me, Diego deserved better.

“My parents are awful,” I tell him. “My father was hideous. Then he died, and we were all the better for it.”

“Your mother?” he asks.

“Despises me.”

“Why?”

Because I killed her husband.

“Who knows?” I lie. “She avoids me like the plague.”

“How is she toward your brother?”

“She’s not stupid. Salvatore is the boss. She would never disrespect him. I don’t think she’d lose sleep if he weren’t

here, though.”

“Why does Salvatore let her disrespect the both of you the way she does?”

Because she knows our secret, and banishing her could unravel it if she chose to run her mouth.

“She’s family.”

“That’s not family, Sia. Family, blood-related or not, are the people who enrich your life.”

I yawn, and he places a hand on my knee. “Go get some sleep. I’ll be here for a few more hours.”

“I can stay with you.”

“Sia. Sleep.”

I stand and stretch. “Can I at least make you another coffee before I head to bed?”

“Go to bed.”

Without second-guessing myself, I lean down and press my lips to his in a quick kiss. “Wake me if anything happens.” I gesture to his screen.

He rubs a thumb under his lips. “I will. Night, Sia.”

“Good night.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

ALESSIA



I slept like the dead.

The trauma from the forest and the intimacy shared with Diego came together like the ultimate sleeping tablet, and I was out the moment my head hit my pillow. I didn't stir until late this morning when I woke with a start. I had stumbled out of my room to find Diego still sitting at the dining table, his eyes wide and his body lax with fatigue.

He confessed to drinking eight cups of coffee to keep him awake, and after I managed to get him to eat something, he conceded to showering and closing his eyes for *just twenty minutes*. That was five hours ago. He's passed out on my bed with my pillow cuddled into his body.

I close the bedroom door, moving back into the living area to take the seat he occupied all last night. I don't even know what I'm looking for, but I'm hoping if something important is found, it alerts me by popping up on the screen to save my limited computer skills.

My phone rings. "Hello, brother."

"Alessia," he greets. "You seem chirpy."

"I slept well," I tell him.

"Can we meet?"

“Not today. Diego is asleep, and when he wakes, I would like to spend more time with him, just he and I. It’s the first time since we were married that I’ve been able to get him to talk to me.”

“He’s acting like a little bitch.”

“*Salvatore.*”

“Tomorrow, then,” he yields. “Bring your new husband over for lunch. After yesterday’s events, Lorenzo has organized a meeting with Dominic Rein and his son-in-law, Rocco Shay. They’ll be flying in midmorning.”

“Okay. We’ll see you then. Love you.”

“You too.” He hangs up.

It’s after five in the afternoon when Diego finally stirs. He stumbles from the bedroom in only his boxers, scratching his chest absentmindedly and yawning widely. “Fuck. You should’ve woken me,” he murmurs.

“You needed the rest. I’ve kept an eye on your screens. Nothing has popped up that I’ve noticed.”

He nods. “I’m gonna take a shower.”

“Are you hungry?”

He groans. “Fucking starving. I could murder a deep-dish pizza.”

I smile. “I’ll order one.”

An hour later, the pizza sits on the coffee table, and Diego, freshly showered, looks like every woman’s fantasy come to life sitting on my floor in a gray pair of sweats and a black T-shirt.

It's hard not to stare, but he doesn't seem to notice or mind. His focus is on his food.

I finish off the last of my pizza, leaving the crust.

Diego leans over, taking the discarded dough from my plate. "Best part, *tesoruccio*."

"How do you keep so lean and eat like you do?"

He glances down at his body. "What do you mean?"

My mouth moves into a thin line, and I narrow my eyes.

That makes him laugh. "Genetics. I run a bit when I need to clear my head. I lift weights with Leonardo when he's not doing my head in."

"So frustrating."

"How do you keep a body like yours?"

I laugh loudly. "Sorry?"

I'm not an idiot. I'm thick. Sure, some men find my curves attractive, but most would prefer I lost a good thirty pounds. Something I have no interest in. I've learned to love my body, no matter how full it is. It took me some time, but I found my style. I discovered the best way to accentuate my assets. I got over trying to impress men or women a long time ago. I learned early on that I needed to be comfortable with who I was, *physically* and mentally. I knew whatever man I was ordered to marry would likely never love me, so to save myself from the horrifying sentence of loneliness and longing, I found love for myself. I wouldn't have survived the world I was born into otherwise. Still, I have my insecurities. Diego is a man women drool over, the kind of man who has them readjusting their hair or licking their lips in hopes that it draws his attention. He could walk into any establishment and pick

the prettiest girl there, and she'd fall over herself trying to claim him. I love my body, but that doesn't mean I expected the man I forced into forever to feel the same way.

“Your body keeps me awake at night.”

I remain quiet, unsure of what he's trying to say.

“It infiltrates my dreams, Sia,” he says quietly.

Dreams, not nightmares.

“You've thought about us like that?”

He smiles, and it disarms me completely. His lips stretch, muting their deep color. His white teeth shine in the dim light, his dark eyes creasing at the sides in joy. “Have I thought about fucking you? Oh, Sia.” A slight cough of laughter dances between us, and I want to catch the sound and store it for a time when I'm alone. It vibrates along his vocal cords and stirs a longing between my thighs I have no right to want to claim.

But he doesn't elaborate, and I'm tempted to move to my knees and beg him to answer me. Did he laugh because it's absurd I would even consider he would think about me like that, a woman ten years his senior? Or did he laugh because it's absurd that I don't know that he does?

I can read almost every man I've encountered throughout my working career. Most don't attempt to hide their disdain or disgust at my position in the hierarchy or their lewd thoughts as I command an audience. The ones that do are easy enough to decipher when you match their energy. They attempt to drown me in disgust, and I drink it like wine, letting it loosen my anxiety and build my confidence. Their desire to see me fail only makes me more determined. But Diego is impossible to read. He's roguishly reserved, and the simple fact is that I

don't want to intimidate or assert power when I'm with him. I want to *know* him, and I want him to *want* to know me. He unravels me with his mere presence, and I am completely and utterly out of my depth.

"You didn't update me on your findings while I was sleeping." Changing the conversation is the only defense mechanism I have.

It catches him off guard, and a sense of relief settles in my stomach. He stares at me for a beat but then blinks in acceptance.

"As much as they tried to hide it, the three men who were killed arrived in the city with a woman. They didn't come together, but after diving deeper into the guy whose head you crushed, he's been spotted with her a lot in their hometown. Boston," he adds as an afterthought.

"Which means it's no coincidence that she was in town the same time they were."

"My thoughts exactly. She left in the early hours of the morning *alone*. No software I've used has been able to identify her, so I don't have a positive ID. She obviously travels under a fake name, and I also can't link her to Oisín. *Yet*."

His frustration leaks into his words.

"We'll find her."

"I'm gonna kill her when we do," he vows. "She's sly. I would bet my house on the fact that she orchestrated the events of last night." His anger grows as his memory pushes back into the forest.

"I'm still in awe that you managed to gut someone with a pocket knife."

The corner of his mouth tips up, and while I should be concerned that reminiscing about removing someone's insides calms him down, I understand his anger and fear and the way it morphs into something unrecognizable inside.

"How did you get involved in the hunt? Is that how you met Charles Lincoln?"

I shake my head. "No. Charles introduced me to the hunt."

"But you remained involved with The Quest after he died."

I shrug. "Just because Charles pushed me into it doesn't mean I did it for him. I fell into a form of addiction with the experience. It offered me what nothing else could."

"What?"

I swallow, dampening my throat. "I'm a powerful woman. I'm a *consigliera*, for fuck's sake. The *first* female in my position, and I moved into that role at twenty-four. But I was still a pawn when it came to marriage. I married for the family. Sure, Salvatore asked me first, but what was I going to say, no?" I wipe my hands on a napkin.

Diego chews quietly, listening to me speak. It's different when I talk to him. Charles listened to me, but I'm not sure he ever *heard* me. Diego hears me *before* I speak.

"I was a possession to Charles. A pretty trophy that he paraded around and touched and caressed to make others uncomfortable. Fuck, it made me uncomfortable. As powerful as I am in the family, I was still *traded*."

"But Charles introduced you to the hunt. Isn't it the same? He owned The Quest and bound you into participating."

I sip my wine, contemplating my words before I speak. "Yes and no. Charles introduced me to the hunt, but nothing

else mattered once I was in that forest. I wasn't Alessia Lincoln, younger wife to a billionaire. I wasn't Alessia Bianchi, *consigliera* for the outfit. I was Alessia. I was free."

He sits back, resting his weight on his palms behind him. "But you had men hunting you."

"On my terms," I argue. "For the first fucking time in my life, it was my terms. I decided what color hood to wear. It lit a fire in my gut. I was being hunted by a man, but it was a man who *wanted* me. Not my name. Something was salaciously primal about the whole concept, which fed something inside my soul."

He's genuinely intrigued by my thoughts, and it entices me to give him more of them.

"I was turned on. Nothing from the outside world existed except for me and my hunter. A man stalking me with the sole purpose of my capture. He wanted to ravage me, and after being stuck in a marriage with an impotent eighty-year-old for ten years, even you have to understand the appeal."

His breath leaves him, and I wait for him to speak, but he keeps silent, watching me intently.

I stand, clearing my plate, unsure how to breathe in his space.

"Say that again."

I pause at the threshold of our kitchen. "Say what again?"

His face has morphed from interest to rage in mere seconds, and I discard my plate gently onto the bench, turning to give him my full attention. "I was turned on?"

What a strange way to show possessiveness. He *watched* me in the hunt for months before participating. He knew other

men hunted me.

He shakes his head. "After that."

I tilt my head to the side. "I wanted someone to ravage me?"

He swallows, the act difficult by the way his lips twist with distaste.

I try again. "I was stuck in a marriage with an eighty-year-old?"

He glares. "Impotent," he grits. "You said impotent."

I roll my lips. "Did I?"

His hands grab at his face, pulling down to grip his jaw. "Sia. Did your husband ever fuck you?"

I avert my eyes, picking my plate up off the bench to walk toward the sink. I wash my plate in silence.

"*Sia.*" He's standing now, moving toward me. In the forest or our home, he stalks me in the same way. Like a panther, broody and silent and ready to pounce at any given opportunity. "Sia." He turns me by my shoulders when he reaches me. "Did Charles fuck you?"

"No." I lift my chin.

"Not once?"

I clear my throat. "Not once."

He is close enough that his breath brushes over my face. "Were you a virgin when you were married?"

I scowl. "Of course," I snap. "I'm not an idiot. I know the way of the family."

His nostrils flare. "Did you keep a lover?"

“What?”

“A lover. Did you keep a lover throughout your marriage?”

“I would never. I was loyal. I was faithful.”

His hands cover his face, and he groans. “Tell me that when Charles died, you let loose? You found a man and let him... tell me.”

I turn away, afraid to answer.

“Holy fucking shit,” he whispers, more to himself than anyone else. “You let me...”

I keep quiet.

“You let me...” He grabs my wineglass before I sense he’s moved and throws it against the closest wall. Red wine coats the soft gray of the kitchen tiles. “You let me...”

“Shove your dick into my ass before I’d felt one in my vagina? You’re one hundred percent right, Diego. I did let you do that. You were in your head. You didn’t want to listen. I tried to tell you.”

“You should’ve tried harder. You should’ve fucking told me!” he yells.

“Jesus, Diego. Calm down. You didn’t pin me down and shove your cock into my ass without preparation. You made me feel good. You pleased me. Does it matter if it was my ass or my cunt?”

“I can’t believe this. You *keep* lying. You’re a liar.”

Guilt washes over his face, and I can’t stomach looking at him long enough for it to morph into regret. I push past him.

“There’s your fine print to an annulment.” I stop myself from running. “Does consummating your marriage stipulate

whether the fucking requires pussy penetration, dear husband? Or does an ass suffice?”

“*What?*”

“You never wanted this marriage,” I concede. “Now you have the ammunition you need to end it. Salvatore can once again sell me off to the highest bidder. I’m an anomaly. A thirty-five-year-old virgin. Do you think that is as coveted as an eighteen-year-old virgin?”

“You should have told me,” he repeats, quietly this time, regret leaking into his words and making my gut churn. I can’t stomach repentance, not when it revolves around an intimacy we shared that *meant* something to me. I thought it meant something to him, too.

“And humiliate myself further?” I question. “My first husband couldn’t fuck me, and now my second one doesn’t want to. I’m already a pariah because of the position I hold in the family. Men think they could do my job better. Imagine when they find out I can’t even tempt a man to take my virginity.”

I storm away, and he lets me.

Thoughts and feelings collide in my gut, making me want to vomit. I knew he’d find out sooner or later since it’s not something you can exactly *hide*. But I imagined coming clean on my own terms, talking it through like adults, and having the opportunity to explain what my marriage to Charles was really like. Diego believed my late husband charmed me with hearts and flowers. Gosh, he couldn’t be further from the truth. Charles and I were friends. He’d shower affection upon me in public but only to keep up appearances. At home, he offered me the one thing I never wanted in a marriage—platonic love.

I didn't even realize I was looking at my wedding dress, caressing my fingers over the delicate material, and contemplating yet another one of my diabolical mistakes until I hear Diego's voice behind me.

"Will you put it on?"

I glance over my shoulder.

He's leaning against the doorframe, watching me with a look I can't decipher.

"I don't regret what we shared, Sia. It was the single most erotic moment of my life. I haven't stopped replaying it in my mind."

My wedding dress drops from my hands, and I turn to face him.

"But you deserved hearts and flowers and a man who *listened* to you. I'm sorry I lost my temper. I'm so fucking angry with myself."

My throat is thick with emotion. "I don't need hearts and flowers."

He smiles, the gesture small but prominent enough to make me want to reach out and touch him. "No one *needs* it, Sia. But you deserved more."

Snapshots of our night together flash in my mind. "I liked your more."

His eyes close. "I liked our more, too."

Silence hangs between us, and I know I should speak or move or *breathe*, but I can't.

"Will you put it on?" He gestures to the dress again.

"I don't ne—"

“Sia,” he reprimands gently. “I spent the entirety of our wedding caught between anger and lust. The way you looked in that dress, your hair, your smile. I wanted to fucking hate you, but my depraved thoughts were stronger. I despised that so many people were there. I wanted you alone. I wanted you to smile like that for *me* and only me. I wanted you to wear that dress for *me*. *Only me*. No one else should’ve been allowed to look at you. You stole my last name, and I wanted you to beg for forgiveness with your tits in my face, your pussy around my cock, your ass in my hands, and my name on your lips.”

My mouth is dry, and my pussy is wet. I blink.

“Let me be the one to beg for forgiveness.”

“How?” The word catches in my throat.

He steps into the room, his hands pushing into his pockets and a sinful grin twisting his lips upward. “I’ll beg with my tongue on your tits, my cock in your cunt, my hands full of your ass, and my name on your lips.”

I arch an eyebrow to take his attention away from the smile twitching for release. “Why does me begging sound eerily similar to you begging?”

His shoulders lift, and he rocks back on the balls of his feet. “Because whether I hate you, love you, or merely lust after you, I *do* want to claim you, and I want to please you.”

I lift my chin. “If I put the dress on, I need to make sure my hair and makeup do it justice.”

He dips his chin. “You have an hour.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

DIEGO



*H*er bathroom door is still closed when I check my watch again.

She's twenty minutes past her deadline, and I'm ready to break down the door to get to her.

I'm still afraid to move or breathe, fearing I'll miss any sound that indicates she's ready for me—the unmistakable catch of a door lock or the twist of the handle. I'm seated on the edge of her bed, *our* bed. The room is darkened, lit up only by the dim light of the candles burning at various points. I took direction from the Four Seasons and scattered rose petals from the bathroom door to the bed. I spent close to a grand on long-stemmed red roses. Thick crystal vases filled with the velvety flowers she loves enough to plant. Their petals shimmer in the candlelight, and I'm tempted to pick it all up and throw it away because I'm a fool and obviously trying way too fucking hard.

But as I move to stand, the bathroom door opens, and I turn in her direction just as she steps into the room.

If I thought she was a vision at our wedding, she's a fucking masterpiece today. Because right here and now, this is all for us, for *me*. I don't have to share her with anyone. The dress I fantasized about peeling from her body to reveal the

naked perfection beneath slides over her skin. I'm torn between my need to fuck her in it and my desire to cut it from her body so she knows how desperately I crave her.

She's styled her hair and makeup in a replica of that day, and I suddenly find it hard to swallow.

"You're a beautiful woman, Sia."

She blinks tenderly, and I step forward.

"*Diego*," she breathes, looking around the room. "You didn't need to do this." But the way her eyes glisten and her lips split into a smile tells me she appreciates it more than she'll ever verbalize.

"I wanted to."

She looks back at me. "I dressed up for you. Where's your suit?"

"I won't be dressed for long."

Her head tilts to the side. "And I will?"

"I haven't decided yet. But I would like your lips on mine, so c'mere so I can kiss you the way I should've when you claimed me as your husband."

She moves toward me with purpose, and I'm tempted to pinch myself to make sure I'm not dreaming. How the fuck this woman remains untouched is unfathomable. My wildest fantasy stands before me, one hundred percent pure and *mine*. Somewhere in life, I made a deal with the devil and sold my soul for nirvana, and I don't regret it. Not one fucking bit.

"Can I touch you?"

Her voice is like frayed silk, tender and scratched with need.

“You own me, Sia. You’re my wife. Take anything and everything you want.”

Her chest heaves with satisfaction. Hand to my cheek, she strokes down, feeling my skin. With featherlight strokes, she brushes her fingertips over my lips.

“You’re stunning. *Beautiful*,” she whispers. “The first time I saw you, I almost stumbled over my own feet. You stood on my brother’s balcony, dressed all in black. Dark eyes and red lips turned down in a frown when you looked at me. Your strong jawline clenched shut with animosity. I’ve been looked at with disdain and rejection my whole life, but the burn of your acidity caught me off guard. I normally pay no mind to insignificant and archaic-thinking men, but you were different.”

I grab her wrist. “Is that why you called me a *good boy*?”

She smiles sadly. “Mm. I felt triumphant when your men laughed, but more so when hate fired in your eyes.”

“I wasn’t looking at you with disdain or rejection.”

She looks up at my face, curiosity in her eyes. I pull her closer to me, tasting her shocked gasp with eager anticipation.

“I was angry that you didn’t recognize me. I wanted you to feel as stupefied as I was. Even though you’d never seen my face, I wanted you to know who I was. I wanted you to feel it was me. Your hunter.”

“I thought...”

I shake my head, denying her words before she says them. “Sia, you holding a position of power as a *woman* in the family only makes me want you more. Your power and drive are among the hottest things about you. You’re a fucking queen.”

Hand to my shirt, she pulls me in, slamming her lips against mine in a desperate kiss. I surrender to her lips, opening my mouth against hers to slide my tongue inside. She slides her arms over my shoulders and around my neck.

My hands track the curves of her waist, searching for the split of her skirt to push it aside. Gliding a palm against the supple line of her thigh, I groan into her mouth as I cup her naked ass.

I kiss her for only a few seconds longer before pulling back. Her lips are swollen, her eyes wide with lust.

“I’m gonna spend some time with my tongue in your cunt before I acquaint her with my cock.”

A look of uncertainty crosses her face, but she masks it, nodding eagerly. “Bed?” she asks awkwardly, and I contain my grin.

“No, baby. I’m gonna drop to my knees to worship you.”

She inhales shakily, and I fucking love the way her throat struggles to swallow.

Placing one last soft kiss on her lips, I drop my knees to the carpet. My hands follow languidly, caressing her curves as they slide down her body. Grabbing a thick handful of her hips, I squeeze and pull her forward. She stumbles closer.

Cupping her left knee, I look up at her. “You’re gonna rest this leg over my shoulder.”

I pick her leg up, and her right hand falls to my shoulder to stabilize her footing. Using only the tips of my fingers, I push her dress away from her apex, exposing the part of her body I’ve longed to taste from the moment I laid eyes on her.

She's bare. No underwear. No hair. Just her bare pussy waiting for my mouth.

Glancing up at her, she watches me intently.

"No underwear for me to ruin?"

She laughs. "Didn't expect I'd need them, but you destroying my lingerie, while deliciously attractive, sounds very expensive."

"I'll buy you all the lacy lingerie your heart desires."

"My heart or your teeth?"

I inch my face close to her cunt, inhaling the sinful scent of her arousal. "Both."

When my thumbs dance over the lips of her cunt, she trembles. "Watching how easy your pussy cries for me is gonna be so much fun."

Exposing the tight coil of her clit, I drag my tongue against her. Her body convulses at the touch, hands grabbing at my shaved head, a strangled breath escaping her lips.

"Diego."

