



RUTHLESS
PASSION

THE GALLO FAMIGLIA BOOK THREE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BROOKE SUMMERS

RUTHLESS PASSION

GALLO FAMIGLIA

BOOK 3

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Wrath

Reaper

Standalones:

Saving Reli

Taken By Nikolai

A Love So Wrong

Other pen names

Stella Bella

(A forbidden Steamy Pen name)

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Snowed in with Daddy

Wooed by Daddy

Loving Daddy's Best Friend

Brother's Glory

Daddy's Curvy Girl

Daddy's Intern

His Curvy Brat

Taboo Teachings:

Royally Taught

Extra Curricular with Mr. Abbot

Private Seduction:

Seduced by Daddy's Best Friend

Stepbrother Seduction

His Curvy Seduction

CONTENT
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PROLOGUE

PORTIA

Aged Fourteen

“**P**ortia, *bambina*, do not tell your mama. She’ll kill me if she knows I’m giving you ice-cream before dinner.”

I smile at my father. His dark hair is so much like mine. Everyone always tells me how much I look like him. I find it a compliment. I adore my father. He’s the best man I know.

“Mama won’t know, Papa. Don’t worry.”

Even though I’m fourteen, I’m still a daddy’s girl. Nothing will ever change that.

He chuckles, and it’s deep and throaty, reminding me of so many happy memories. “Come along, *bambina*, we need to get into the house before your mama sees you.”

I flash a smile at him. “I know the way,” I tell him, and bite my lip when he gives me a sharp look. “I always hide from Mama,” I say, walking quickly toward the secret entrance.

“Portia, *mia carissima*, your mamma loves you. I do not understand why you do not get along.”

I sigh as I skirt around the house, making sure to keep an eye out for Mama. “Papa, I don’t want to get into this.”

Thankfully, he doesn’t say a word and I manage to get us both into the house and into his office without being seen. I take a seat and eat my ice-cream, happy to be in one of my favorite places in the world.

Papa looks at me with a proud smile on his face, his eyes alight with humor as he studies me. “Very good, *bambina*, but you should realize that I have my own secret route into the house without being seen.”

I bounce on the balls of my feet as I watch him. “You do?”

He shakes his head, unable to take the smile from his face. “Of course I do. Portia, the life I lead, we have every precaution to ensure that you and your mama are safe if anything were to happen.”

My blood runs cold at the seriousness in his tone.

“Don’t talk that way,” I snap. I hate it when he gets all serious and talks about what *could* happen.

I’m not stupid. I know that my father being a captain for the Famiglia means he’s a dangerous man who does things people would consider evil. But he isn’t like that to me. No, to me, he’s the best father and the best man a girl could ask for. He’s my biggest protector and supporter, and he’ll do whatever he can to make, not only me, but Mama happy.

He shakes his head. “Nothing will happen. Now, what’s going on with you and your mama?”

I sigh. “She’s being irrational,” I say as I finish my ice-cream and sit back in the chair, bringing my legs to my chest. “She’s always getting into my business. Whenever I’m texting Camille, she’s demanding to know who I’m talking to. Papa, she goes through my cell phone. It’s not fair. She’s being irrational and over the top.”

“She’s just worried. You’re young, *mia carissima*. Your mama is worried about you. But I shall talk with her, make her understand that going through your things is not okay. She’ll be saddened to know she has upset you.”

I nod, not wanting to tell him that she already knows, I hate that they argue about me. But my mama is determined to catch me doing something I shouldn’t be doing. It’s beyond weird and over the top, and it drives me crazy. I believe it’s because she was my age when she was promised to my father, she’s worried about me not living up to tradition. Ugh. I hate that one day I’ll be made to marry someone from the famiglia, but it’s who we are and it’s part of our life. Until then, I’ll enjoy everything in life.

“Now, tell me, how has your training been going?” he asks me as he sits back in his own seat and watches me with a soft look. It has the harsh, weathered lines on his face softening and makes him seem less intimidating.

“You already know,” I tell him with a raised brow. “Don’t Amadeo and Umberto give you a run down after every session?”

He grins. “They do, but I want to know from your own mouth, *mia carissima*. How is it going?”

I shrug. “Fine. I’m able to use a knife and a gun,” I tell him without emotion. The thought of hurting someone with those weapons makes my stomach flip. “I can defend myself if needed, and according to Umberto, I can kill a grown man if the occasion ever arises.”

My father nods and smiles at me with so much pride it makes my heart clench. “That, *bambina*, is good. I would like you to continue with your training. As long as you are comfortable.”