I hum my approval against her soft flesh, enjoying the way my name sounds on her lips a little too much.

After a few ardent laps of my tongue, Sia finds her confidence. Head tipped back, bottom lip caught between her teeth, she grinds her pussy into my face. I build up the pressure, letting the flat of my tongue drag through her slit.

"Jesus."

Pulling back, I kiss her right thigh. "Sia, *I'm* your only savior." I kiss her left thigh. "And I'm not here to cleanse your

sins. I'm here to drown you in them. So when you pray, do it to your devil."

"Fuck."

"Better," I praise. "But Diego is preferable."

Pushing my forehead back with her palm, she pins me with a narrow stare. "If you want to fuck me, *Diego*, be a good boy and make me come."

I growl, pushing my face back against her cunt. Lips circling her clit, I suck, gently at first, letting her adapt to the sensation.

"Yes. Diego. Fuck."

When I increase the pressure, she screams out.

Her pussy lips are soft and swollen. Her clit tight and firm. Her excitement coats my lips and tongue, and I wish I'd had more foresight when I dropped to my knees and went further, lying on my back so she had no choice but to sit on my face. The only thing better than her cunt pressed against my face would be to feel her slide back and forth, fucking my mouth.

Her right leg shakes. "Diego, I don't think I can stand. I... *Fuck. Yes.*"

I make the decision for us. Falling to my ass, she cries out at the loss of my mouth.

"Come down, Sia. You're gonna finish on my face."

I lie back, and she hesitates for only a second before coming down onto her knees over my face.

"Drop."

She pauses to think, and I'm a second away from yanking her down when she whispers to herself, "The right kind of

heavy.”

“Sia?”

“The right kind of heavy,” she repeats, her voice finding its confidence. “You said I would be the right kind of heavy, that when—”

“I convinced you to sit on my face that you’d fuck me all the way up because when I felt all of you all over me, I knew I’d drop to my knees to beg you for another taste.”

She nods.

“Fuck me up, Sia.”

She lowers without another word, pushing her wedding dress back over her hips to bare herself.

My tongue massages her clit as my hands clamp roughly on her thighs. Her hips move in circles, grinding against my face.

Fuck. I need to see her tits. I need every inch of her skin.

Removing one hand from her thigh, I reach into my pocket and pull out my pocket knife. Flicking the blade out at my side, she doesn’t hear the soft *whoosh*, too consumed with her race to climax.

Gripping the dress at her ample cleavage, I pierce a hole in the delicate fabric and slice through it with ease, exposing her chest. Her tits bounce out, and I moan her name.

“*What?*” she breathes, but with both hands on the severed material, I tear the rest of it open—the scraps of silk and lace drape over her shoulder and bunch at her waist.

I suck her clit, and she rolls her hips faster, fury and lust burning in her eyes.

Knife still in my hand, the cool metal touches her skin, and she gasps, eyes falling to the weapon.

Her gaze widens.

She pauses.

The blade used to gut and slit the throat of the men who attacked her was used to desecrate her wedding dress.

I ready myself for her rage. I prepare myself for her to take the knife and plunge it into my eye. But hands grabbing her tits and her fingers pinching her nipples, she moves again, a single roll of her hips, and she comes violently against my mouth.

“Holy shit.”

While her body is languid and unsteady, I take advantage. Hands to her thighs, I flip her to her back in one swift motion. She yelps in surprise, and I use the time to kiss my way up the supple line of her stomach, flicking my tongue over the tight peaks of her nipples before crashing my lips against hers.

She moans into the kiss, but I pull back before she can lose herself in it. Her hazel eyes stare up at me in wonder, and I wish I could capture the look in her sultry gaze. Her world is centered around me, sight zoned in on the only thing she cares to see.

“You’re so fucking beautiful, Sia.”

She blinks, a touch of pink touching the balls of her cheeks.

“The fact that I’m the only man to have ever seen how stunning you are when you come makes me foolishly smug. If the world knew what I do, men would lay down their lives for a simple taste.”

She rolls her eyes, but I grab her jaw.

“I’d kill them before they got the chance. I’d gut them and smile, knowing they’d never experience heaven like I have.”

“Diego,” she whispers.

“Stand up,” I tell her, doing the same.

I help her stand, tucking a stray auburn lock of hair behind her ear. The final scraps of her dress fall to the floor, and she kicks it away.

“Lie on the bed, *tesoruccio*.”

Divesting myself of my plain black shirt and dark wash jeans, I watch as she sits on the edge of the bed, eyes never leaving me. She uses her arms to shift herself backward. Her gaze roams over my naked chest, tongue coming out to wet her lips as her eyes fall on the bulge pushing at the confines of my boxers. Sliding them from my body, I stand before her naked, and her eyes close tenderly in appreciation. When she opens them again, they’re deep with the desires of a woman craving intimacy and connection. They plead for the intoxication of pleasure. They beg for her body to be ravaged and her mind to be silenced.

I grab the cross at my neck, needing something to center me before I touch her. Before I’m tempted to pin her down and claim the purity of her body in the brutal dominance of possession.

“Diego,” she whispers. “*Please*.”

“Sia,” I warn, stepping closer, my knees hitting the edge of the bed. “You can’t beg me like that. Not this time. I’m barely hanging on to my control.”

“I don’t want you to be in control.”

My eyes close, and I crack my neck from side to side. “Trust me, *tesoruccio*. Just this once, I need restraint. I won’t make that mistake a second time.”

Her mouth opens to speak, but her words stop in her throat when I drag two fingers up her slit, decorating my digits with the climax that clings to her cunt.

I move onto the bed, my wet fingers trailing the lines of the cross dangling from my neck. “Spread your legs for me.”

Knees up, she does as I ask, opening her thighs wide enough to let me slide between them.

Hands sliding over her silky skin, they stop when they reach the magical part of her body where her thighs move into her apex.

Grabbing my cock, I slide the head up and down her pussy, coating myself in her juices. She moans, tipping her head back and closing her eyes.

“Watch, Alessia,” I murmur. “Watch me fucking claim you in a way no man has had the balls to do before.”

Coming up on her elbows, she settles her eyes on my cock, her lips parting in a silent gasp.

“That’s my girl.” I push my tip inside her, watching her gluttonous cunt swallow it with ease.

“*Oh!*”

A smirk finds its way onto my lips, and I can’t recall a time I’ve ever been as close to ecstasy as I am now. Nothing has felt as important as breaching my wife’s pussy for the very first time. *Her* very first time. Now, I understand Vincent’s and Lorenzo’s obsessions. I don’t think I’d ever be able to go back

to fucking nameless women again. Not after experiencing the perfection of Alessia. *And* I'm not even fully sheathed.

She watches me thrust forward and back, moving deeper into her with every slice of my hips. Her face is open with awe, every touch of pleasure, shock, discomfort, connection, and desire free for me to claim.

She breathes purposefully through her nose when the pain hits too hard, and she rolls her hips, pulling away from me. Grasping her tightly, I keep her close. "Stay with me, Sia."

"*Stay*," she whispers. Her hips arch upward, swallowing more of me.

"That's it," I praise.

When I'm buried completely, I pause, taking a moment to enjoy the ecstasy coursing through my veins. Fireworks explode up my spine, erupting against my rib cage and startling my heart. I rub at my sternum and grab the cross at my chest, centering myself.

"Diego."

I look at her. "Hmm?"

"Are you going to move?"

I swallow. "You feelin' okay?"

She nods, the gentle movement softening my resolve.

I grind inside her, rolling my hips.

She gasps with pleased surprise, and I groan.

I move slowly. A tender back and forth rock in and out of her wet heat. I roll my hips in languid circles. I let Sia adjust to the intrusion of my body in and against hers. She takes every shift and drive with a serene eagerness. She's taking my lead,

but her body refuses to lay dormant. Her hips raise to meet mine and follow my lead, maximizing the grind of our bodies. She takes our pleasure and sings its praises with moans and gasps and whispered words of prayer.

Yes.

Please.

Like that.

More.

Diego.

Di-ego.

The queen of Chicago begs me to break her, and the power that stems from that intimate knowledge is enough to place me on a throne, one cast in velvet skin with thighs that circle my waist and a warm cunt throbbing and dripping with humble submission. Alessia Greco may be sovereign of her city, but when we're alone, she's all but declared me her king. And I'll happily genuflect in front of her followers, knowing that behind closed doors, she'll drop to both knees in nothing but her metaphorical crown and beg me for worship.

I'm so close to coming. Placing my cross between my lips, I clench my jaw, staving off my impending orgasm. My nostrils flare with every deliberate breath. The taste of Sia's pussy dances along my lips, my necklace an ode to the generous way she fucked my face in a way I'd only fantasized about. Her plump tits bounce with every thrust, and I long to see the way they move when I can let loose and fuck her hard and rough. I want to wrap my cock up in their heavy sway and fuck them furiously enough to spray her neck and chin with cum and massage it into her perfect skin like a perfume.

Sliding my hands over her body, I lose myself in every exquisite bump and curve. “Fuck, you’re pretty,” I murmur.

She moans, and I want to hear it again.

Pressing my thumb against her clit, she bucks against the unexpected touch. “*Fuck.*”

I drive in and out of her cunt, my thumb massaging her clit. She moans again.

“Sia, baby. I’m gonna come.”

“*Yesss,*” she breathes.

It sends me over the edge, and I come hard enough that my body buckles, falling over hers. My elbows hit the mattress, and my lips immediately seek out hers. She kisses me through the orgasm that rips through my body, my final movements jerky and unpracticed as I christen her pussy with a load of cum that will be leaking out of her for days, reminding her of who she sacrificed her virginity to in a deed of ownership that I shouldn’t be so eager to claim.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

ALESSIA



I can't sleep.

Not a wink.

Diego passed out relatively quickly, which is surprising, considering he only woke up a few hours ago. But pleasantly sated, he looked drunk when he fell beside me after he came, roaring my name like a blood oath. He lay quietly, stroking my naked body until his even breathing took hold, and his hand stopped, draped over my hip.

I take the stolen moment to admire him.

He's a beautiful man. Enigmatically polarizing but not cold enough to be frightening. Not to me, anyway. Even in sleep, he looks as though the weight of the world rests on his broad shoulders. My husband is a thinker and a planner, and when things take him by surprise, I've learned very quickly that agitation wraps itself around him in outward violence and seething rage.

The men we killed allowed him to channel his shock into something seemingly productive.

My blindside has stripped away his power, and I know he's struggling to rationalize how he takes it back without force.

I slip from the bed, careful not to disturb him. Grabbing an oversized shirt from my dresser, I throw it on and move silently through the house. I check the numerous screens Diego has set up, but no alerts or notifications have arisen in the time we spent wrapped up in one another.

Pouring myself a wine, I grab my glass and the bottle and move into my courtyard. Depositing my wine, I walk into my study, picking up some charcoal and my sketchbook.

The stars shine brightly in the sky, and I take a moment to look at them when I've settled into one of the two chairs in the small space I claim for my art. My brother has asked me countless times why I don't convert the guest bedroom into a studio, but the truth is, I don't think I'd feel inspired. When I sketch, I like to sit outside with a fresh breeze on my face and the sound of life passing me by. When I paint, I like to do that with others. I've found a studio I like downtown, and when the mood hits me, they welcome me to sit with a canvas and explore with color.

Lifting my feet onto the chair, I tuck them against my backside, resting my shins against the curve of the table. Balancing my sketchpad on my thighs, I take a sip of wine before letting my hand wander over the page.

The angle of his jaw comes into focus first, the shadowed line of my charcoal moving in sharp lines to capture the severity of his features. The knowledge that I'm drawing him would likely creep him out. He'd believe I'm every cliché come to life—the virgin falling head over heels with their first lover. But I don't care. The perfection of Diego's face is coming to life on my page, and I can't stop.

My hand cramps and my fingers are black from the material smudge on the paper.

“Sia.”

“Hmm.”

“Sia.”

“One second.”

I finish the downward turn of his lips, smiling at how realistic they look.

When I lift my head, the real-life version of my art leans against the doorframe, dressed only in a pair of boxers.

“What are you doing?”

“Drawing.” I drop the charcoal to the table and rub my dirty hand over my naked thigh, transferring the black marks from one part of my skin to another.

“What are you drawing?”

I close my sketchbook and shrug.

“Did you sleep?”

I shake my head, noticing that the sun is rising and the stars have long since disappeared. “What time is it?”

“Almost six.”

My eyes widen.

“Why didn’t you sleep?”

“My body felt too electric. I felt like I was buzzing.”

He stares at me. “Are you okay?”

I smile. “I’m amazing.”

His eyelids drop. “You are amazing.”

We stare at one another for a long-drawn-out moment.

“Are you gonna try to get some rest, or would you be okay if I sat between your thighs and ate your pussy?”

I cough in surprise.

He waits a beat. “You gonna answer me?”

“I’m not going to rest.”

He pushes off the doorframe, his lips stretching open in a wide grin. “I was hoping you’d say that.”

“We can go inside if you want.” I move to stand, but he stops me with a hand on my shoulder.

“Stay where you are.”

I lower back down.

Dropping to his knees in front of me, he’s not triggered by the stenciled concrete beneath his skin. He grabs hold of both my calves, lifts and spreads, dropping my legs over the arms of the chair with precision.

Eyes rolling back in his head, he tips his face to the sky and groans aloud. “Prettiest pussy I’ve ever seen.”

Leaning forward, I cup his jaw, pulling his face down to meet his eyes. “Diego?”

“Yeah, baby.”

“Don’t ever talk about the fact that you’ve seen another pussy before mine.”

He grins. “Yours is the only one that matters, Sia.”

I release his face and smile.

“Are you sore?” He turns his attention to the center of my thighs, his fingers trailing tenderly along my inner thighs.

“Just a little.”

“You bled.”

“What?” I sit up straighter, glancing down.

Small drops of smeared blood decorate my skin, and I gasp in horror. “Oh my god. I’ll go shower. Fuck. This is embar—” My words stop abruptly as Diego’s tongue darts out and licks away the remnants of my virginity.

He doesn’t wait for a single beat before his tongue hits my clit, dragging over the already swollen bud with ardent appreciation. He hums against my sensitive flesh. “You taste like us.”

He spends the next few minutes dragging his tongue in different directions through my slit. Up and down. Side to side. Diagonal strokes that catch my clit and make me squirm. But my favorite is when he circles my sweet spot before sucking. He knows it, too. The smile lines around his eyes give him away.

I moan his name.

I beg him for more.

I lift my hips to grind myself harder against his face.

He meets every moan with more enthusiasm.

He listens to every plea and moves faster and harder, bringing me to the brink.

He hums in approval when I push against him, the soft vibration making my toes curl.

I come on a strangled breath, a broken *yes* catching on the breeze and dancing through the courtyard in a sound of pleasure no one could deny.

Placing one last kiss on my clit, he sits back and looks at me. My cum clings to his lips and glistens around his mouth and chin. Using his palm, he cleans his face before burying his hand in his boxers to squeeze his hard cock.

Pulling my legs from the armrests, I lean down, reaching for him, but he shakes his head. “You’re sore, and if you’re up for it, I’d love to fuck you tonight, so right now will have to wait.”

I suck my bottom lip into my mouth. He notices. “I could...”

But he shakes his head again. “There isn’t anywhere near enough time for the ways I want to acquaint your mouth with my cock, *tesoruccio*.”

My eyes widen, and he stands, reaching out to help me.

“We need to eat,” he tells me. “I have some work to do before our meeting at Bianchi’s in a few hours. I’d also like you to try and get some rest after we look at new apartments.”

A twinge of sadness hits me in the chest.

“You don’t want to look at apartments?”

“What? No. Of course,” I lie. “I can make a home anywhere. I want us both to be comfortable.”

He stares at me for a second longer than comfortable before nodding once. “We’ll park the apartment for now. Food or rest?”

I yawn on cue.

“Rest.” He leans down and kisses my cheek. “I’ll wake you in a few hours.”



THE DRIVE over to Salvatore's is quiet. My silly husband made the assumption I'd let him handle my baby, but I only had to lift a single eyebrow for him to sigh louder than necessary but move toward the passenger side door.

“So you're fine with me riding your pussy but not driving your car?”

“No one drives my car.”

“No one rode your pussy until I came along, either.”

I laugh. “My car is more expensive.”

He shakes his head and looks out the window. “You can't put a price on perfection, Sia.”

I sit quietly for a beat, soaking in his words. “This was the first thing I bought when I was promoted to *consigliera*. It was the first thing that ever felt like it was *mine*. I'm protective.”

Diego looks over at me. “Okay.”

“*Okay?*”

He shrugs. “Sia, I have no intention of taking away things that are important to you. You have boundaries, and I'll respect each and every one of them.”

My throat feels dry. I've never had anyone respect my boundaries. Salvatore and I don't even tend to honor one another's barriers. We bulldoze our way into each other's business with little finesse and even less care factor. It's all

we've known. His life is my life, and vice versa. Diego's consideration of my feelings is brand-new territory.

"Thank you."

He leans his head back against the leather headrest. "You don't thank people for the baseline of decency, Sia. At a bare fucking minimum, everyone should respect you, and if they don't, they're soon going to learn that your husband isn't afraid of blood when teaching them manners their family should've instilled into them when they were learning to fucking walk."

I blink, taking my eyes off the road for the briefest of seconds to look at the man who I have no doubt still despises me a little for forcing him into this mess but just threatened to make anyone who chose to disrespect me bleed.

He's a little unhinged, and I'm a lot turned on.

I clear my throat and focus back on the road.

Diego remains quiet for the rest of the distance. Who would've ever imagined that Charles forcing me into the hunt all those years ago would have led me to this moment? Me falling for a stranger in the woods.

My heart speeds up.

Falling for.

I hadn't even considered my feelings for Diego.

I know I told Salvatore I loved him. But that was a bald-faced lie. A fragment of deceit forged in a split second of desperation to save one friend's heartbreak and to protect a man I knew very little about. I never considered my lie would morph into some twisted form of reality. I'm falling for a man

who can never know *all* of me, a man who might always hate me, even on the days he threatens bloodshed to protect me.

“Good morning, Miss Bianchi.”

I smile at Francesco when I pull up to Salvatore’s mansion.

“Greco.”

“Sorry?” Francesco leans into the car.

Diego doesn’t even turn his head to look at him. “Her name is no longer Bianchi. It’s Alessia *Greco*. *Mrs. Greco*.”

I roll my lips to hide my smile.

“Of course.” Francesco winks at me. “Good morning, Mrs. Greco.”

“Good morning, Francesco.”

“You’re the last to arrive. I’ll buzz ahead and let them know you’re here.”

“Purposely on time,” I argue jovially.

Cars line my brother’s long driveway, and I travel past them, taking a forceful breath and cracking my neck one way and then the other. Pulling into my designated spot to the right of Salvatore’s home, I cut the engine and sit.

Eyes closed, I breathe through my nose, filling my lungs and expanding my stomach. I hold it and then exhale slowly through my lips. Opening my eyes, I check my appearance, running my tongue along my teeth to remove the possibility of any lipstick stains. Nothing would irk me more than giving one of Salvatore’s minions an excuse to interrupt me with something so trivial in a meeting with new associates.

I wish we could kill them all. I know Salvatore would. But our outfit isn’t big enough. We need all the manpower we can

get, even if it is at the cost of my sanity from time to time. Their disrespect costs me nothing but irritation. I don't take it to heart. If I did, I would've given up years ago. Thick skin is the only way I've survived the past decade. I would never let the archaic thought process of a man who hasn't been able to see his dick in twenty years destroy everything my brother and I have worked to protect and build. Still, I push parts of myself down every time I come face-to-face with these fuckers. Alessia fucking Bianchi is prey to no man's need for importance, and that's who I am when I fold out of my car and move toward the front door.

Diego walks a step behind me. He kept his silence the entire time I morphed into the woman Chicago needs. I pause at the threshold of the door to wait for him. He reads my cues effortlessly, stepping up beside me. I grab his hand and walk into the mansion.

We move toward the outdoor balcony.

Lorenzo, Vincent, and Leonardo sit at the sprawling table set up for lunch. They stand when we appear. They shake my hand, kiss my cheek in greeting, and congratulate me again on my nuptials.

Narciso, Amadeo, and Salvatore kiss my cheeks silently and sit back down. Four of Salvatore's high-ranking members are also in attendance. Two greet me warmly. The others merely dip their chin.

Fuckers.

Their disrespect doesn't go unnoticed by my husband, who squeezes my hand involuntarily with anger. I squeeze back, and he settles, his gaze not moving from the assholes who I wish would hurry up and die.

Two men I don't recognize stand as I approach them.

"You must be Dominic Rein." I shake the hand of the older man. "And Rocco Shay." I do the same to the younger man, who is comparable to my brother's height but is easily another half of Salvatore in shoulder width, with muscles that envelop every inch of his body.

"Pleasure to meet you, Alessia. This is one of our men." He points at a man standing by the balcony door. "Frank Tivoli."

I dip my chin in greeting.

Diego introduces himself without a quandary.

"I apologize for our tardiness."

Freddie, one of the outfit members I'd prefer to see cold and tucked into a wooden box, snorts loud enough for everyone to hear.

"What was that, Freddie?"

He smiles boorishly at me. "Oh, nothing. None of us expected any less. You're a newlywed. Women in their thirties are said to be wildcats, so you probably cleaned the young guy out." He laughs loudly at his own joke, but everyone else remains quiet.

"Talk about my wife like that again, and I'll gut you like the pig you are."

Freddie's face turns red with anger.

"Am I understood?"

"Alessia has no problem with our jokes. Isn't that right, *boss?*"

They call me boss as a sign of disrespect, but I've learned to ignore it.

I move to speak, but Diego's voice breaks through the silence before I can open my mouth.

"Let me be clear, *Freddie*. Alessia exists to you in two separate entities. One, as your *consigliera*. If you question the family or her performance as Salvatore's *trusted* adviser, I have no need to be heard or seen because her capabilities are unmatched. I've seen firsthand what she does to men threatening her position, and it involves a lot of blood." He grins. "But she also exists to you as my wife. If you speak *to* her or *about* her in a way that I deem offensive or even slightly inappropriate, I won't hesitate to kill you. Don't look at Salvatore," he bites out as Freddie's head turns in my brother's direction, pulling Freddie's attention back to him. "The fact that he hasn't intervened at any point during this exchange tells you all you need to know, and that is, he won't bat a single eyelid if I shoot you right now."

Lifting his chin, Freddie scowls at my husband.

"Now, apologize to my wife for attempting to humiliate her. No matter how piss-poor the effort was," he adds as an afterthought.

"Sorry," he mumbles.

"Louder," my brother quips.

"Sorry," Freddie says louder.

"Not a problem." I smile serenely. "Shall we get started?"

Salvatore's housekeeper serves us lunch prepared by his in-house chef, and small talk hums across the table as we eat.

Rocco talks openly about his wife and kids, the intimidating giant melting away as the family side of him shines through. He has my full attention as we discuss Chicago and Seattle and his move into the suburbs years ago to raise his five kids. Dominic offers commentary as his son-in-law talks but remains relatively silent unless spoken to directly. Conversation flows among everyone except Diego and Freddie, who choose to stare at one another with murder in their eyes. The cross around Diego's neck is held in his grasp, and he slides it along the dark chain in long and measured movements.

Freddie's anger builds with every smooth move of Diego's necklace, and it doesn't go unnoticed across the table.

"Do you have something you need to say, Freddie?" My brother cuts through the conversation with quiet violence.

"I don't like being disrespected by lower-ranking members, boss."

Salvatore nods, the movement slow, his face impassive. "Diego, can you remind Freddie of your position in New York."

"Capo."

"Seems you hold the same position," Salvatore ponders sarcastically.

Freddie sighs. "You know what I mean, boss."

Leaning back in his chair, my brother frowns. "I can't say I do."

"He's barely outta diapers."

Diego growls.

Rocco smiles.

“I took power at eighteen,” Salvatore combats.

Freddie shifts in his seat.

“But I believe it is irrelevant in this scenario. You disrespected another man’s wife. Caruso?” Salvatore calls. “What would you do if Freddie here had talked shit about Gabriella?”

“Taken a belt to his eye and watched him bleed until he begged for death.”

My brother raises an eyebrow. “Rocco,” he says. “You?”

“Beat him until he was pissing blood and then shoot him when I got bored.”

“Shall I ask Necktie here? I think we all know his reputation with a piece of barbed wire. Vincent, am I correct in assuming Freddie and that wire would become well acquainted had he disrespected Bianca like he did my sister?”

“Yeah,” Vincent murmurs, a smile in his voice. “You’d be correct, Bianchi.”

“Shall I keep going?”

Freddie opens his mouth, but my twin brother holds up a hand to stop him from speaking.

“I’ve decided your voice is irrelevant. Stand up and move farther along the balcony so your blood doesn’t get on our food.”

The old capo remains seated.

Salvatore stands and saunters around the table. “Your consiglieria was attacked yesterday. It’s the reason this meeting was called, so I know you are aware. Instead of being concerned for her well-being, instead of praising her and

Diego on their success of annihilating a genuine threat that stepped foot into our territory, you choose to be a slimy motherfucker instead.”

Grabbing the collar of Freddie’s jacket and shirt, Salvatore lifts him to his feet. The idiot struggles, his chair hitting my brother as he attempts to free himself from the boss’s grasp.

I’m conscious of the fact we have an audience. *Witnesses*. But while I want to warn my brother against the undeniable threat of onlookers, I know better than to question him in front of others, so I keep my mouth shut. Salvatore isn’t impulsive, and he’s not careless. If he’s willing to kill one of his own in front of the congregation of men surrounding us, his level of trust must be high, and if these men have my brother’s vote of confidence, they have mine.

I see the moment Freddie’s panic turns violent.

“Your father would be turning in his grave watching what you and your fat bitch of a sister have made of this family.”

“I’d stop speaking if I were you.” Salvatore drags him away from our guests. “Excuse me, gentlemen, please continue eating. I need to attend to something rather pressing.”

Dominic Rein, Rocco Shay, and the trio of mafioso from New York turn back to their food without hesitation, and I want to laugh at the absurdity of our lives. My brother is dragging a man to his death, and not one of them has batted an eyelash of concern or disdain.

“Alessia. Diego,” my brother calls.

My husband stands with an eagerness that tells me he was mere seconds away from following Salvatore without an invitation. He takes a single step but pauses, turning to Carlo,

who has always been anti-Alessia until now. Now, he's quieter than I've ever seen him.

“Do you want to join us, or have you learned what happens when you disrespect my wife?”

Carlo has his words primed and ready to go. “I'm happy to remain here.” He dips his chin in my direction in a fabricated apology, and it takes everything not to roll my eyes.

“If you don't mind...” I place a hand on Diego's arm. “I'm going to keep our guests company.”

I saw enough bloodshed yesterday. Sure, taking my revenge on Freddie for his outward disdain over the years would feel fan-fucking-tastic. But I won't let his blood ruin my favorite pantsuit, and I won't give up the opportunity to solidify our relationship with another family when the Irish have begun threatening us directly. I want heads to roll, and Freddie's is inconsequential in this much larger fight.

Diego walks away slowly, my hand skimming the tattooed skin of his arm until he's out of reach.

I spend the next thirty minutes updating the men around the table on the information Diego shared last night about the mystery woman his software cannot identify. I email Rocco, Dominic, Lorenzo, and Vincent a copy of the photos we managed to screenshot before heading over today, but none showed a hint of recognition when met with her face.

“We'll keep trying,” I say as Diego and Salvatore arrive back at the table, neither of them covered in the copious levels of blood I expected.

I raise a questioning brow, and Diego leans into my ear. “We decided we didn't have near enough time for all the ways we wanted him to feel pain. He's restrained for now.”

He kisses my jaw.

“What took you so long?”

“We were negotiating.”

I sit back and eye him warily. “Negotiating what?”

“Buying your place. It’s your home. It should belong to you. Not him.”

The sounds of the table fall away, and I stare at Diego in shock. The truth is, I know Salvatore would’ve signed the house over to me in a heartbeat had I asked. I just never gave it enough thought to care. Placing both hands on his cheeks, I kiss his lips, unperturbed by the men surrounding us. Diego lets me guide the kiss, matching my energy and letting me control the entire exchange. Pulling back, I touch my fingers to my bottom lip, checking for smudged lipstick.

“You’re good,” he murmurs.

“On that note”—Rocco clears his throat—“I miss my wife, so if there is nothing more to discuss, we’ll be on our way. We’ll check in with our associates with the photos you sent through, Alessia.” He stands, and Dominic follows his lead. “Keep us updated with what you find, and we’ll do the same.”

“Thank you for your hospitality,” Dominic adds.

They say their goodbyes, and I’m surprised at the peace that seems to have settled over me as a result of such a short lunch meeting.

When Salvatore killed Dino and finally took his rightful place heading up our outfit, the family was divided. It *remains* divided. We’re smaller than New York, and our father and Dino managed to ensure we were seen as disreputable, which is a feat in the underworld. Salvatore’s assumed slaying of our

father and then Dino's murder hasn't helped us. By all outward appearances, Salvatore Bianchi is power hungry and unethically ruthless. Men and women of the Mafia are right to be wary of the likes of Salvatore's reputation. But he's worked hard to establish a loyal bond between Caruso's outfit and ours. The Rein and Shay conglomerate is a bonus. We're no longer a small-scale threat. Salvatore knows it, and I'm finally seeing it. We'll always remain vigilant, we have to, but we no longer have to be *as* conscious of keeping untrustworthy soldiers in our ranks merely to keep numbers. Our alliance with New York gives us greater power to build the type of syndicate we've always wanted.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

ALESSIA



It's been two weeks since Freddie's final meal. I spent some time with Caterina, Gabriella Caruso, and Bianca Ferrari while the men disposed of one of Chicago's disloyal family members. These women were kinder than I thought they would be. Gabriella is relatively new to the underworld, but she's made her mark. Bianca spent most of the time focused on her sister. Worry lined her face, and concern leaked into every question she put forward about Salvatore. She's overprotective, but then rumors have swirled that she tried to undermine Lorenzo Caruso to save her sister's virtue. Her plan tied her up in Vincent, but she doesn't seem to be complaining. On the contrary, she looks very much in love. It makes me hopeful, but I didn't have the courage to ask her *how*. *How* did she make the unhinged fixer of New York fall hopelessly in love with her? Vincent Ferrari and his aloof persona isn't too different from Diego. I want to know how she broke down Vincent's walls, but her visit was about her sister and not me. So I kept my silence and swallowed my burning questions.

I could have flown privately to New York, but the family is a business, and for some reason, Chicago eats up gossip websites that feature even the most mundane stories about me. It builds publicity and takes the focus away from the under-the-table deals we run with city officials and politicians while

the media splashes stories about my style choices and personal relationships. Sometimes, I long to submit an anonymous tip that I'm as ruthless as the men the tabloids are too afraid to write about. Imagine if they knew that *I* was responsible for my father's death, that it was me and not Salvatore who wore his blood on my hands. Would they run the story and watch as women painted their hands red as a fashion statement Alessia Bianchi made spring's hottest trend? Or would they tear me down and vilify me like they do my brother? Would the paparazzi lose their confidence in my presence, afraid I'd offer them the same end I gave my father?

We'll never know because my gender offers us the ability to fill our bank accounts legally. We can splash our wealth around without question because brands trip over themselves to pay me ridiculous amounts of money to represent them with a purposefully placed handbag or coat. My union with Charles Lincoln put the Bianchi name on the map as a luxury brand. We may be lawless, but we do it with flashy cars and extravagance, so people overlook the corruption because the illicit is apparently on-trend.

I play my part for the family. People frequent our restaurants and bars, which offers us the opportunity to launder more money than we have ever been able to do before. We're rich, our money both dirty and clean, and our success makes it near impossible for authorities to differentiate the impure from the unsullied.

Diego waits outside, leaning up against a matte black RAM pickup. He stands tall when I exit the building, unconcerned by the small cluster of photographers trying to pay their mortgage. His face shows no emotion, a typical Diego mask of indifference.

“Hi.”

He steps forward, kissing me instead of greeting me with words. The kiss is only a peck, but his lips envelop mine, caressing my mouth in an unexpected and ardent show of affection.

“Welcome to Page Six, husband,” I whisper.

A smile small enough that you’d blink and miss it graces his lips. It quickly morphs into an angered frown when one of the men gets too close, his camera close enough to my face that I startle.

In one quick shift of his feet, Diego steps in front of me, shielding me with his body. He grabs the guy’s camera and drops it to the ground.

“What the fuck, man?”

“This is your first and only warning.” Diego ignores his protest. “If *anyone* stands close enough to my wife that she can smell your desperation, it’ll be the last photo you ever take.”

Everyone goes quiet. There is no exaggerated threat in his tone or sensationalized words. The sentence is a statement of fact that leaves no room for interpretation.

“Nod so I know you understand.”

They all nod.

“Now move the fuck on so I can check on my wife.”

“You owe me a thousand bucks for breaking my camera.”

My eyes widen.

Diego steps forward, looks the guy in the eye, and crushes his boot against the broken lens. “Another word, and it’ll be

your face.”

The photographer huffs but picks up the remnants of his camera and walks away.

Diego waits until we're alone before turning back to me. “You okay?”

“One hundred percent. That was nothing. I've had worse.”

He growls, and I step into him to feel it rumble against my body. I kiss him, but he pulls away before I can slide my tongue into his mouth.

“Sia,” he hums. “The things I want to do to you...”

I nod, a buzz of anticipation vibrating on my lips.

“We don't have time. Your flight was delayed, and everyone is already at my parents' house.”

I drop my head to his chest.

“My mom would kill me if I didn't show up.”

I look up at him with a small smile. “You afraid of your mom?”

He laughs. “I'm afraid that if I don't share you with her now, she'll spend the next few days at my house, and I plan on living with my cock buried deep inside you while you're here, which would be awkward with her hovering around.”

My laughter catches me off guard, and I snort.

Opening my car door, he waits until I've climbed into my seat before closing me in and moving my suitcase onto the backseat.

We've been driving for five minutes when he says. “It's nice to see you.”

I lick my lips. “I’ve missed you, too.”

He doesn’t attempt to hide his grin.



COSIMO AND ANNA’S home is brimming with family. Mafioso, their wives, and countless children. In truth, I hadn’t thought this through and likely should’ve brought a man or two of my own for protection. Diego sensed my dilemma the second we arrived, curling an arm around my waist and placing his lips against my ear. “You’re safe, but if it makes you more comfortable, I will stay with you at all times.”

“It makes me more comfortable.”

I know I will have to get used to being in what we once deemed a rival territory without my men. I can’t exactly turn up to dinner with the in-laws with three men who stand guard as Anna Greco asks me to pass the potatoes. I orchestrated this union, so somewhere in my mind, I believed Diego to be trustworthy. My instincts don’t tell me I’m wrong. But it’s not Diego I’m worried about. I make a mental note to speak with Salvatore about our ability to spare one or two men for my own assurance when I’m in New York.

Hours pass, and aside from the few people I’ve already met and Diego’s parents, I can’t recall a single person’s name. Drinks flow, and the food is endless. My face hurts from smiling, and my body protests with exhaustion. My legs feel heavy, and I have to blink to offer my eyes a sliver of reprieve.

Anna pulls me toward a group of women who have easily polished off five bottles of champagne in the time we’ve been

here. I let her introduce them, forgetting their name the moment she says it.

“Can you believe it, ladies? Female hierarchy in the family.” Anna is preening, and so caught up in bragging that she doesn’t notice the irritated glare of the women I can’t be certain she counts as friends.

I change the subject, complimenting a dress or set of earrings as I make small talk to remove the animosity shooting through the group. Tensions ease, and I sip my wine slowly.

“So, Alessia,” one of the women says. “Any immediate plans for you and Diego to start a family?”

I’m not quick enough to hide my shock, placing a hand over my mouth to excuse my unladylike cough.

“Oh, don’t sound so surprised.” A woman to Anna’s right laughs.

“Diego’s young,” another woman comments.

“He is,” I agree.

“But you’re almost forty?”

In moments like this, I envy the way men deal with conflict. First, I could guarantee that not *one* person has questioned Diego on our plans to start a family. Second, no one would be brave enough to comment on his age for fear of being disrespectful. He is a capo. I am a consiglieria. But as a woman, I’m expected to hold myself in a more dignified manner. I let my mind wander to an alternate reality where I could pull out a gun and shoot the bitch between the eyes.

Instead, I smile. “I’m thirty-five.”

The woman next to me nudges me. “That body clock would be ticking. You don’t want to be a geriatric mother

when Diego looks as good as he does. Your body won't bounce back as quickly as it would've when you were your husband's age. You're a voluptuous woman; pregnancy isn't always kind to women with meat on their bones."

I now understand Anna's need to flash me as a commodity in front of these women. They're vultures. The kind of women who insult others to make themselves important.

I glance around the room. "Vincent," I call out, and he frowns, turning away from his conversation with his father-in-law. "Could I trouble you for a moment of your time?"

The women around me look among themselves, discomfort creasing around their mouths as Vincent Ferrari moves toward me cautiously. Vincent holds a very particular reputation across all Mafia families. He spent most of his career as an enforcer. One that, by all rumors, very much enjoys bloodshed and suffering. He now sits beside Lorenzo as his consigliere, but his reputation precedes him.

"Yes?" He speaks directly to me when he reaches the group, ignoring everyone else.

"We were just discussing the viability of procreation in our senior years. You're thirty-five?"

"Nine."

I nod. "Hm. A little older than me. Christina, was it?" I touch the arm of the woman who felt the need to lecture me on my body.

She nods but doesn't speak.

"Christina was warning me about the very real threat of being a parent when you have a *much* younger spouse. I thought rather than her having to speak to you separately about it later, it would be easier to include you in the conversation

now. These kind women would like to know your sperm count levels, you know, considering your body clock is also ticking.”

I sip my wine, ignoring the way Christina’s face turns bright red.

“No. I... I didn’t mean...”

“You’re not used to having female leadership in your outfit. I came here hoping to have a conversation with you ladies to get to know you better at my mother-in-law’s request. Don’t ever mistake my approachability or kindness as a weakness. You would *never* speak to one of my male counterparts the way you did me because you know that your husband would pay dearly for your indiscretion. I am no different, and I would have no problem letting a bullet find residence in your husband’s kneecap right now, or yours, for that matter. It’s the advantage of being a woman. The mafiosos you’re used to...” I gesture toward Vincent, who has a sinister smirk pulling the corner of his mouth. “They despise violence against women. I have no such boundaries. Disrespect me again, and you’ll learn that the hard way.”

“Of course,” Christina rushes out.

“As a matter of fact,”—I raise my voice—“should I hear any of you discuss anyone’s body or fertility journey without their explicit permission, you will become acquainted with me in a way you don’t want to.”

I turn away without another word and storm toward the kitchen, but Leonardo hooks his arm in mine, maneuvering me outside without conversation.

Fresh air hits my face, and I breathe it in.

“You okay?”

“Where is Diego?”

“Thankfully, with Lorenzo.”

I roll my shoulders. “He’ll be mad?”

Unscrewing the lid on a bottle of Irish whiskey, Leonardo ignores me. “I found this in Cosimo’s office. It was sitting in a locked cabinet. Must be important or expensive.”

“So you took it?”

“Of course I did.”

“What will Cosimo do if he sees me drinking his sacred whiskey?” Not that I honestly care at this point. Those women pissed me off, and the burn of alcohol might dilute some of my animosity.

Women who tear down others are a great weakness in this world. We should be standing united. Once women collectively accept that we’re just as powerful, if not more than our male counterparts when we stand as a unified group, we’ll move toward a future that we deserve—one where our worth isn’t determined by a number on a scale or our ability to reproduce. Our intellect, drive, and ambition aren’t substandard. Our capabilities are stronger—we can manage all we do while running households and businesses. Men belittle us every chance they get. We take on more than they could ever handle, yet a lot of them still consider themselves superior because they can swing their cock around.

What would Christina have said had I told her I, like her, was forced into a marriage in my *prime* child-rearing years, but my husband was impotent? Loyalty is something I pride myself on. My marriage may have been a farce, but my vows weren’t. Diego will be my first opportunity to consider a family, and he told me without hesitation that he never even wanted to get married. I’m not stupid enough to ask him about

kids when I'm still convinced he hates me a little bit less than he likes to fuck me. He likes the feel of his cock inside me, but that doesn't mean he's forgiven me for the life I have forced him into. Even if I was trying to save his life, he'll never know that.

“Thinking pretty hard there, Alessia.”

I yank the bottle from Leonardo's grasp and lift it to my lips. Swallowing a sizable gulp, I shake my head, my eyes watering at the way the liquid burns.

I hand it back.

“I was wondering why people have to be so shitty.”

The underboss of New York laughs. “When people are filled with toxicity, the only way they know how to expel it is to throw it at others. Unfortunately, all that does is multiply that festering poison inside them and make them feel worse.”

“We should feel bad about the burden of their negativity even though they bring it on themselves?” I question curiously.

“Absolutely,” Leonardo declares. “Imagine being that miserable *all* the time. How exhausting. I'd much prefer to smile at their venomous frown and live my life knowing I go to sleep at night with women in my bed, money in my bank account, and stolen whiskey on my tongue.”

I smile, taking the bottle back.

“Meaning, I live my life the way *I* want, and I do it unapologetically. How someone *thinks* I should live my life is none of my business.”

“Your ability to carry children or keep a man's attention likely isn't questioned daily.”

He shrugs. “My nickname in the outfit is Romeo,” he tells me. “A lot of the assholes in there”—he gestures to the house—“think all I care about is pussy and bloodshed. But there’s a reason why Lorenzo has me as his second-in-command. There’s also a reason why none of them say it to my face. They’re afraid of me but will still ridicule me behind my back. They’re jealous that I manage to live my best life while surpassing them all in my ability to be a badass motherfucker.”

I drink quietly.

“You’re a badass motherfucker, too, Alessia. Even I wouldn’t be brave enough to publicly question Necktie on his sperm count and refer to him as a fossil to prove a point.”

My laughter starts small but builds steadily until I’m chuckling loud enough that I cover my mouth to stifle the sound.

Leaning into me, Leonardo takes the bottle of whiskey. “Diego is listening. He’s creepy like that. Don’t startle him. He might turn to stone.”

My laughter gets louder.

He raises his eyebrows, mischief dancing on his face. He’s incredibly handsome. A schoolboy charm that works in mysterious ways with his reputation in the underworld. He’s both loved and despised. Some call him immature. Others see his juvenile charisma as his greatest weapon. He’s often underestimated. Looking him in the eye, watching the way his tongue dances over his teeth in flirtation, I don’t know how anyone could be stupid enough to sell his threat short. The man could strip you naked and fuck you while you begged him to slit your throat if he’d just let you come.

He bites his red lips, clearing his throat. “It’s a shame Diego found you first, Sia.” He speaks louder than necessary, the name only Diego uses for me rolling off his tongue in artificial amour. “I’m not sure he can handle you the way you deserve.”

“Sia.” My husband’s voice courses over my body, clawing its way up my spine to make me shiver.

Leonardo winks at me as Diego steps into sight.

“Fuck off, Leo.”

The underboss for New York stands, his hands held up in surrender. “Was just rescuing your wife from your fourth cousin or whoever the fuck she is while you were taking a shit or diddling yourself in the bathroom.”

The look in Diego’s eyes tells me he could kill his friend right now and not regret it.

“Now.” Leonardo holds up the bottle of whiskey in his hands. “I’m going to take this and see if there is a woman inside that I’m *not* related to who might be looking for someone to cuddle tonight.”

We watch his exit, and I decide that I know what side of the Leonardo Caruso fence I sit on, and it’s one filled with admiration and appreciation.

“You like him,” Diego comments.

I turn back, a soft smile on my face. I don’t need to answer. It wasn’t a question but a statement that he needed to vocalize for his sanity.

“I wasn’t in the bathroom,” he adds, still standing a few steps away from me. “I was checking in with Lorenzo.”

“Filling him in on all Chicago’s secrets,” I joke.

He gives me a strange look. “Christina is a bitch. Her loser husband cheated on her with the nanny, and she’s convinced herself that every man cheats so she doesn’t feel so alone. That sounds like I’m making an excuse for her, but I’m not. I want you to know that it’s not personal.”

Sliding my hands into the pockets of my pants, I let myself look at him unabashedly. His jaw is set tight, which isn’t abnormal, but when paired with the narrowing of his eyes, his temper ricochets from his face like an almighty bellow of rage.

It’s annoying that even bristling with fury, he’s more handsome than anyone I’ve laid eyes on. I mentally pat myself on the back. Trapping a husband as delicious as Diego Greco isn’t the *worst* decision I’ve ever made.

“You’re mad?”

He nods once.

“I won’t apologize for standing up for myself.”

His frown deepens. “I’m not mad about that.”

The line between my brows pulls together tightly.

“We’re leaving.”

I stand, looking back at the house. “I need to say goodbye to your parents.”

“We don’t have time for that.”

I step toward the house. “It’ll only take a second. I want them to like me...”

“You let Leonardo flirt with you when you knew I was listening.”

I pause.

“I only *heard* a recount of the way you stripped Christina down, and my cock is hard. I’m annoyed I wasn’t there to witness it firsthand.”

I swallow.

“I came out here searching for you, only to find you with Leonardo. You let him joke about you being his.”

I step toward him. “I belong to me, Diego.”

“Wrong.”

Our bodies flush, I drag my hand down his chest, enjoying the possessive gleam in his eye.

“You claimed me, Sia. I’m still not sure why, but the why is irrelevant when it comes to your body and how it responds to me. You forget that I told you from the very start that I planned on claiming you, and you were silly enough to make it legally binding,” he whispers.

He picks up my hand and kisses the ring adorned with purple stones.

“I’m going to take you into the forest, I’m going to hunt you down, and this time, when I catch up, I’m gonna fuck you against the dirt and leaves, and you’re gonna bring the fantasy you’ve permanently tattooed into my mind into reality. You’re gonna feed my obsession, *tesoruccio*, like the dutiful wife you are.”

I swallow thickly.

“My sweet prey, I hope you’re ready.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

ALESSIA



*M*y body is covered in sweat, my breathing labored. I pause, leaning my back against the trunk of a tree.

Even the negligee I changed into is too heavy. I pull it away from my stomach, enjoying the breeze that finds my damp skin.

Diego drove for almost two hours before pulling up to a sprawling property in Water Mill. The house was dark. The land was filled with trees and a creek that broke the grass plains of the front yard and the forest out the back. It would have to be acres of land. *In New York.*

“Business asset,” he said when I turned to him wide-eyed and mouth agape.

He gave me ten minutes to change and a thirty-second head start. I’m at a disadvantage because this land is new. Our roles are reversed. In Chicago, while I was the one being hunted, I always felt a semblance of control. But here, I’m the definition of prey. The sky is dark, and aside from the break of the moon between the treetops, our gameboard is cast in shadows. I had a moment of panic when I first started running, the breath of the men that caught me last time careening across my neck in a trauma I’d much sooner forget. But I won’t let

them take this from me. I know Diego enough to know he would never have brought me here unless it was safe.

I push off the tree I'd found rest against, filling my lungs before listening carefully.

I ran straight for the trees when he began counting. He would've followed my path into the brush. I've zigzagged and run back over my course to confuse him, but my wolf is clever. My attempts to deceive him wouldn't be swallowed easily.

The soft flow of the creek echoes the sound of the night, and a small splash makes me smile. I turn away from the water and move on gentle feet in the opposite direction.

"You're not silly enough to fall for such an obvious diversion."

His voice is in front of me, but I can't see him.

"Maybe I'm hunting you," I whisper.

A twig cracks, and I spin, sprinting left to put as much space between us as possible. His heavy footfalls thunder behind me, and my heart rate skyrockets, launching into my throat.

Anticipation buzzes in my fingertips and toes. Excitement tightens between my legs, and panic pushes me farther and faster.

"Tesoruccio."

This is uncharted territory for us both. I've never wanted so badly to be pinned against the dirt and ravaged. But a pinch of fear refuses to let me give up running. He'll need to catch me.

I dart between trunks. I can't look back because it will slow me down, so I have no idea where he is or how close I am to being captured.

My eyes rush between the ground and directly in front of me. I dodge rocks and skim branches, ready to make me stumble. He follows my path with ease.

My lungs burn, and my legs quiver with exhaustion. Spotting a wide enough trunk that my body won't be visible behind, I sprint past it, doubling back farther up, tiptoeing with a wide enough berth to be disguised in the shadows.

I hold my breath as I move.

I can't hear his footsteps, and I pray he's taken the bait and continued forward. Reaching the tree, I plaster myself against the trunk, sliding around it. Confident I'm alone, I turn and let my back fall heavily against the splintered wood.

I don't know how long we've been out here, but I'm dead on my feet and unsure how long I can keep it up. Eyes closed, I concentrate on filling my lungs as silently as possible. My stomach expands with every inhale, and I exhale through my mouth.

The tension in my shoulders falls away, and brushing my hair off my face, I open my eyes and scream.

Diego stands less than three feet in front of me, a smile of victory on his handsome face.

I don't have time even to shift before he pushes his body roughly against me as his lips slam onto mine. He swallows my scream with a heady growl.

Big hands on my ass, he lifts me, and while my heart feels ready to give out, my legs move on their own accord, wrapping around his waist to bring us closer together.

His lips are everywhere. He attacks my mouth, then moves his assault down my neck, his tongue and teeth scoring my skin with the marks of a man lost to lust. His nose skates over my cleavage, his teeth biting into the ample swell with a groan of appreciation. He licks my jaw and moves back to my mouth.

“You’re supposed to fight me, Sia. You’re not supposed to take me like a good girl.”

I kiss his neck, my tongue reaching out to suck the small black cross that dangles from his ear into my mouth. I bite his earlobe, and a jagged hum rumbles up the line of his throat.

“Fuck.” I close my eyes, a tender sound of satisfaction and appreciation dancing in my stomach and breaking through my lips. “That’s hot.”

He twists away from the tree, dropping to his knees and letting my back fall to the cool earth. My legs remain twisted around his hips, and he pushes at my silk nightie. Exposing my naked body inch by inch, he leans over me, using the soft material to tie my hands together above my head.

“Keep them there, or I won’t let you come.”

My head moves eagerly, sticks catching in my messy hair and scratching my neck.

The callous touch of Diego’s hands trace over my body, pausing at random intervals to pinch and squeeze. First, my neck, the slender column an easy target for his large palm. He watches the way his knuckles turn white as he cuts off my airway.

“You gonna fight me yet? Or still being a good little sacrifice?”

I lift my hips to grind against the generous bulge in his jeans.

He bites his bottom lip.

His touch tracks downward, both hands massaging the heavy sway of my tits. His eyes darken, and reaching for his belt, he rushes to undo his pants and free his straining cock.

I cry out when he falls free, a thick droplet of precum decorating his flared head.

Pushing at my thighs, he frees his hips, moving his knees over my legs to bracket my waist.

Hooded eyes watch as he slides his cock between my tits. Pushing them together, he thrusts forward and back, nostrils flaring every time his crown hits my chin.

“Tell me to stop. Tell me to fuck you. Tell me not to spray my cum all over your face.”

I shake my head, and his grip tightens.

“Tell me to stop, Sia.” He thrusts harder, his voice grit through the granite lock of his jaw.

I arch my back and moan loudly toward the sky.

“Fuck!” he spits, his body jerking. “Tell me to stop!” he growls.

“Be a good boy, Diego,” I taunt instead, “and come on my face.”

Head tipped back to the sky, he roars into the night, cum shooting from his cock and spraying over my chin and neck. Letting my tits go, he grabs his cock and aims it at my mouth. He jerks it a few more times, his orgasm landing in my mouth and across my cheeks.

His eyes are wild, his cock still hard. Breathing heavily, he narrows his gaze at me.

“I’m gonna fuck you so hard you’ll feel as though my cock is lodged inside you for days after I finish.”

I smile.

He shifts back. “Fight me now, Sia, and it won’t be pleasant. You’re gonna take everything I give you like the dirty little whore you’ve shown me you are.”

I gasp.

Hands on my hips, he flips me onto my stomach with little effort. He slaps my ass before squeezing it. Burying a hand into my hair at the nape of my neck, he pulls my head up, my arms—still above my head—dragging against the earth. I wince in pain, but my stomach tightens with excitement.

I’m so wet between my thighs, and my pussy throbs.

“*Diego.*”

He hears the plea easily enough.

Using his knee, he kicks my legs apart.

Dirt and leaves stick to his cum drying over my neck and face.

“Let’s see how wet your cunt is.” He slides his fingers into my pussy, and I cry out in pleasure. “Fucking dripping, *tesoruccio. Dripping.*”

He drags his fingers out, and seconds later, his cock slams inside.

“Diego!”

“Look at that greedy cunt taking me in one swift swallow.”

He's relentless in the way he fucks me. Body pressed against mine, he thrusts his hips forward with a power that shifts my whole body. I slide through the harsh earth with every drive until my tied hands push against the base of a tree. I push against it.

"Knees," he groans. "Get up on your knees."

He pulls me up, and I shift into place, palms pressed against the jagged bark of the tree, elbows buried into the dirt, my knees tattooed with twigs and stones that dig into my skin. His thrusts were hard, but they hit deeper this way, and wetness spills over my cheeks. The sheer overwhelm of how alive my body feels at his mercy is something I can't fathom.

Diego Greco can strip away my control and bare my vulnerabilities in a way I *never* imagined could feel powerful. But it's *all* that consumes me. Wrapped up in this man, this hunter, I'm a goddess, bared and beautiful and *enough* to bring him to his knees.

A sob breaks from my lips, and he knows without looking at my face that it's not a sound of grief or pain.

"That's it, Sia. Take it all from me, baby."

I push back when he drives forward.

Reaching around, his hand seeks out my clit, his fingers rubbing back and forth in the same rough and desperate way our bodies clash.

I begin trembling.

Diego feels it because he moves faster.

"*Tesorruccio*." His hips still, and he pinches my clit.

I buckle beneath him, falling to the ground, and he follows me down. We come together on incoherent shouts, our names

echoing into the night and screaming back at us in an intimacy
I don't think I'll ever be able to let go of.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

DIEGO



*W*e've been married for a few months, and I'm still oblivious as to why Sia forced my hand. She's comfortable in her independence. She has no problem spending time away from me when our work obligations dictate it. She likes to be fucked a little harder on the days we're reunited, but that works for me because without vocalizing the words, it lets us both know that we've missed whatever fucked-up version of a marriage each of us is pretending we fell into the right way.

I stepped into this marriage pretending I hated her for pulling my strings. She made me a puppet, and I don't care if the world believes that, but I know there's more to the story. I don't know if what we have will ever be real to her, but it's starting to feel real to me, and I don't know how to swallow that if I'm the only one who believes that. I wasn't lying when I told Caterina all those months ago that I had no intention of ever getting married. Marriage is complicated. I already think about Sia more than anything else. When I'm not with her, I obsess about where she is and what she's doing. I find myself fixating on whether she's thinking about me. I'm broaching the reality of a lovesick fool, and I couldn't tell you if my wife orchestrated a wedding to infiltrate New York and kill me in my sleep. Not that I think Sia would wait until I was asleep to kill me. She'd look me in the eye without a doubt.

She's hiding something, and I keep waiting for her to be honest with me and tell me *why* she needed this for whatever secret she seems so intent on keeping.

“Why did you tell Salvatore you were in love with me?”

She chokes on her coffee.

I wait for her to gather her composure.

“What?”

“Sia, don't do that. You heard me.”

“How do you know I don't love you?”

We're sitting outside where I found her drawing in the early hours of the morning. She's sitting across my lap, her naked thighs free for me to drag my fingertips across. She still has scratches from the forest over a week ago. Deep welts that turn my cock to stone every time I see them.

I squeeze her leg. “Because I'd feel it.”

She looks into my eyes. “Do you think?”

I stare back. “I believe so. I can't imagine a feeling as potent as love could be mistaken for anything else.”

She looks disappointed by my admission but blinks it away. “I have my reasons.”

“Don't you think I deserve to know, considering you roped me into it all?”

The line of her neck moves purposefully with the strength she takes to swallow. “I can't.” The whispered words beg me to leave it alone.

But I don't. “Why?”

Placing her coffee mug down, she twists, straddling my lap. Hands cupping my face, she brushes her thumbs over my cheeks. “It’s nothing sinister,” she assures me, but caught up in her hazel eyes, I can’t decide if she’s lying. “I did it to protect people.”

“People?”

She shrugs. “People.”

“How many people?”

She looks down, tracing her fingertips over my chain and following the line of the cross. “Two.”

“Two people.”

“Hm.”

“What are their names?”

She shakes her head, leaning forward to kiss my chest. “I can’t tell you that. But I believe them both to be good people.”

“Sia,” I sigh.

“Will you go down on me?”

“You’re deflecting.”

“No,” she argues softly. “Salvatore and I have a meeting this morning. The family has questions about Freddie’s death, and I feel icky. I want to forget.”

“You had nothing to do with that old cunt’s death.”

Her lips brush over my chest. “Or I could suck your cock? I haven’t done that yet.” She moves to crawl off my lap, but I stop her.

“Sia. You’re not sucking my dick to relieve your anxiety about a misogynistic asshole who deserved to die.”

She pouts.

“I’ve fantasized about how these pretty lips will look wrapped around my dick more times than you’ll know.” I lift her chin, bringing her mouth to mine to kiss her. “But you’re not getting down on your knees for me before you come face-to-face with a group of men. I’ll be worshipping you on *my* knees so you remember that you’re a fucking queen, and every single one of those fuckwits should be kissing your feet.”

I stand with her in my arms and walk into the house.

Less than three minutes later, she’s writhing on the sofa, her legs on my shoulders, my fingers buried in her pussy, and my face pressed against her heat, licking and sucking as she sings my praises with moans and pleas for *more, more, MORE!*

She comes violently, the wet rush of her climax clinging to my lips and fingers.

Body lax, her eyes are hooded with pleasure, and she shudders as I pull my mouth and hand from her cunt. Pushing up high on my knees, I move in to kiss her, but she stops me with her hands to my face. Tongue out, she leans forward, licking my bottom lip and tasting herself on my skin.

Sliding my fingers back inside her, I soak them in her orgasm, and she squirms. Crashing my mouth to hers, I kiss her, my lips moving with frenzy. Pulling my fingers from her cunt, I brush her submission over my cross, praying she belongs to me like this for the rest of my fucking life.

“Why do you do that?”

“Do what?” I chase her lips.

She kisses me again but speaks against my lips. “With your necklace.”

I pull back slowly and raise an eyebrow.

“You collect my cum and follow the sign of the cross.”

I smirk. I didn't think she'd noticed. “Praying that this doesn't end.”

She narrows her eyes, and I stand. “Do you wash it?”

I laugh loudly. “Yes, *tesoruccio*. I scrub my necklace every morning and evening when I shower, making sure it's ready for my next prayer. We're late for your meeting. I'm going to make a few calls while you get ready.”

“You can't come to a family meeting, Diego.”

I frown. “Like fuck I can't. You had nothing to do with Freddie's death. If they're going to put anyone on trial, it'll be me and Salvatore.”

“I don't need you to handle this for me.” Her tone is biting, and I stop reaching for my phone, focusing completely on her.

“I'm *not* handling this for you. I'm coming because if your outfit decides someone needs to be punished for Freddie's death, the person responsible should be present. Sia, treat this like you would any other meet. Order my punishment if it's deemed appropriate. I don't care, but you're not walking into a firing squad for something you had no hand in.”

“There is no firing squad.” She lifts her chin. “Freddie disrespected his *consigliera*. Salvatore and I will communicate that well enough.”

“Okay,” I concede, hating that she would ever believe I would need to handle anything for her. “But if it's okay with you, I'd still like to be there.”

She walks toward her bedroom. “That's fine.”



THEY'VE BEEN GOING AROUND in circles for twenty minutes. My head hurts, and I know Salvatore is ready to kill at least four of his men. But Alessia prides herself on being fair, which means she's offering every one of these assholes a chance to speak when it should have been a two-minute monologue from her or her brother.

My brow furrows as Sia's voice rises. She's answering the same question *again*, justifying why the prick had to die. I want her eyes, but she shuns me, refusing to focus on me for fear she'll be judged as needing my approval or support. Her eyes wander over the group of men in front of her purposefully, and she holds her voice steady as she addresses them. Her gaze flicks over me, moving on again almost immediately. But she doubles back, watching as I drag the tail of the onyx cross that hangs around my neck over my bottom lip. Sucking it into my mouth, the taste of this morning explodes on my tongue, and it takes everything I have not to groan aloud. My wife watches on, transfixed as I push the jewelry back between my lips, letting it fall against my shirt. I lick my bottom lip, my eyelids dropping the way they do when I watch her come. Our stare caught, I smirk.

Praying that this doesn't end.

Sia focuses back on what she was saying, ignoring me for the rest of the meeting. But I see the way she adjusts in her seat, rubbing her thick thighs together.

"It concerns me that Freddie was killed without a unanimous vote, *and* it was done in front of witnesses," Carlo

argues.

Sia's eyes close. "Six of our ranking members were in attendance. Not one of you chose to speak up in the moment."

"None of us wanted to be served the same fate," Carlo mumbles, and I wish I'd dragged him out of the last meeting by his collar so I wasn't forced to look at his face right now. He'd be more useful dead.

"Every one of your questions has been the same," Sia grits. "You are rephrasing in an attempt to get myself or Salvatore to admit we fucked up. We didn't. Freddie fucked up, and it wasn't the first time. I have been belittled in the family for the last fucking time."

Her voice cuts out across the table.

"I swallowed your insults and let you doubt me, *knowing* they were all unfounded. I stupidly believed my abilities would change your small minds. I was wrong. So, we're playing a new game. I am your superior. Moving forward, if *anyone* questions my authority based on my gender, there will be no possibility for you to justify or argue your reasoning. I'll slit your throat and paint my lips with your blood. Now, get the fuck out of my face before I'm forced to do that."

Anger bristles off her as she stares each one of the fuckwits down. Standing, they each dip their chins in a show of respect. Freddie won't be the last of them to die. It's a given. Some of them are too set in their ways. But, for now, they've heard Sia's warning loud and clear.

I wave to them as they leave, enjoying the disdain in their eyes, knowing I slit their friend's throat.

Salvatore moves to speak, but Sia holds up a hand. "Whatever you have to say is going to have to wait. Excuse

us.”

She grabs my hand, and I go willingly as she pulls me through her brother’s mansion to the powder room closest to the front door. Slamming the door behind us, she whirls on me. “You’re a liar.”

I lean casually against the vanity. “How so?”

She steps forward. “Your cross,” she accuses. “You said your little ritual was you praying that we don’t end.”

I let out a soft bark of laughter. “My *little ritual* has more than one goal.”

“Pray tell.”

“I wasn’t lying.” I shrug. “It is a silent prayer. But it also lets me taste you when I miss you.”

She blinks widely. “Miss me? You were sitting right across from me.”

“Hm,” I agree. “But you were mad, and while I’d never interrupt business dealings, especially when you’re being all boss bitch because it makes my dick hard, I don’t like seeing you frustrated.”

“And tasting the remnants of my cum does what exactly?”

I’m standing so close that I can smell her. Looking down at her, I lift a thumb, dragging it gently over her bottom lip. “It reminds me of all the ways I can make you happy, of all the ways I can erase their pitiful attempts to undermine you and remind you that even though you played me like a puppet, I’d still drop to my knees and beg for whatever scraps of attention you were willing to give me in front of every single one of them.”

One second, she's staring at me, her eyes wet with tears, and the next, she's kneeling in front of me, unbuckling my belt and undoing my jeans.

"Sia," I murmur.

"Please," she begs, her voice gentle with the plea inside of it. "I need you to know I feel the same way. I need you to know how much I would sacrifice for you. I would do this in front of them all so they all knew how at your mercy I really am. I may be their queen, but you're my savior."

I grip her hair, her words doing something stupid to my heart. It seizes in my chest, beating rapidly and pausing intermittently when her eyes meet mine.

Her hands rip at my pants and boxers. My cock bounces out, thick and hard, and a breath away from her lips.

"If I do it wrong..."

"You couldn't if you tried," I reassure her. "But if I'm too rough."

She shakes her head. "Diego, too rough doesn't exist between you and me."

Her tongue licks out, dragging through the slit at my tip, and I clench my free hand at my side, searching for control.

Wetting her lips, she kisses my head tenderly before sliding them over my crown and engulfing it in her sweet-as-sin mouth.

"*Sia*," I hiss, and she rewards the desperate plea with an ardent roll of her tongue.

She moans at the way I jerk, and I can't help myself. Using my hand in her hair, I push my dick deeper into her mouth.

She takes the cue, swallowing as much of me as she can down before I feel the resistance of her throat.

I groan. “Baby, relax. Let me go deeper.”

She breathes through her nose, her throat opening when she exhales slowly, inching her farther down.

“*Fuuuuck.*”

I guide her, moving her head back, enjoying the way her tongue slides against my length before directing her back down. She picks up the rhythm easily, her head and tongue moving in tandem.

“Give me your hand,” I grit between my teeth.

She follows the instruction without delay, and I wrap her small palm around the base of my cock, squeezing to show her the kind of pressure I like. Without further instruction, she moves her hand in cadence with her mouth. She gags when she pushes too far, and I like the sound a little too much, growling my approval whenever it happens.

Her hazel eyes are wide with wonder and wet with the tears my cock force to leak onto her cheeks every time my crown pushes against the resistance of her throat. I’m fucking her virgin mouth in a way she should spit on me for, but instead, her eagerness only grows with how rough I am.

“Sia, baby. You swallow my cock so good.”

She hums around me, and the vibration of her mouth buzzes along my dick in a promise to swallow every drop of my cum.

“You’re gonna swallow my cum like that too.”

She nods, her tongue lapping at the straining need of my cock. Spit runs over her chin.

Gaining confidence, she lifts her free hand, sliding it into my boxers to cup my balls.

I yell out her name, punching the wall to stave off my orgasm. It cracks through the plaster, and I yank it back, pushing it against the solid fixture of the wall to stabilize myself.

“Like that, Sia. Baby, don’t fucking stop. Don’t. Fucking. Stop.”

She doesn’t, and my cock starts jerking before I’m ready, cum spilling from my tip and shooting into her mouth with merciless appreciation.

Using her hair, I pull her off my dick when it can’t handle anymore. Sitting back on the balls of her feet, she looks up at me. With her hair mussed, lips swollen, and mascara smudged under the damp line of her eyes, she’s more of a queen than I’ve ever seen her. Alessia Greco may believe I’m her savior, but in a world where I believed my isolation was my greatest strength, her happiness is slowly growing into my only duty.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

ALESSIA



“*I* trapped him.”

Caterina pauses, chopsticks in the air, the sushi she had held tightly between the two sticks dropping back onto her plate. “Trapped who?” She looks around awkwardly, making sure no one saw.

“Diego,” I whisper.

Caterina’s eyes narrow, and the smile she offers borders more on confusion than joy. “I’ve known Diego all my life,” she says. “He doesn’t strike me as a man who can be trapped.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

I haven’t touched my lunch, the sashimi sitting as pretty as it was when placed in front of me. I move it around my plate with my chopsticks.

“I mean, if Diego has been *trapped* as you say, it’s because he wanted to be.”

Guilt has manifested into something liken to regret, and I rarely, if ever, allow myself to fall down that negative rabbit hole. Too many facets of my life could eat away at my soul if I allowed them to. It’s easy to ignore the sins of others and justify their rationale, but misdeeds that rest solely on your shoulders are a heavy weight to bear. What-ifs stifle your

ability to move on and up. You can spend your life on a roundabout of contrition that will send you crazy. You'll isolate yourself from the people who love you because self-loathing can become burdensome to others. Negativity breeds negativity. You fall out of love with yourself, and your self-worth will become a distant memory. I long ago forbid myself to even contemplate the act of regret. Had Salvatore killed my father, I wouldn't question his motive or his moral compass. Yet, I'd never treat myself with the same understanding.

Diego is a whole other conundrum. Had I not confessed to a love I can no longer declare a lie, there's a high possibility Diego would be dead. My brother doesn't play with what-ifs. He doesn't ever step onto the merry-go-round of regret. He acts and sleeps soundly with his decisions, whether justified or not. In my panicked state, I protected the young capo the only way I knew how. I can't regret that, but I do find my self-loathing growing every day since I stripped away his choice and treated him like a commodity to be bargained with.

"I'm glad you're here," I finally say, meaning every word.

Caterina looks saddened by my statement. "I wish we knew one another under different circumstances."

I try not to let her despair filter into my heart.

"Unlike Diego," she whispers, "I wasn't so willing in my entanglement."

"Salvatore's a good man," I reassure her, hoping she hears the sincerity in my voice.

"I wouldn't know," she counters. "He's spoken all of two words to me."

My features soften. "Doesn't that tell you that maybe he's as out of his depth as you are?"

She doesn't answer, and I turn my attention back to my food, picking up a thin slice of tuna and popping it into my mouth.

“Do you love Diego?”

I don't know how to answer that because I'm not sure I'm allowed to declare I love someone I dragged into my life against their will.

“Because Bianca and Vincent fell in love when I was certain her life was carved out in hell. Gabriella and Lorenzo fought the odds to find love. None of us will ever fall in love in a traditional sense, but do you think it's possible in this world?” Caterina asks. “Or do you think they're the exception?”

“I... I'm not...”

She continues. “I believe Bianca and Gabriella couldn't fall in love until they laid themselves bare, and I don't mean that in the literal sense,” she clarifies. “I mean that all their twisted secrets and the darkest parts of their souls had to be shared until they could feel free enough to love.”

She watches me intently, her face twisted with worry.

“If that's true,” she whispers, “doesn't that scare you?”

I nod.

She mimics the gesture. “I don't have any secrets, but everyone is complex and maybe a little bit fucked up. What if you open yourself up and you're rejected?”

My hands shake, and I place them on my lap and out of view. “Do you think Diego is the type of man to dig into secrets before allowing himself to fall in love?”

“I think Diego is the type of man who knows your secrets before he knows your name.”

Acid rushes my throat, and I pick up my glass, gulping at my water in search of relief.

“You’re afraid Diego would never love you if he knew the real you.”

“No.”

Yes.

“Whether he loved me or not would be irrelevant.”

“Why?”

“Because my life would come crashing down around me if the world knew who I really was.”

She smiles, but the gesture is full of sadness. “His love wouldn’t be irrelevant. It would be the only thing that would keep you fighting for the life you’ve built.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

DIEGO



I stare at my screen, trying to understand what I've found.

None of it makes sense.

I started with the date. The stupid password she insists on using for everything that requires a six- or eight-digit code.

There wasn't much to go on. Her dad's death is seemingly insignificant to her, so I have to surmise that something else went down on that day. But the Bianchis look clean. As clean as a family built on crime can look anyway.

I did it to protect people.

That doesn't add up. *Who* does she think she's protecting? More importantly, why is she taking on the burden of someone else when she believes the truth could destroy her?

I had considered investigating her and her brother's secret the day she barged into my home unannounced and accused me of attempting to destroy her and threatening my life. I decided against it because I honestly didn't care what she was hiding. Their business was none of mine. I wouldn't spy to unravel their outfit. They've become too important to our cause. If something worth mentioning blasted itself into my

knowledge and it was too big to ignore, I'd take it to Lorenzo. But I would never do anything to put Alessia in danger.

And then she all but wrestled me into a black suit and demanded I exchange vows of forever.

After Lorenzo told me to spy for him, knowing what I already did felt wrong. I hated Sia for what she'd done, but I believed she had good reason. I knew she didn't *love* me, even if she declared she did. I was obsessed with the woman, but love hadn't existed between us. We didn't even *know* one another. We'd shared *one* kiss. One toe-curling, soul-shattering, thought-rendering kiss. She'd only *just* learned my true identity, and then we were married.

On our wedding night, she had confessed that CJ had proposed only weeks earlier, and at first, I surmised that the ranks had begun to circle, so to save herself from having to marry a man who was a blink away from wearing an adult diaper, she made a gamble. But why me and not the billionaire heir to the Lincoln enterprise?

Two people.

Is CJ one of the people she's protecting, and if so, why do I want to punch him in the face again? And what the fuck does he have to do with what I've just found?

They've hidden their secret well, I'll give them that. But what does this woman using Giuliana Bianchi's name have to do with Sia? More importantly, who the fuck is she?

The front door unlocks, and I close my laptop softly.

"Oh." Sia smiles, walking into her house and following the same routine she does every time.

Her shoes come off first, and she pushes her toes against the hardwood floors, eyes closing in satisfaction as she

stretches the arch of her foot.

She drops her keys to the entryway table and her bag beside it.

“I didn’t think I’d see you for another few days.”

“Who are you protecting?” I don’t bother with small talk. I want answers, and she’s going to finally give them to me.

She moves closer, curiosity pulling at her dark eyebrows. “Protecting?”

“The secret you seem so intent on holding, who are you protecting?”

Her eyes turn wary, and she takes a step away from me. “I told you I couldn’t tell you.”

“You can. You won’t.”

She keeps her silence.

“You said two people. Do both of them have the ability to destroy you?”

She swallows. “No.”

I slide my arms along the backrest of the couch. “Tell me about that person, then.”

Her jaw is wired shut, and it pulsates with irritation.

“Do you need something on me? I don’t want to know for gain, Sia. Not for me or my outfit. But if you need ammunition on me to keep an even playing field, I’ll play the game.”

“No. I don’t want to know anything you don’t want to tell me.”

“Lorenzo was eager for our union so he would have eyes inside your family,” I tell her unnecessarily. “As a spy. I

agreed, and I don't know if I intended to fulfill that expectation."

"That's hardly a secret. Why it might not be the main reason he agreed to our nuptials, it was obvious enough that it played a part. Which is another reason *why* you can't know. *Please*, Diego. Leave it alone."

The room seems larger than I remember. She's only mere feet away, but I feel like an entire house separates us. I imagine she'd feel the opposite, walls closing in. Her gaze moves cautiously over her exit points.

"Why are you bringing this up all of a sudden?"

"I need to know."

She shakes her head. "You don't *need* to. You *want* to. There's a difference."

"Tell me."

She stares at me instead of speaking.

"We're stuck in this marriage," I say. "We can either make the most of it and enjoy it the way we have been." I let my eyes track over her white high-waisted pants and black block-colored body suit, covering the soft curves that bring me to my knees. "Or we can start living like strangers. You'll live here, and I'll stay in New York. I have no interest in being a pawn, Sia. I like you a lot, which has come as a surprise, considering for a while I tried to convince myself that I hated you." I laugh because the notion is beyond absurd. How could I despise someone I crave more than air? "*Let me help you.*"

"Grace." The word jumps from her lips, and the way she cups her mouth afterward tells me she didn't mean for the single syllable to escape.

“Grace?”

“Grace Snow,” she concedes.

I know that name, but I don’t see how the nurse from The Quest is significant.

She clears her throat. “Lucy Snow was my best friend. Grace is her sister.”

“What are we protecting Grace from?”

I don’t like the way her eyes glisten with tears, but I ignore the wet shadow.

“Heartbreak.”

My bottom lip tips out. That’s a very Sia way of thinking, protecting a heart that is not hers to claim or give.

“CJ asked me to marry him,” she says, even though I already know this. “Marrying my stepson seemed incredibly unsavory, but Salvatore didn’t care. Nor did CJ.”

I can appreciate her apprehension, but it’s still not enough for her to deny CJ.

“How does Grace fit into this proposal?”

“She’s in love with CJ.”

This whole situation is fucking absurd.

I rub my eyes, working to relieve the steadily growing headache. “Let me get this straight...you denied a proposal from a billionaire bachelor that could have saved you the reality of marrying some decrepit old fuck because your friend Grace has a crush on CJ, and her feelings *might* be hurt.”

“*Would* be hurt, and it’s not a crush. She’s in love with him.”

Sia's eyes fall to my computer, and her chin wobbles, but she keeps her head high. "What are you doing, Diego?"

It's not a simple question. There is no innocent curiosity in her tone. It's an outright accusation—a panicked rush of words that has me sitting up straighter.

"This is fucking with my head, Sia. I never wanted to be married. Yet here I am, and the stupidest fucking part of the whole situation is that it's starting to feel *right*. I miss you when I'm not with you, and not in the fucking obsessive way I used to long to look at you on a screen. I miss making you laugh and seeing you smile. I miss seeing you when I talk to you because I like watching the way your lips move. Hearing your voice isn't enough for me anymore. I want to touch you before I go to bed at night instead of listening to you yawn and say good night over a fucking phone call. I want to be able to wake you up with my hands on your body, my lips on yours, and my cock buried deep inside you instead of fucking my fist from a memory I have to wait *days* to become a reality again."

She stares at me blankly.

"Feelings are involved," I say more simply. "But I need to protect myself against whatever the fuck you're hiding."

"*I'm* protecting you. I *protected* you."

Silence befalls the house, and Sia stops breathing.

"*Me?*" I question, shock lacerating up my spine. "I'm the other person you're protecting? From who?"

"Grace was my best friend Lucy's sister." She ignores me. "Her sister died, and that's enough loss for one person. I won't take her chance of happiness away."

I stand, throwing a cushion across the room in frustration. "Another fucking lie."

“It’s not a lie,” she implores.

“I’m smarter than you seem to think. Is that why you chose me? It had nothing to do with *me* or *us*, but you believed me to be imbecilic enough that I would never ask questions, that I’d never look for answers? I knew enough about you even back then to know that you chose me for a reason. Tell me what that reason is.”

“I’ve never thought you were imbecilic. I told you, Diego, marrying you, pretending I loved you was the only way I could think to protect you.”

“Against what? Against who?”

“I haven’t lied to you. You have to believe me.” She moves closer, pushing her hands against my chest, her eyes wide as she begs me to swallow her lies. “I might not be able to give you the whole truth, but I haven’t lied to you, Diego.”

I hate this part of her. I hate how easy it is for her to lie. Her untruths roll off her tongue without a blink of hesitation.

“Your family hid it well, Sia. But I’m really fucking good at what I do.”

“No.” She shakes her head. “You can’t know. You *can’t* know.”

“The date of your father’s death was the date Lucy Snow went missing.”

Her head continues to move back and forth, denying me, but the tears in her eyes tell another story.

“You didn’t care for your father.”

“He was the devil.”

“So Lucy was the importance of that date.”

Her hands drop from my chest, and she rubs her palms up and down her pants. “Diego, please stop.”

“I looked for her. She just disappeared.”

Sia looks ready to break, but I need her to. I need to know *everything* before letting my heart get tangled up in whatever is growing between us.

“I searched, and I searched, and then I remembered something.”

Her eyes close.

“Your mother.”

They open.

“No one mentions her. She attended our wedding for the ceremony and didn’t so much as shed a tear or crack a smile.”

Nothing, not even a blink.

“Imagine my shock when I looked into her and discovered that apart from being a widow, she’s also a resident of a psychiatric ward close to the state border.”

Shock overtakes my wife, and without conscious thought, she steps closer to me once again. We’re almost touching.

“I have to give it to the Bianchis... you’re smart. Hiding her in plain sight.”

“Hiding... *who?*”

“How could your mom be a psych patient but move freely around the city? She uses her credit cards. She pays all her utilities on time. How, Sia? How does a patient in a psychiatric clinic who is taking twelve different kinds of medication that keeps a person virtually comatose do all that?”

She shakes her head. “No. My mother has never been admitted into any hospital.”

“Your mother, no. But Giuliana Bianchi has.”

“You’re making no sense,” she snaps.

“And you continue to lie!” I bellow.

“I’m not lying!” she yells back.

“Why has Lucy Snow been sitting in a psychiatric ward for the past eighteen years with your mother’s identity? You’re not protecting Grace’s feelings, Sia. What does Lucy and Grace Snow have on your family, or *you* specifically?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

ALESSIA



*M*y hand finds my throat, and I stumble backward.
“Why are you saying this? Lucy died. She *died*.”

I know my words to be true, but my voice has lost its fight.

Dropping my palms in front of me, I see the stains of red. The blood that decorated my skin when I stabbed my father in the throat. I watched him die. I killed him. I did it for Lucy. I murdered him for Lucy.

“He told me. He told me.” I know Diego is still here, but the room around me keeps expanding. I’m standing in an empty space, the last moments of my father’s life playing out in front of my eyes. “He said I would end up like her if I questioned him. He killed her because she was pregnant with his baby. He *did* that, he *confessed*. I was in his office, and he attacked me. He could’ve killed me like he did her. *He* said that. That’s why...that’s why he...I had no choice...he killed her.” I finally look at my husband. “You’re wrong.”

He has to be wrong. Otherwise, I killed my father without cause. My conscience has always remained clear because I had a justifiable reason for murder. If there is such a thing. Edoardo preyed on a seventeen-year-old girl and then disposed of her the second she threatened his empire. A scandal like

that would've destroyed Chicago. Edoardo would've gone to prison, and the vultures would've circled.

Myself aside, five people know the truth, and two of them are dead. My brother and mother were there. They saw what I had done. Dino came after the fact, and my secret was spilled by my mother. But the moment he attempted to blackmail me and Salvatore for personal gain, Salvatore slit his throat and spat on his corpse. Charles was different. We entrusted him with a secret to secure our union. I didn't like the idea, but Salvatore assured me that Charles had no reason to unravel us. He needed what the outfit could bring him. My late husband was skeptical about entering into an arrangement with a man who killed his own father for power. The truth alleviated his concern immediately. I was furious when Charles confided in CJ. It wasn't his secret to tell, but CJ has never brought it up. I trust him to keep it with him until the grave.

Diego is different. He likes the powerful side to me, but I don't know if he'd feel the same knowing I murdered my father in cold blood. I don't want him to view me differently. He watched me take the life of a man who attacked me, but he *saw* the attack. The slaying of my father is my word against a dead man's. How can one ever be certain I was defending myself? The truth is I wasn't. I attacked him. I took his letter opener and stabbed it into his neck. Not confident it was enough, I smashed him over the head with a crystal decanter and then slit his carotid artery and watched him bleed out. That's not self-defense. Diego already doesn't trust me completely. He believes me a liar. Imagine if he knew the truth.

Picking up his laptop, Diego opens the screen. "Look."

I shake my head.

“Sia. *Look.*”

I glance at the screen showing admission forms and a thumbnail photo of *Giuliana Bianchi* or Lucy Snow as she was born.

A sob big enough to rack through my body and powerful enough to make me shake breaks from my lips. I cover my mouth. “No. Diego.” My chin wobbles. “Tell me you’re lying.”

“You didn’t know?” He slams the laptop closed.

“She’s still alive?”

He stares at me, dubious of my tears.

“You *really* didn’t know? Look me in the eyes, Sia, and don’t lie.”

“She was my best friend,” I whisper. “Why would I do this to her?”

Falling onto my sofa, I try to make sense of what I’ve been shown.

I clench my hands into fists, my throat rips open, and I scream as loud as I can.

“I didn’t look for her,” I tell him. “He told me she was dead, and I was so concerned with hiding her death from Grace, who *was* looking, that *I* didn’t look.”

“You likely wouldn’t have found her.”

I shrug. “Maybe. But I should’ve looked. I’ve spent the past eighteen years afraid her body would be discovered, and it would somehow link us to her death, and I’d lose Grace as well. I never imagined she’d be found alive.”

“How do I fit into this, Sia? What does this woman and your mother and father have to do with me?”

He doesn't know. He still doesn't know.

I stand, brushing off my clothes and putting on a false mask of calm. “I need to see her.”

He grabs my arm. “You need to talk to me first.”

I look down at his hand, and he lets go.

“Sia.”

“I need to get Lucy out of that fucking hellhole.” I sniff and dab my fingers beneath my eyes, removing the stray tears clinging to my skin.

“We can do that *after* you tell me what the fuck is going on.”

Ignoring him, I grab my handbag from beside the door and walk out of the house with bare feet.

Diego chases me out of the house. “I'll drive you.”

I stare at the car for a beat. I'm shaking and in no condition to drive. “Okay.” Holding out the keys, Diego takes them from me, pausing when he sees the tremble in my hand.

“Who is paying for the facility?” I ask as we reverse out of the driveway.

“Your mother.”

I shake my head. This whole time. She has known this entire fucking time.

“Do you think Salvatore knows?”

I don't look at him, but his head shakes in my peripheral vision. “I found no evidence to suggest that.”

I nod once.

“Dino and Giuliana are the only signatures I found on Lucy’s paperwork over the years. Your brother killed Edoardo the same day she was admitted. Was she the reason?”

“How long is the drive?”

He doesn’t answer. I ignored his question. Now he’s ignoring me.

The facility isn’t too far from town, and it only spikes my anger. Lucy was right under our noses the entire time. A short drive, and I would’ve found her had I actually fucking looked.

Slipping my feet into the stilettos Diego was smart enough to grab for me before chasing me out of the house, I adjust my clothing, straighten my back, and storm toward the entrance doors.

An elderly lady sits at the front desk and smiles at me as I enter.

“I’m here to see Giuliana Bianchi.”

Her smile drops away almost immediately. “I’m sorry,” she rebutes. “Giuliana isn’t taking visitors.”

My patience is waning.

I lean over the desk. “I am *not* in the mood to be fucked with, and I’m also not someone you want to piss off. I take it you’re familiar with the real Giuliana Bianchi. The old witch who comes here to visit the woman using her name. She likely treats you like dirt on her shoe.”

The woman swallows.

“I’m her daughter. Only I’m more powerful than she ever dreamed of. I carry a gun everywhere I go, and I have no

qualms about using it on people who *piss me off*,” I yell.

Diego steps up beside me. “Take us to Giuliana *immediately*, or you will have an army of police officers through these doors in minutes. You and I both know that whatever is happening with the patient you’re refusing to let us see is far from legal. You’re also likely being paid for your silence to put your children through college.” He gestures to the photo of three kids sitting around a Christmas tree on her desk. The woman drops the photo face down.

“They keep her drugged,” she says sadly, “for her own safety.”

I snort.

The woman stands, moves around the desk, and uses her key card to grant us entry. “That woman, your mother,” she says as she walks. “She said her daughter, the patient,” she clarifies, “tried to hurt a lot of people. She said she’s a danger to herself and her family.”

“My mother is the only threat to society,” I murmur.

She pauses on the threshold of a large room. Sun pours through the glass, and soft music drifts through the speakers. The space is empty save for one woman sitting in a wheelchair by the window. A bassinet sits beside her, and I frown. If Lucy had given birth, the child would be eighteen years old by now.

“I’ll get the doctor. He can explain her situation.”

I move into the room, trying to step quietly on my heels so as not to startle her.

Her hair is still blond but cut short and tied in a small bun at her nape. Scratches line the column of her neck, and watching the way she twitches, it’s not hard to determine that they’re self-inflicted.

Diego hangs back as I approach.

“Lucy,” I call.

“Lucy. No Lucy. Not Lucy,” she repeats two or three times.

“Giuliana?” I test instead.

She huffs and frowns but doesn’t speak.

I pause. My hands are shaking, and my eyes are filled with tears, and I want nothing more than to throw myself at her and cuddle her.

“It’s me,” I continue. “Alessia.”

She looks at me like a stranger. Her skin is pale, and her blue eyes have sunken into her face. Fingers at her mouth, she bites her nails, watching me cautiously.

My eyes drop to the bassinet. A small doll sits wrapped up in a blanket, its eyes permanently open and lips set in a slight pout that allows the teeth of a pretend bottle to click into place.

“Your baby is beautiful.” I move to touch the doll, but Lucy screeches, and I stumble back.

“Don’t touch my baby. Don’t touch.”

“I’m sorry.” I keep my hands fisted against my chest. “She’s adorable.”

“Yes. But she’s mine,” she rushes out. “And she’s sleeping. She sleeps a lot.”

“Young babies do sleep a lot.”

“Mm.” She nods.

“Can I sit with you?”

“Yes. But it’s dinnertime soon. Dinner is at six, and if you’re late, you don’t get to eat, and if I don’t eat, Grace is not

allowed to sleep in my room.”

“Grace?” My voice cracks, but Lucy doesn’t notice.

“The baby. *My* baby,” she clarifies.

I look up at Diego. Pain sits heavy in his eyes. He doesn’t know Lucy, but anyone can see the trauma of what she’s been through.

A man in a suit and tie walks into the room, an air of authority straightening his shoulders. “You shouldn’t be here.”

I stand immediately, my feet storming toward him. “I should shoot you where you *fucking* stand,” I grit through my teeth.

“I would advise against it. This facility is filled with cameras.”

I feel Diego’s hand brush against my back. “If you think the threat of a few cameras could protect you, you are sorely mistaken.”

The doctor looks back and forth between Diego and me.

My husband speaks, and when he does, his voice is quiet and calm, a murderous lilt caressing every word in anticipation. “Salvatore Bianchi is on his way with a selection of men. One of which is a family doctor. I suggest you ensure your staff have all of Lucy’s medical files available by the time they arrive. Especially the ones detailing the medication you’ve kept her on to keep her in such a pliant state.”

His face reddens.

“If you contact Giuliana Bianchi”—the doctor looks at Lucy as Diego continues to speak—“the *real* Giuliana Bianchi, to warn her of our knowledge of what she has created here, I will gut you like the feral fucking pig you are.”

“This woman has been medicated for her own safety,” he spits.

Sia steps close enough that no space exists between her and the pitiful man. She pokes two fingers at his jugular, making him choke. “You’re a real cunt, and I don’t know what my mother is paying you or what she has on you for you to follow through with such an atrocious misuse of your medical license, but none of it will be worth it by the time I finish with you. I will destroy you. I will twist the love your family has for you until they can only look at you with contempt and disgust, making sure you are more alone than you could know. I will bleed your fortune dry until all you have left of value is your saggy little body that no one would pay to fuck. And when you believe it can’t get any worse, I’ll find a way to make you beg for death, but I won’t give you the satisfaction. I’ll trap you in the prison of your own mind while you remember every poor decision you ever made to get yourself to that point, and I will smile through it all.”

“I’m calling the police.”

Sia steps back, crossing her arms over her chest. “Please do. While you’re at it, I’ll call Grace Snow, Lucy’s sister. She’ll be down here quicker than you can blink to watch you walk away in handcuffs for your part in all of this.”

“Alessia.”

Spinning on her heel, Sia moves toward Salvatore, throwing herself at him in a hug that he returns stiffly.

“What’s going on? Diego told me it was an emergency and to bring only those I trusted.”

“It’s Lucy.”

“Wh—” But his words stop as Lucy stands, her legs shaking as she stares at Chicago’s boss like she’s seen a ghost.

“Edoardo,” she whispers. “You came for me.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

DIEGO



Salvatore stood with Lucy Snow wrapped around his body, sobbing into his chest while we all watched on in horror. I've seen photos of Edoardo Bianchi as an old man, and if I squint hard enough, I guess I could see a resemblance between him and his only son. But Lucy believed them to be one and the same. Not surprising, considering she believes the doll she placed into Salvatore's arms to be their baby eighteen years *after* Edoardo died, and the fake baby doesn't look older than four months. I don't know what drugs they've forced down that poor girl's throat for almost two decades, but the damage would have to be permanent.

Amadeo was put in charge of Dr. Death and seemed to take his job of guarding the piece of shit literally. The guy couldn't shift without Salvatore's guy punching him in the ribs to keep him still. Turning him over to the authorities seems a too easy punishment for the man who had the power to save Lucy but chose to collect a paycheck instead. I'd vote for locking *him* away in a cellar and letting the rats take care of him.

The nurse at reception took Narciso into the records room to collect all files available on Lucy Snow with the family doctor, a man I've never seen before and who spoke very little. We need an understanding of what's been going on in the

fucked-up facility before bringing Lucy's family and the authorities into the mix.

Once everyone has their assigned responsibilities, Sia hightails it out of the ward without warning. I run to keep up with her, and she's wearing six-inch fucking stilettos.

"Sia. Wait. Where are you going?"

Ignoring me, she yanks open the driver's side door of her Maserati and slides inside. The car roars to life, and I step in front of the revving vehicle, hoping like hell she likes me enough not to run me over.

Hands on the hood, I shake my head.

She slams her palm against the horn.

I wait her out, the deafening sound ricocheting against my eardrums.

Window down, she shouts at me. "Diego, get the fuck outta my way."

"Sia."

"I will run you over."

"You're not thinking clearly..."

She growls, punching the steering wheel. "Do not call me irrational right now! My mind is crystal fucking clear. Either move out of my fucking way or get in."

I don't hesitate. I rush around the car and throw myself into the passenger seat.

Her foot hits the accelerator before my ass has even hit the seat, the car zooming through the parking lot on screeching wheels.

"Where are we going?"

She ignores me, her hands clenching and unclenching on the steering wheel.

Salvatore's murder of his father now makes sense. The twins believed he impregnated and then killed Sia's best friend. Sia wasn't fucking kidding; the guy was a monster, but Giuliana and Dino were a whole other breed unto their own. Death would've been a kindness to Lucy. The torment and trauma she's experienced is a torture I couldn't conjure in my fucked-up mind, and the poor girl was only seventeen when it all started.

"Salvatore killing your dad now makes sense," I say aloud. "He wasn't power hungry like the underworld has insisted. He was retaliating *for* you, for Lucy."

She won't look at me, but it doesn't stop the tears from falling.

"Why Dino, though? Was it believed that he was party to her suspected murder?"

She's quiet for long enough that I consider she'll ignore me again, but then her voice haunts the silence of the car, the emotionless lilt of her tone wanting me to reach out and touch her. "Dino saw an opportunity for power. *He* was the one obsessed with control and dominance. When Edoardo died, Salvatore was too young to step into the boss's shoes. He was only seventeen. No one in their right mind would've blindly accepted his authority."

She's not wrong. He would've been killed within days.

"Dino offered to protect us, *him*," she corrects. "We saw it for what it was, but what choice did we have? At seventeen, our, *his*," she amends, "sins were a death sentence. Dino saved our lives for the promise of power. He assured Salvatore that

he'd only *warm* the throne until he was ready to take over, but he wasn't so eager to give it away when Salvatore was ready."

Understanding settles through me, but she keeps on going.

"Then Dino demanded our union."

"Whose union?"

"Me and him. He wanted me as his wife, and he was willing to blackmail us to make it happen. It tipped my brother over the edge. He killed him to save us."

"The family accepted that without issue?"

She shrugs. "By this time, he'd killed two heads of the family. He'd earned his nickname as the Joker, slicing smiles into the faces of everyone he killed. I also think the family was relieved by Dino's death. He was a terrible leader. They wanted someone fearless, someone who would kill their own father to ascend to the top."

Her words trail off as she finishes that last sentence, and I leave her with her thoughts, choosing to settle into the silence as she drives.

Within thirty minutes, we pull up to a house I don't recognize.

"Where are we?"

"You might want to stay in the car." She climbs out of the vehicle, her handbag in her grasp, and moves purposefully toward the front door.

I follow her.

She doesn't knock, walking straight through.

"Mother!"

“I didn’t invite you here.” The woman steps into the entryway, mouth twisted with distaste. “Leave.”

It’s hard to see the resemblance between the mother and daughter when Giuliana is such a vile piece of shit. Her eyes are the same color, but hers don’t shine like Sia’s. Instead, they squint with hate, the lines of disdain permanently etched around them aging her unnecessarily. Sia’s full lips smile and laugh while hers frown and spit fiery insults at the world. Hate has eaten away at the woman’s beauty, and the radiating allure of her daughter only exacerbates her loathing.

“For the past eighteen years, I’ve believed you froze me out because you despise me.” Giuliana opens her mouth to speak, but Sia continues. “But it’s not that. You thrive on throwing libel my way. I get it now.” She steps closer. “You knew I’d figure it out, didn’t you? You knew I’d eventually see through the veil of betrayal you insisted on portraying and see the evil that sat inside you.”

“I said *leave*.”

Her mother had ignored my presence up until now. She looks down her nose at me.

“How dare you bring your scum from New York into my home! Marrying him was embarrassing enough, Alessia. Parading him around is just desperate. You couldn’t find a man to love you, so you trapped a *boy* into pretending he cares for you.”

I open my mouth to speak, but Sia slaps her across the face, shocking us all.

“You can treat me like shit all you want, Mother. I’ve learned to live with your contempt long enough that it means nothing to me. But when you speak of or to *my husband*, when

you even *think* about his existence, you do so with fucking respect. He is a motherfucking capo. More importantly, he is the man I am married to, and I am a *goddamn consiglieria*.”

Giuliana’s eyes widen in shock, telling me that her daughter has *never* chosen to stand up for herself against this god-awful woman before this moment.

“You will never be worth a damn in my eyes, girl. You’re not a leader. You’re a murderer.”

Sia freezes, and I step close enough to place my hand on her lower back. “My wife may have learned to cope with your hostility, but I have not and will not. If you so much as glower in Sia’s direction again, I know a man who will replace that cross you’re clutching at your neck with a section of barbed wire. I won’t ask you if you understand because I don’t care. That’s your only warning.”

“Did you just threaten to kill me?” she screeches.

“Yes.” I turn to Sia. “Do I need to call Lorenzo for damage control?”

She frowns in confusion.

“Will your brother try and kill me for disrespecting his mother?”

She smiles. “No.”

“Good.”

“Vincent would do that for you?”

I press my lips against her ear. “No. Vincent doesn’t take orders from me, and he’d never kill an old woman for being a bitter old bitch, but she doesn’t need to know that.”

She leans up unexpectedly and kisses my lips.

“What was that for?”

“No one has ever stood up to my mother like that for me before. My brother reprimands her, but you just threatened to have her killed for being rude to me.”

We’re speaking as though she’s not standing right in front of us. Our tones hushed, and our eyes caught on one another.

“I don’t take kindly to people hurting the people I love. Physically or emotionally.”

“Diego.”

“Mm?” I lean closer, wanting to touch her lips again.

“You love me?”

“Enough!” Giuliana yells, the word screeching from her throat like a scratched record.

Her face is red with anger, but a hint of jealousy carves at the narrow line of her eyes. The bitch hates that Sia has found someone to love her. She loved seeing her only daughter alone because she can’t stomach the idea of Sia having something she never did. Something blossoms in my chest, a feeling of contentment and achievement. Giuliana Bianchi has lived long enough to see Sia happy, and it’s ruined her very existence.

“Get out of my house before I shoot you. *Murderer!*”

That word again.

Murderer.

“Did you think we’d never find out?” Sia ignores the stab. “Did you think we’d never find her? It’s all coming undone, Mother, and your sins will be paid for in blood. I’ll make sure of it.”

Giuliana's fury has quelled for the first time since we arrived, panic settling in its place. She lifts her chin, ready to rebuke Sia's claims, but my wife speaks first.

"We have Lucy. Salvatore is with her now, as is Narciso and Amadeo. Your little doctor friend will sing like a fucking canary when your son starts pushing him for answers. We both know that. *I win,*" she whispers the last words like a declaration of war.

Her mother laughs, the sound steeped in malevolence. "I won a long fucking time ago, Alessia. That underage bitch thought she could take *my* life. I spent my life loving that man. I gave him *everything*. I wasn't going to let her take it. She wasn't going to take him from me."

"She was a child!" Sia's voice breaks as she bellows the truth that has haunted her for decades. "She was a child, and he preyed on her, and you punished *her*. You locked a teenage girl away for the sins of a man who *never* loved you. He was never going to love you."

"You don't know that," her mother screams. "You took him away from me to make sure of that. All for a stupid girl. You killed him, and you got away with it!"

Shock lacerates my spine, freezing me in place.

You took him away from me.

You killed him.

You got away with it.

Sia doesn't notice me or the earthquake of her truth wracking through me.

Sia killed Edoardo.

Not Salvatore.

“You took something from me, so I made sure I took something from you. I watched that girl’s soul die day by day, and it was all your fault, Alessia. *You* did that. *You’re* responsible for Lucy’s decline into madness. She was your punishment for what you stole from me.”

I stand still, frozen with a complete collapse of conscious thought because my *wife* is the one responsible for her father’s death. She’s not wrong. Her secret would be diabolical for Chicago. If the underworld knew the truth, Salvatore would be seen as a fraud. They’d gut him for his lies, for *their* lies. One thing our world hates more than a rat is an impostor.

When she stormed into my home all those months ago, she thought I knew. She thought I’d discovered their secret.

It still doesn’t answer why. What do I have to do with all of this? *How* is she protecting me?

A gun fires, and I grab at Sia, yanking her behind me and shielding her from harm. But I needn’t have worried. Sia wasn’t in danger.

Gun held tightly in her hand, she wrestles free of my grasp and watches her mother fall to her knees, holding her stomach with both hands as blood pools around her midsection.

“I’m glad my face is the last one you’ll see before you die. You’ll dive headfirst into hell knowing I was the one who put you there.” A smile sits on Sia’s face that doesn’t look entirely sane or composed. “Just like that evil husband you dedicated your life to. Even if they kill me for this, it’ll be worth it.” She lifts her gun again and fires three more shots. “Tell Dad I said hi.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

ALESSIA



I can't hide it anymore.

He heard my mother out me as a murderer, and if that wasn't enough, she had to spell it out in capital fucking letters with an exclamation point.

You killed him and got away with it.

Standing over Giuliana's dying body, I clear my throat. "Lucy was involved with my father. He was having sex with my seventeen-year-old best friend, and he got her pregnant."

I keep my back to him, unable to look him in the eyes.

"I knew about their affair, and I tried to stop it. I tried to warn her of the kind of man he was, but she couldn't see it."

I sniff, clicking the safety back into place on my gun and tucking it back into my handbag.

"Then she told me about the pregnancy. I knew it would end badly. I told her that. I tried to warn her. We fought. She was upset that I couldn't be happy for her."

"The doll."

I nod. "I assume so. She must have miscarried, or they took the actual baby from her and replaced her with the doll."

My mind wanders, the horrors of the past two decades flashing before me. What hell she must have endured at the hands of my mother and that doctor.

“I asked her to meet me the next morning to discuss everything. I begged her to wait until we had spoken before she shared the news with my father. She never showed.”

Rummaging through my handbag, I pull out my cell phone and dial my brother. He answers on the first ring.

“Giuliana is dead. You need to send in a clean-up crew. I would organize it, but I’m not thinking clearly.”

I hang up without waiting for his response.

“I looked for her, and when I couldn’t locate her, I confronted Edoardo.”

“You were alone?”

“Yes,” I whisper. “We argued. He told me to forget about my *whorish* friend. He said that I would never see her again. I assumed he’d killed her.”

Looking in the direction of my father’s study, I step over my mother’s lifeless body and the pool of blood surrounding her like a halo of hell and move toward the office. Diego follows.

“He attacked me for being disrespectful, hit me and kicked me, then dismissed me like I was nothing. He never saw me as a threat, and it made me so fucking mad.”

I move toward the drink cart. My mother had replaced everything that was broken or stained with death shortly after she buried her husband. The room doesn’t look any different from the day he died here.

“He was standing here when I stabbed him in the neck with a letter opener. He was shocked enough that I had time to grab his whiskey decanter.” I pop the lid, pouring myself a glass of whiskey. “And smash it over his head.” I sip the amber liquid, finally finding the courage to turn and look at Diego. “I then used the broken glass to cut his carotid artery, and I stood on his neck and smiled while he bled out.”

He shows no emotion.

“Salvatore isn’t the ruthless murderer the world thinks him to be. It’s me.”

I swallow the rest of the alcohol in one fell swoop, grimacing at the burn.

“Had the family known that I, a *girl*, had executed my father for the retribution of a friend, I would have been strung up like a pig to slaughter. Salvatore would have been made to watch. He would have died trying to protect me. It was better this way,” I assure him. “It was better for the world to believe my brother was a psychotic killer obsessed with a need to sit at the very pinnacle of Chicago’s hierarchy. It was easier to swallow for the archaic system of the Mafia. They respected Salvatore for his bloodshed but would have vilified me for mine.”

“Who knows the truth?”

“Only Salvatore, CJ, Giuliana, and I knew the truth. Even the underboss of Chicago still believes the version of events he was told. But then, Narciso has no reason to doubt us. It was a matter of life and death keeping our secret. We knew that.”

“How do I fit, Sia?”

“The hunt was a peculiar stroke of fate that pushed us together. A coincidence too convenient to be true, don’t you

think? It was too farfetched that you, a rival family member, were involved in something as hush-hush as *The Quest*. I questioned your motive, as did my brother.”

“Your brother threatened to kill me to protect you and himself.”

It’s a statement, not a question, but I nod.

“I declared my love to spare your life in a moment of madness. It was all a lie. I didn’t *love* you, but I felt connected to you. How bad could marrying you be? I pulled you into a net of deceit, but I did so for good reason. The ranks were circling, and Salvatore gave me an ultimatum. You die, and I marry CJ, or I stand by my lies, and I marry you. I did it to protect you. To keep you,” I admit shamefully.

He says nothing.

Not a single fucking word.

As I place the crystal glass down, my hand shakes in a way that has me clenching my fist. I’m thrown back eighteen years, covered in blood, watching my brother carve a smile into my father’s retched face.

“I have to go,” I say. “This is a lot for you to take in, and I know you have questions, but I just discovered that I killed a man, and while he deserved to die,” I implore, “I killed him without just cause. A friend I believed dead has been found alive and has been living through a trauma I can’t even *begin* to decipher, and I just shot my mother.”

Leaving my husband soaking in the layers of deceit I once believed righteous, I walk past him. “Are you okay to wait for whoever Salvatore sends to manage this mess?”

He nods once, and I’m thankful he doesn’t attempt to follow me. I’m not ready for him to stamp the end on our

marriage *or* my life.

Avoiding Giuliana's lifeless body as I exit her home, I consider her to be the last in a succession of gifts Diego Greco never wanted to receive.

CHAPTER THIRTY

ALESSIA



It's been a week since my world blew up in my face.

I've been walking around like a shell of the woman I know myself to be.

Salvatore has watched me like a hawk, and it's irritating how much I have to reassure him that I'm fine. He's so fucking concerned he hasn't even brought up our mother's death. Not a single fucking word. It's like we're moving on as if she never existed, which, I'm not going to lie, works for me.

I haven't seen or heard from Diego since I left him at my mother's house. I'm not sure *what* I expected, but if I needed time to grieve what we were building before he had the chance to tear it out from underneath me, he's given it to me. There is no doubting that.

Salvatore wanted to kill him immediately. But once again, I lied. I assured my brother he was trustworthy. I swore on everything inside me that Diego wouldn't tell anyone what he now knows because he loved me.

Or so I thought.

I don't know for sure that the damage isn't already done. Maybe Lorenzo already knows and is marinating on the information, trying to decide how to handle it all.

Diego admitted that Lorenzo placed him in Chicago to spy. The boss of New York wanted ammunition should he require it, and Diego now has it tied up in a neat little bow. A grenade big enough to turn Chicago into dust.

I've called Diego. But every single one of my calls goes straight to voicemail.

I was even stupid enough to fly to New York *alone*. I entered territory that could now be antagonistic. But he wasn't home. I wasn't suicidal enough to track down any other family members in search of him. I have a sliver of self-preservation left.

Two days ago, I admitted defeat, and pulled the only trump card I had left in my arsenal to protect Salvatore. I didn't much care for my own well-being, and it was clear enough that Diego had made his decision. But I owed Salvatore a shot of keeping his throne. He deserved it.

I approached Salvatore with a thick yellow envelope, gifting Diego his freedom and his unattached life back in New York. Lorenzo would never let Diego step away from our marriage, but if I were the one to begin the proceedings, he'd have no choice but to agree.

It could all be a moot point if Diego has divulged our darkest secret. He'd be a widower instead of a divorcée. Either way, he loses the wife he never wanted.

Using my pinky finger, I rub along the charcoal on my page, smoothing the line of the torso. I attended my first live drawing class in almost a year, trying to distract myself from the pain of what I'd done or what may still happen.

It's so cliché, loving someone enough to let them go.

I wish he'd talk to me. But I don't see another option. He's made his decision. His silence is loud enough.

I have to look past my selfish desires. The man I have fallen in love with declared his love to an idea that no longer exists. My lies were enough to turn him away, and I have to accept that.

I might not have his heart, but I must protect his life. Salvatore wants to kill him. I hope my husband values the life of solitary he wanted enough to keep his silence.

It's a gamble, and his loyalty to Lorenzo could outweigh his personal desires, but I have to try.

The class finished over an hour ago. I wasn't ready to finish, though. I needed to distract my wayward thoughts. He'd have the papers by now. Salvatore assured me of that. I don't know how. He was ignoring my calls, so I don't know why my brother seems to think he'd answer his. Unless Lorenzo was facilitating the delivery.

I offered the model standing in front of me, naked as the day he was born, a thousand dollars to stay to allow me to finish my piece. He didn't even blink, accepting my offer and keeping his position while everyone else packed up around us.

"Are you sure you're comfortable, Lucas?" I ask for the millionth time. "You've been holding that position for almost ninety minutes."

He smiles easily. "I'm fine, Miss Bianchi."

"Two more minutes, and we can finish up."

"Whatever you like, Miss Bianchi."

I'm shadowing the line of his neck muscles when the door to the studio slams open, startling us both. I reach for my

purse, the gun I used to kill Mother still tucked comfortably inside, but I stop when I see who stands at the entrance.

“Diego.”

“Put your clothes on and get out,” he speaks to Lucas, his eyes drilling into my skull.

He looks as he always does—black shirt, black jeans, heavy boots, and his thick cross hanging around his neck. His dark eyes are narrowed on my face, his jaw set tight, and his nostrils flaring.

He’s mad.

“Who are you?” Lucas asks stupidly.

Diego pulls a gun from the back of his jeans, aiming it in Lucas’s direction.

“I won’t tell you again. My wife only needs to look at *my* dick, so put yours away before I remove it with a perfectly aimed gunshot, and fuck off.”

Lucas scrambles to grab his clothes.

“Sorry, Lucas,” I apologize. The poor guy is trying to pay his way through college, and the last thing he needs is a raging mafioso waving a gun in his face.

Diego scowls at me.

“No worries, Miss Bianchi,” Lucas lies, picking up his shirt.

A gunshot ricochets through the studio, and I yelp in shock. Lucas’s shirt dangles from his hand, remnants of a smoking material that he was seconds away from pulling onto his body. He looks at Diego in shock and fear.

“It’s Greco.”

“What?” Lucas breathes, on the verge of tears.

“Her name. It isn’t Bianchi or Lincoln. It’s Greco. Alessia *fucking* Greco. Don’t make me shoot you by disrespecting our marriage again.”

Lucas scrambles to leave, yanking up his jeans as he hurries out the door Diego burst through only seconds ago.

Now alone, Diego turns his attention to me.

I focus my attention back on my drawing.

“I’ll put a bullet through that, too, if you continue to pay it more attention than me right now.”

I put my charcoal down and push my stool away from the easel.

He holds up the yellow envelope. “What the fuck is this?”

“Divor—”

“I know what they are, Sia. I’ll ask again, what the fuck?”

“I tried to talk to you, and I don’t hold it against you for ignoring me...”

“Ignoring you? Are you fucking kidding?”

My brows pull together. “I have been calling you nonstop, and you send me to voicemail. I flew to New York, Diego. You weren’t there. You wouldn’t see me. I couldn’t find you.”

Rubbing a hand down his face, he laughs, the sound too unhinged for me to find joy in the gesture. “Ignoring you.” He shakes his head. “Where do you think I’ve been, Sia?”

I lift my shoulders awkwardly. “Taking time to think.”

“Oh, I’ve done plenty of thinking about all the ways I want to kill your fucking brother.”

“What?”

“He’s kept me fucking captive, Sia!”

“What!”

That doesn’t make sense. I’ve been reassuring Salvatore all week that Diego has promised me his silence. He listened to my lies and didn’t bat a fucking eyelid, knowing it was all fucking made up. How could Diego reassure me when he was locked away?

“No. No.” I shake my head, knowing it’s true.

Of course, it’s fucking true.

“*He* turned up at your mother’s to facilitate cleanup. He took one look at me, and when I had my back turned, he pistol-whipped me over the back of the head. I woke up tied to a chair in his stupid house.” Fury radiates through his entire being. “He threatened to kill me a minimum of a thousand times. He asked me what I planned to do with what I’d learned, but nothing I said resonated. Then he delivered me these, preening like a fucking pigeon, offering me something I don’t want.”

“I don’t want to hold onto something that I stole. I borrowed your love, Diego. It’s not fair.”

He stares me down.

I’m going to kill my brother, but first, I need to work out what the fuck is going on.

“I wrote you a letter,” I murmur absently, confusion twisting my words and letting them trail off into nothing but a whisper. “It’s in there. It explains everything.”

“*Oh*. You wrote me a letter?” he growls. “Tell me what it says.”

I rub my eyes. “I can’t tell you off the top of my head. I spent a long time finding the right words. I thought it was what you wanted.”

He hands me the envelope. “Luckily, I have it handy. Go on, read it. Tell me what you couldn’t say to me in person.”

“I tried to speak to you in person.” I take the envelope reluctantly, staring at him.

He stares back. “Not hard enough. How many times were you at your brother’s obnoxious fucking mansion over the past seven days, Sia?”

I choose my silence.

A lot. A *whole* fucking lot.

I know my brother. I should’ve suspected he was up to something.

I swallow loudly enough to be heard in the studio, but I tear at the sleeve and pull out the papers, all marked with stickers indicating where Diego needs to sign to end our marriage.

He’s close enough that I can hear his heavy breathing. His shoulders almost heave with the action. He’s angry, and he’s happy for me to know it.

“Read it.”

I clear my throat. “My dearest Diego. I love you.”

“No.” He stops me with sharpness in the syllable. “You don’t get to tell me you love me for the first time when you’re trying to leave me.”

He pulls the papers from my hand and throws them to the floor. “Tell me why, if you love me and you know damn

fucking well that I love you, why you think we should get divorced.”

He told me he loved me before he knew the truth.

“I was trying to prot—”

“If you tell me you’re protecting me, I swear to god, Sia.”

“You *and* my brother.”

He stares at me blankly.

“You have the power to destroy Chicago, Diego. I know you owe me nothing, but I’m asking anyway. You have your freedom. I never should have caught you up in this web of deceit cast over my life. I’m sorry. I’ll walk away so you can have your life back. It’s the only thing I have left to offer you. All I’m asking is that you don’t destroy me and Salvatore.”

He moves to speak, but I cut him off.

“Please, Diego.” I stand, pushing my hands together in prayer. “I know you’re loyal. I know family is everything to you, and I know I’m asking you to turn your back on it all. But it’s just this once. Just one small untruth that I’m begging you to keep.”

“*You’re my family.*”

My hands drop to my sides. “*What?*”

“You said family is everything to me. You’re my family, *tesoruccio. You.*”

“Diego.”

He steps closer. “You’re the only fucking thing I need to protect in this world.”

I drop my face to hide my tears, but he lifts my chin, forcing me to look him in the eyes.

“Why are you allowed to protect and love me, but I’m not allowed to protect and love you?”

“I didn’t think...”

“You didn’t think I loved you enough to give zero fucks about how Edoardo Bianchi died? He’s dead, and the world is a better place. I wish the world knew what a fucking fighter you were at seventeen, but I understand. Telling anyone about what I now know didn’t even cross my mind.”

“It didn’t?”

“What purpose would it serve?”

I open my mouth but close it again.

“New York and Chicago are more powerful united. Not that I think Caruso would care, but your secrets are my secrets. I know I made you believe I didn’t want this marriage, and maybe you felt like I didn’t want you... Sia, fuck, you didn’t even know I fucking existed, and I fantasized about you claiming me like I’d claimed you. I convinced myself I was a fucking psychopath. I stalked you online. I inserted myself into The Quest for you and only you. You were my end goal from the beginning. The only treasure I’ve ever dreamed of. I was so angry about the wedding because I didn’t think of it first. You outsmarted me with the one thing I longed for. Possessing you *and* being possessed by you.”

“It’s real?”

“It was never a lie, Sia. *We were never a fucking lie.*”

I take a single step to throw my body against his, wrapping my arms around his neck. A sob escapes me, vibrating against his jaw. He holds me tight, and I feel peace overcome for the first fucking time in days.

“Kiss me,” I whisper. “Fuck me, Diego. I missed you. All day. Every day. I missed you.”

He doesn't need any further encouragement, both hands cupping my face. He draws me in, slamming his lips against mine in a kiss that screams love and obsession. I meet his energy, my tongue sliding into his mouth with urgency.

“I need you so bad, *tesoruccio*. This week without you has been my personal version of hell. I'm fucking lost without you.”

I pull at his shirt, needing to touch him. He helps me, yanking it over his head with a single tug at the nape of his neck. My hands drag over his body.

I kiss his chest.

I tug at his belt buckle, undoing the button at the top of his jeans.

While I busy myself with pushing his pants down, he toes off his boots, kicking them away and doing the same with his socks. Within minutes, he stands only in his boxers, the thick swell of his cock visible through the thin material.

“How are you mine, Diego?” I murmur distractedly. “You're too fucking pretty to belong to anyone.”

He laughs.

“How are you mine, Sia?” He flicks at the buttons on my blouse, exposing the swell of my breasts pushed up by my bra. “You're a motherfucking queen. *My* queen. How? How did I convince you I was worthy enough?”

I look into his eyes. “You loved me.”

“Yeah,” he breathes. “I do fucking love you.”

Dropping to his knees, he grabs his jeans to retrieve his pocket knife, flicking it to release the blade. “I’ll buy you a new one.”

“A new what?” I breathe.

Knife at the center of my skirt-clad thighs, he drags the blade downward, splitting the material in one quick movement. Dropping the knife, he grabs both sides of the open skirt and tears upward, my underwear now the only barrier between us.

Fingers running the waist of my G-string, he pulls it down slowly, groaning loudly as my pussy comes into view.

“*This* is where I belong. On my knees worshipping my wife.”

My wife.

“I need you,” I say, the lust coursing through me evident in the scratched words echoed between us.

My pussy is wet, and I’m seconds away from self-combusting if he doesn’t touch me. “Diego,” I beg.

Standing, he pushes me backward until my ass hits the first available surface. He lifts me with little effort. The flimsy table groans under my weight, and I stare at him wide-eyed.

“I don’t kn...*oh my god.*”

He slams inside me, the roughest groan I’ve ever heard ripping from his throat and hardening my nipples.

“*Fuck!*”

He’s relentless. He pulls back only to thrust back into me with a drive that has the legs of the table screeching against the stained concrete floor.

“Yes.”

He never takes his eyes off mine, powering in and out of me. He watches every bite of pleasure that licks across my face and every shout of surprise that escapes my lips when he caresses that sweet spot inside of me with a push of his hips hard enough to make me see stars.

“Tell me you love me, Sia. Say it and mean it.”

Tears spring to my eyes at the uncharacteristic show of vulnerability in his tone.

“I love you.”

His eyes close in relief.

“I love you,” I repeat, the declaration lost to a moan that arches my back.

“I love you, Sia. I love you so much that it fucking hurts.” He massages a palm against his chest. “It hurts so good, and I never want the pain to stop.”

“Never stop.” My body buckles, my muscles tightening and readying for release.

“That’s it, baby. Give it over. Come for me.”

A few more thrusts, and he sends me into oblivion.

Slowing down, he waits for me to regulate my breathing enough to bring him back into focus.

Body languid and eyes hooded, I watch him move. Eyes on where we’re joined, he bites his bottom lip. “So wet. *Listen*, Sia. Listen to how good we sound.”

The damp slap of my excitement and climax rings between us, surrounding us in the sound of lust and passion.

“Diego,” I cry.

The wood at my back cries out in protest, but Diego ignores it.

“Give me another one.” He leans over me, sucking a nipple into his mouth. “I can feel it.”

I’m nothing but a puppet to his pleasure, he says come, and my body concedes to his demand within seconds. I scream out his name. My soul extinguished as I lay flat on the table, unable to open my eyes.

I’m drunk or high or flying, and gratification buries itself into my bones.

He roars, his climax teetering on the edge of falling. Slamming a fist against the wood beside me, he moves faster, *harder*.

“I love you,” I whisper, and he slams forward one last time, growling my name *just* as the table gives in to the pressure, succumbing to the trauma and dropping us to the ground in a flurry of naked limbs and painful grunts.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

DIEGO



Grace Snow isn't stupid. It didn't take her long to cotton on to the fact that the Bianchi name was behind her sister's captivity.

She was very quick to ban Sia and the family from stepping foot near her sister. Although it broke her heart, my wife didn't argue. She has this unrelenting guilt over her mother's and father's sins.

Sia tried to pay for Lucy's medical bills, but Grace declined her offer rather unceremoniously with an extended middle finger and a few empty threats. She accepted CJ's assistance, though. CJ and Sia argued for days about *who* would actually pay. In the end, he could see how important this was to her. So, while Lucy's accommodation and medical expenses for her new hospital look donated by Lincoln Enterprises, a portion of the inheritance Sia didn't want or need when Charles passed is now being put to good use.

Giuliana Bianchi was held solely responsible for the kidnapping and imprisonment of Lucy Snow. As expected, the doctor on Giuliana's payroll sang like a canary in an attempt to save himself. It didn't work. He, unfortunately, fell into the shiv of an inmate already serving a few consecutive life

sentences. The inmate's children have all had their college debts paid out by an anonymous source.

Salvatore remains sketchy as fuck on me. He doesn't trust me. Not one fucking iota. But he trusts his sister. Thank fuck. Or I'd be worm food.

I told him I loved her, but he was so sure I was lying. He was so confident I would've said anything for my freedom, only to return to New York to unravel his leadership.

He was so sure of himself that when he handed me the divorce papers, offering me a way out of Chicago and out of their lives, he believed I'd take the opportunity.

I wanted to tell him that Lorenzo wouldn't fucking care who killed Edoardo. They have their own secrets. Fuck. Vincent killed his own brother to protect the family. Maybe I should've told him that so he had something on New York to alleviate his worries. But I'm not about that life. My word is important to me. As is my loyalty. To Caruso, but more importantly, to my *wife*.

I don't know what changed his mind. I don't know what he saw in my face when he flashed Sia's desire for a divorce in my face, but it was enough to make him believe that I was *maybe* telling the truth. He took a gamble, but that wasn't for me *or* Chicago. It was for his sister because, above everything, Salvatore Bianchi loves his sister.

He'd gamble the possibility of his downfall if there was a chance Sia could be happy.

"I don't know whether I trust you anymore, Diego. You seem *pretty* content here in Chicago."

Lorenzo smirks at his brother's teasing.

Like always, I ignore Leonardo, leaning back in my chair. “We’ll be back in New York next week. We plan on hanging around for a few months. Sia will go back and forth as needed, of course, but I’ll be available for whatever you need.”

Lorenzo nods once, checking his phone for the umpteenth time.

“Everything okay?”

“I haven’t heard from Vincent. Bianca should’ve had the baby by now.”

Caterina flew back to New York a few days ago, wanting to make sure she was there for the birth of her niece or nephew. Salvatore looked ready to lock her in a cellar. I’m certain the asshole thinks she won’t come back.

“Labor can go for days, Enzo. Chill.”

“I should be there.”

Leo and I share a look.

“In the delivery room?” Leonardo tests.

His brother scowls. “At the hospital.”

“I’m sure that’s exactly what Bianca wants. The head of the family hovering over her after she pushes a watermelon out of her vagina.”

“Jesus, Leonardo.”

“What?” He holds his hands up. “It’s true. You’re acting ridiculous. Diego made an ID on the bitch with the Irish, and you’re focused on holding your best friend’s hand while his wife is in labor.”

“How has no one killed you?” Enzo pinches the bridge of his nose.

Leonardo's laugh booms through the house. "You'd all fucking miss me too much."

"Ainsley O'Brien." I pass the tablet to Lorenzo. "She's Oisin's cousin."

Lorenzo frowns, finger sliding over the screen as he reads everything I've been able to dig up on the elusive brunette. "Makes sense."

"It does?" I ask.

Lorenzo drops the tablet to the couch, swearing under his breath.

"My first ever kill was at the age of nine, but you likely already know that."

I dip my chin, confirming as much. Martina Caruso was brutally raped, and then her nine-year-old son was dragged into the room to watch as her killer slit her throat. The Irish soldier thought nothing of young Lorenzo as he left him alone with his mother's lifeless body. Lorenzo shot the asshole in the back.

"The man I killed was Oisin's uncle. I think his daughter is finally seeking her retribution."

Leonardo watches his brother carefully. His lips pressed into a thin line of concern.

Lorenzo sighs as he stands. "Good work, Diego. Keep digging. I need to know how involved Oisin is in her plot to bring me down."

I nod.

"I'm heading back to New York to make sure I'm there to meet the newest member of the Ferrari family when he or she arrives *and* as my brother so eloquently put it, hold Vincent's

hand. I don't need the psychopath killing a doctor while his wife is pushing."

Leonardo follows his brother, slapping my back goodbye as I open the front door.

Lorenzo taps a single step before turning back. "Did Salvatore ever tell you why he killed his father? The narrative he and Alessia stand by doesn't add up for me."

I lean casually against the doorframe. "I'm loyal to you, Enzo. But I'll never tell a soul anything that could cause Sia harm. All you need to know is that it was warranted and wasn't done for power or lack of loyalty."

EPILOGUE

ALESSIA



18 months later

*T*he grass is wet under my feet, and freshly cut blades stick to my skin with every hurried step I take. Mud pushes its way up between my toes, and I clench them inward, letting the soft sludge ground me to the earth. My heart flutters in my chest. My breathing coughs out in short and sharp rasps. Fog dances from my lips, and I watch it dissipate into the dark night before angling my head and listening for any sound of movement. A twig cracks to my left, and my lips tip upward as I dart to the right behind a thicket of trees. The purple silk of my cape billows in the wind I create as I run. I push my legs faster, eyes darting over the ground ahead.

I keep my breathing shallow and listen intently to the world around me. My adrenaline is at an all-time high. Fear trickles its way down my spine even though I know I'm in no danger. But the anticipation still heightens my anxiety. My flight-and-fight mode at war.

Run, my mind screams.

Stay, my heart pumps.

Diego has always considered himself superior in the hunt.

He's good. I'll give him that.

But I'm better.

I've been a part of this lifestyle for over a decade.

Ten years of running and letting my heart run free in a darkened forest. Chased by a man in a black hood who was forbidden to touch me. My hunter changed often, but the freedom that coursed through my veins never did.

And then Diego stepped into the game, and it was *never* the same.

I no longer craved freedom. I longed for capture. I wanted to know how violently he pined for me. I wanted to know that his obsession was aimed at *me*, not the game.

I discovered my liberty among these very trees, and then I found my heart.

This is the first hunt we've managed since the birth of our son. Matteo just hit six months, and he's the most glorious gift I've ever received. We were pregnant within a month of our reconciliation in the art studio. And while I would lay down my life for the chubby boy who has his father's eyes and my auburn hair, I needed this time with Diego.

The Quest looks very different for me these days. Grace still works as the head nurse on the estate, but she only agreed to remain if CJ cut me out of the business in its entirety, as an entrant and a controlling party. I agreed immediately. Grace still refuses to speak to me, which I can't say I blame her for. Lucy has been relocated to a mental health facility close to her sister. CJ assures me it is the best in facilities and care. He gives me updates, but only as Grace provides them, which isn't often. She doesn't trust him not to share the details with me.

The Quest finished up for the season last month, so the estate is deserted with the exception of the caretakers *and* Diego and me for the night.

He upped the stakes as well. Hunting me wasn't enough. He wanted me at a disadvantage.

Which is why I currently have my palms braced against a tree, riding out the hum of the small vibrator secured into my underwear courtesy of my husband. He's controlling the device through his phone, alternating the speed and intensity at any given time to catch me off guard and slow me down.

The vibrator stops, and I don't know whether to be elated or disappointed. I arch my back, my clit throbbing so vigorously that, not for the first time tonight, I'm tempted to slide my fingers into my panties and put myself out of my misery and come.

But I know the orgasm *with* Diego will be worth the delay.

Letting go of a purposeful breath, I take a shaky step forward. I'm so damp. My excitement has escaped my underwear and found residence on my upper thighs. I'm dying, desperation coursing through my veins.

"Hurry up and find me, Diego," I whisper.

"I found you over an hour ago, *tesoruccio*."

I startle at the hushed growl of his voice, spinning on my heel to find him.

He's leaning against a tree, and his eyes travel from my muddied feet and up the length of my body in a slow and sensual caress. "But watching you struggle through the torture of an impending orgasm was too good to pass up."

I narrow my eyes, and he taps his phone screen, making me bend at the waist with a wanton shout. “Fuck.”

“I want so badly to fight you to the ground and force you to take every inch of my dick, but *this*, fuck, Sia, you’re so fucking beautiful.”

I lick my lips and force my body upright.

“Don’t come, baby.”

The vibrator stops.

“How wet are you?”

“Dripping,” I say. “My thighs are slippery.”

Nostrils flaring, he steps forward, but I hold up a hand.

“I want a head start.”

He denies me with a shake of his head.

“Ten seconds.”

“Five,” he counters.

“Diego!”

“Four.”

I turn and run, knowing I’m three seconds away from capture.

But he cheats, his arms wrapping around my waist a second later.

I scream out in surprise.

Cape draped over my shoulders to free the back of my body, he pushes me against a tree. The bark scratches at the front of my thighs and snags along the material of the flimsy negligee, barely keeping my naked body covered.

Roughly kicking my feet apart, he yanks the silk nightie up over my ass. The cool breeze brushes between my thighs, and I moan out his name.

Panties pushed to the side, he slams inside me in one solid thrust, and I scream out in the darkness.

“*Si-a!*” he roars.

The wet sounds of his cock moving in and out of my cunt is almost too much. The rough kiss of the tree trunk cuts into my skin, but the sweet torture of his harsh thrusts is the perfect balance. I’m assaulted by the sounds and feel of *us*, and I never want it to end. I want to live out my days here, trapped against a tree with my husband’s body keeping me captive. I want the salacious torment his body gifts mine. I want his jagged groans in my ears and his sharp breath caressing my skin. I want to hear the desperate declaration of love that only he can give, the sweet words that sound like a plea to love him back.

My body buckles without warning in an orgasm so powerful that it rips through me, stealing my breath.

Diego doesn’t let up. His hips piston behind me, pushing deeper and deeper and making me cry out his name in a prayer to keep going.

He comes with his teeth pressed into my shoulder, a roar of pleasure puncturing my skin and bleeding over his lips.

Dragging me down to the ground, he kisses me slowly, letting us melt into the earth in the aftermath of our climax.

“I love you, Sia.”

“I love you, Diego.”

There are times when my mind makes me believe I don't deserve this, that I don't deserve Diego. How can a person claim another with lies on their tongue? How can something with so much beauty grow from the thorns of deceit? Diego and I were built from the foundations of obsession and nurtured into something untouchable in the very heart of this forest. We found one another in the righteous grace of deceit, but our love is the truest thing I'll ever know.



Thank you for reading **RIGHTEOUS DECEIT**

We hope you enjoyed Diego and Sia's love story.

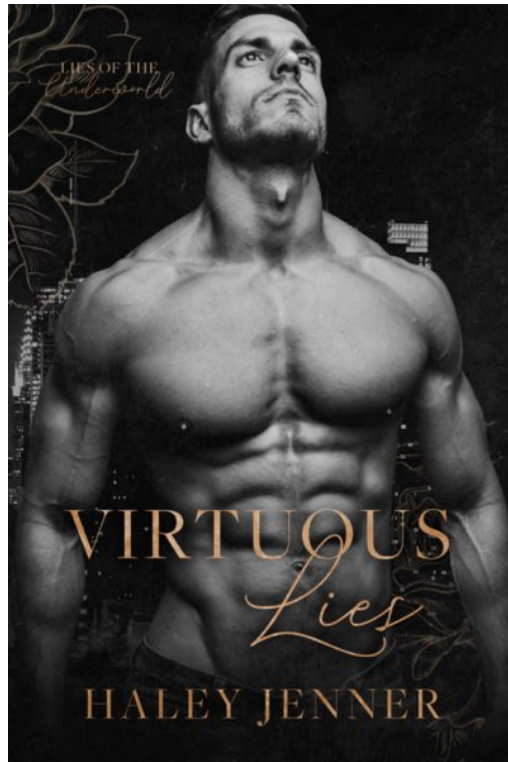
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Have you read Virtuous Lies yet?

[You can read about Vincent and Bianca's happily ever after here...](#)

Keep going for a *sneak peek* of Virtuous Lies.



Want to know more about **Rocco Shay**?

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TANGLED LOVE (#1)



RIGHTEOUS DECEIT PLAYLIST



- Love You Anyway - Luke Combs
- Just Say I'm Sorry - P!nk, Chris Stapleton
- Is This Love? - James Arthur
- The Real Thing - Ron Pope
- Mercy - Lewis Capaldi
- Already Gone - Dermot Kennedy
- One Life - Dermot Kennedy
- Hate Me - P!nk
- Falling - Harry Styles
- Till Forever Falls Apart - Ashe, FINNEAS
- My Wildest Dreams - Ron Pope
- Cold - Chris Stapleton
- Broken Halos - Chris Stapleton
- BLOW - Ed Sheeran, Chris Stapleton, Bruno Mars
- I Want Love - Chris Stapleton
- Save Me - Jelly Roll, Lainey Wilson
- You Should Probably Leave, Chris Stapleton

SNEAK PEEK: VIRTUOUS LIES

BIANCA



Holding my head high, I walk from the apartment. One high-heeled foot in front of the other moves me toward the elevator. The silence is deafening. The plush carpet mutes the sound of my heel. No music plays through the hallway speakers. Even the lift moves silently.

The dress I meticulously chose from my closet—the sexiest one I own—brushes my upper thighs as I step into the elevator. Anxiety rushes over my skin, but I force myself to stop fidgeting. I push my shoulders back in a posture that screams confidence.

My racing heart pounds against my rib cage. I'm convinced I'm only moments away from a heart attack. At eighteen.

My eyes move to the digital read on the elevator, the metal cage moving closer and closer to the ground floor with every second that passes. My body wills to shake, to tremble with dread. I refuse to let it, holding it in. It inverts, my organs rocked by tremors that make me nauseous.

Life changes so fast. You blink, and your world turns inside out. Six weeks ago, I was told I would marry Salvatore Bianchi in a peace deal brokered between our family and the Chicago Outfit. I wasn't surprised, certainly apprehensive, but

I hid my hesitation well—as would have been expected. Salvatore was due to arrive in the coming weeks. I was of age, having just celebrated my eighteenth birthday, which meant by my family standard, I was ready to belong to a man I was yet to meet.

I know the basic facts about my future husband. Thirty years old and boss of the Chicago Outfit. Never formally married. Mama assures me he's handsome, but she'd say anything to make me agreeable. Honestly, I couldn't care less if he had two heads. I just wanted to know whether he'd hurt me. Mama tells me that men can't hurt us if we don't let them infiltrate our hearts. I told her I meant physically. She told me to learn to disassociate. Inspiring, no?

On the same day I was told of my union with Salvatore, Caterina was told of hers with Roberto Ferrari. An act to preserve power *within* the family.

Caterina and I knew this was our path. *This* being the accepting mafioso women who we were, we'd accept our fate. Only, I couldn't acquiesce my sister's.

Caterina Rossi would never belong to the consigliere of Cosa Nostra. Not if I had anything to do with it.

I pretend I can't see myself in the reflection of the elevator doors. My lipstick is smeared, but I don't fix it. My hair has lost the neat silk of the wave I'd styled it into, the strains a messy resemblance of what they were a simple hour before.

The elevator comes to a stop with a delicate jerk, and I take a fortifying breath, relaxing my face into what I imagine an eighteen-year-old woman stupidly in love would look like.

I adjust my dress purposely as I step from the open doors, the resounding click of my heel against marble loud enough to

steel my nerves. The black Town Car parked curbside is impossible to miss, and I'm both elated and petrified at the sight of it.

My brother, Tony, eyes me warily as I exit the building with balletic strides. He stuffs his hands into his black dress pants. The leather of his gun holster is visible, his jacket haphazardly thrown open, and I eye the concealed weapon with trepidation.

God, if he makes Tony kill me.

My brother dips his chin inconspicuously enough that if you blinked, you would miss it. I return the indecipherable gesture. The success of a scheme coming together without issue passed through silent conversation between siblings.

Tony was surprisingly agreeable when I came to him with my plan. Our sister is naïve and amorous. Traits that wouldn't fare well in the possession of a monster. Our father had no issue with pushing her into the lion's den. Mother would stand by idly and watch the carnage. I would not, and Tony wasn't convinced he could close his eyes to the slaughter of Caterina's soul either.

Tony steps forward when I'm mere steps away from the car, grabbing my upper arm roughly. "Well done," he whispers, his face a contradiction to his praise, twisted in disapproval to make my father believe he's reprimanding me.

He pushes me forward unexpectedly, and I stumble on my stilettos, falling against the car roughly. I scowl at him, my reaction one-hundred-percent real. "Ow."

I straighten myself, retreating onto the sidewalk and adjusting my hair. Normally, a driver would be waiting, car door held open for me to slide into the sanctuary of my

father's presence. Not today. Today, I'm forced to remain outside, waiting for a punishment I had hoped for.

Bile twists itself in my stomach, and I'm thankful for the heat New York City slathers my skin with. The sweat grasping my upper lip will be mistaken for the humidity in lieu of what's actually causing it—crippling nerves.

He could kill me.

Men have died for less.

The dishonor I've drenched my father with is a scandal my family has not had to overcome for generations.

I was the golden child.

The swan in a gilded cage.

I was my father's most prized possession.

The key to the expansion in the business.

And I've just fucked it all.

There will be blood on my hands. The loss of life resting heavily on my shoulders for eternity. But I can't find it in me to care. My hands might forever be bathed in red, but I would wear it proudly. If only to myself.

The back door of the Town Car opens slowly, and my heart skips a beat. I avoid Tony's eyes, afraid of the panic my older brother will be unable to hide.

Armando Rossi moves torturously slow, and I consider he does it purposely. I refuse to look at the buffed leather of his loafers as he steps out, my eyes kept forward as my father—all six-foot-two of him—unfolds from the car.

He straightens the cuffs of his pressed shirt.

He adjusts his collar.

He spins his wedding band three times.

He does all this before taking a single step. Before even looking at me.

The fury in his breath coats my face in warmth, and it takes everything within me not to grimace in repulsion.

I want to apologize, but I refrain.

I want to swallow, yet I clench my jaw to abstain.

“Look at me.”

My chin longs to wobble, the fear in my throat like acid. But I do as I am told.

The back of his hand scores across my face before I register he’s lifted it. The slap is hard enough the metal of his wedding band rips into my skin in a caress of reproach.

“Let it bleed,” he grates out when I lift my hand.

Fist clenched, I drop it to my side, my eyes watering unintentionally at the feel of blood trickling down my cheek and onto my neck.

“Tony,” he murmurs, refusing to take his eyes from me.

Tony moves toward the glass doors of the building without delay, and I send a prayer to anyone who will listen that he’ll be safe.

“No, Daddy,” I cry. “Please.” I throw myself toward him, grabbing the lapels of his jacket. “Don’t hurt him.”

He pushes me back with a disregard and disgust that pierces my heart in a way I wasn’t expecting.

“Get in the car before I’m forced to kill you.”

I swallow. It was always a possibility, but hearing the words fall from my father's mouth with such ease slices me open and makes my heart stutter in pain.

I scramble toward the car, attempting to be seen as a dutiful daughter when, in fact, I'd just blown his entire world apart.

He waits long enough for me to swipe at my tears before following me into the car. His stare burns a hole into the forefront of my head, where a bullet would lodge itself right between my eyes.

"I love him," I lie, massaging my hands in my lap. My eyes are cast downward, afraid my deception will shine through.

He snorts in disgust. "You know *nothing* of love. What of loyalty, Bianca?"

"I'll do anything you ask of me."

"Anything I ask?" he bellows. "It was implied, Bianca. You are *given*. You are promised to another. To the *boss* of the Outfit." The veins in his head pulsate so fiercely that I fear his head will explode.

"And I will remain dutiful to him."

"He will not want you," he sneers. "You are no longer pure. What will Lorenzo tell him? The disrespect is unforgivable."

My father is a beautiful man. Tall and muscular. A strong jawline and thick lips. Brown eyes the color of cognac. Women throw themselves at him. I'd love to say that he only has eyes for my mother—as beautiful as she is—but I'd be lying. He takes advantage of his beauty.

While he remains respectful of my mother, which is the Cosa Nostra way, he's kept a *goomah* for many years. Even then, he enjoys the women the family has on the payroll when it suits him.

I want to hate him for it. It's not uncommon for made men to cheat on their wives, and it's not frowned upon. The women accept it. My mother tells me my father does it respectfully. How does one *respectfully* commit adultery? He does it discreetly, yes. But respectfully? There is no such thing.

My father is a capo, and while he has never outwardly vocalized his charge, I know he's responsible for the underworld prostitution ring run by the family. It should make me sick, but I've met some of the women under his charge, and they're happy. As happy as you can be sucking cock for money. But their vocation lets them live a life they're comfortable with. They're protected, to a degree, by the family, and I can't begrudge them that.

"Why is it okay for you to have mistresses but not okay for women to live the same?" I stupidly spit. "Were you a virgin when you married Mama?"

"Watch your mouth." His mouth doesn't open as he threatens me. The clench in his teeth so tight, the words are scarcely audible. "You honor and you respect the old ways, Bianca. I am a capo, for fuck's sake. What do I tell Lorenzo? Huh? His key to peace with the Outfit has been blown up because you fucked his *consigliere*? His closest advisor?" he screams, shaking the windows of his Town Car.

I can't swallow. I try, but my throat has tightened. An invisible palm having closed itself around my neck. I didn't think about what Lorenzo would do.

Tony jumps into the passenger seat, startling us both. “Go,” he urges my father’s driver.

Twisting in his seat, Tony looks ready to combust. “Did you fucking kill him?”

“What?” My mouth falls open.

“Did. You. Kill. Him?” he snarls, his face twisted with unease.

“Wh—No. Of course, not.”

Looking at our father, he shakes his head. “Roberto already had a serious fucking headache when I got up there.”

“A headache?” I repeat dumbly.

“A gunshot wound to the *goddamn* head, B.”

“Who else was with you?” My father grabs my wrist, and I cry out from the pain.

“No one. I swear. It was just Berto and me.”



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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Want to know our superpower? We can write a 90,000-word story and get to the acknowledgments with a million people to thank, stare at a blank screen, and forget how to string a sentence together.

Please know that if the rest of the section doesn't make any sense, we want to thank everyone who helps us bring the ideas in our heads into a legitimate-looking book that readers *buy*.

ellie. We know we snuck this baby into your inbox with a big, almighty please, *way* behind schedule. We appreciate you. We love you. We miss you.

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We hope you enjoyed Diego and Sia's journey to their happily ever after. It would mean the absolute world to us if you have a spare second to drop an honest review for their story.

Love you.

Always.

H and J xx

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



A blonde. A brunette. A tea lover. A coffee addict. Two people. One pen name. Haley Jenner is made up of friends, H and J. They're pals, besties if you will, maybe even soulmates. Consider them the ultimate in split personality, exactly the same, but completely different.

They reside on the Gold Coast in Australia's sunshine state, Queensland. They lead ultra-busy lives as working mums, but wouldn't want it any other way.

Books are a large part of their lives and they are firm believers that reading is an essential part of living. Escaping with a good story is one of their most favorite things, even to the detriment of sleep.

They love a good laugh, a strong, dominating alpha, but most importantly, know that friendships, the fierce ones, are the key to lifelong sanity and fulfilment.

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