“Is there a reason why?” I ask him. I know my father. He wouldn’t make me do this, not unless there was a need. That he’s pushing me to continue just cements that fact even more.

An alarm on his computer goes off, and my heart begins to pound.

What the hell is that?

“Papa?” I ask when I see his body go solid and his face void of emotion. “What’s going on?”

“*Mia carissima*, I need you to listen to me,” he says sternly as he rises to his feet and reaches for his gun. “You are to go through the bookcase and stay there until I get you or Umberto does. Do you understand?”

I swallow back the fear but nod. “What’s happening?”

“The Scaffidi’s are coming,” he says, without missing a beat. “They’re coming for me, *bambina*. They’re coming for everyone I love. I need you to do as I say and go through the bookcase.”

There's no emotion in his voice, which let's me know he's been waiting for this day to come for a long time. I heard the rumors that he killed Scaffidi's son—his only son, Marco. But that was months ago, and there was no retaliation, so we'd all assumed it was over with. Now, they're out for revenge, and they're coming for my father.

“Papa.” I swallow hard at the thought of something happening to him. “Please,” I whimper.

He moves toward me and pulls me into his arms. “*Ti amo, Portia. Non dimenticare mai che,*” he whispers as he presses a kiss to my head. “Go,” he instructs. “We only have a little time. Now go.”

He pulls me toward the bookcase and ironically pulls out a vintage edition of *War and Peace* by Leo Tolstoy. There's a slight whirring sound, followed by creaking, then the bookcase swings open like a door, and I see a barely lit tunnel behind him.

“Papa?” I ask as I turn to face him. I already know in my heart that I'm going alone through this tunnel while he stays here and fights those who are coming for him and our family.

“Go, *bambina,*” he instructs.

“*Ti amo, Papa,*” I whisper as I press a kiss against his cheek, then I hurry through the secret door. The moment I'm in the tunnel, I turn to see my father giving me a soft look as he closes the door.

My heart is beating wildly. I have no idea what to do. Should I run or stay? Everything in me is telling me to stay put

and wait for Papa or Umberto, but there's another side of me that's urging me to run and find someone to help.

My inner musings are cut off when I hear deep voices talking. I step closer to the wall, trying to hear better.

"Davide," I hear someone say, the masculine voice is unfamiliar to me. "You knew we were coming," The unknown man continues, his tone filled with displeasure. "How?"

"I'm surprised it's taken you this long, Marco. You've known from the moment Marco Junior died that it was I who did it. Why wait so long for revenge?"

My lips part in surprise. Why is my father antagonizing him? He's only going to make it worse. What is he doing?

Bone chilling laughter filters through the air. "Ah, Davide, I've heard the rumors. The man who is the hitman for the Famiglia. Do you think your family will miss you? What about that gorgeous daughter of yours?"

"Watch it, Marco," my father warns. "My daughter is off fucking limits."

"And my son wasn't?"

"Your son was part of this life, Marco. He was on his way to becoming your underboss. You think we don't know that he managed to work his way through the ranks? Hmm? What about the fact that he was raping girls from the Famiglia? The Outfit didn't care. As long as your men were doing what they needed, that was all that mattered."

"My son was doing what he wanted."

“He raped a nine-year-old girl,” my father shouts. “Tell me, asshole, how the fuck is that normal?”

“You’ll die for the disrespect you have shown me,” the asshole growls. “For killing my son.”

“I killed an animal. One that needed to be put down. Had you been a decent father, you would have done it yourself.”

The laughter is back again, and this time it’s a lot more maniacal than before. “Your wife is going to become mine, and your daughter is going to be my whore.”

“Over my fucking dead body,” my father roars.

“That can be easily arranged,” the bastard retorts.

A gunshot rings out, and it’s followed by a thud, then silence.

I crumple to the floor, tears flowing down my face as I press a hand to my mouth to stop my cry from escaping.

Papa...

He’s gone.

Oh God, he’s gone.

ONE
PORTIA
THREE MONTHS LATER

The wall to the office opens and light floods the dark tunnel. I don't know how much time has passed, but the dimly lit lights that paved a way to an unknown exit, turned out a while ago. I've been sitting in the dark, wondering what to do next.

My heart beats wildly as I blink at the harsh light. I hold my breath, hoping and praying that it's Umberto. Papa said he would be coming.

"There you are, you fucking bitch," I hear a man snarl, instantly recognizing the voice of the man who shot my father.

"Portia," Mama whispers, her eyes red and puffy. She rushes toward me and pulls me into a hug. "Oh, mia cara ragazza, I was so worried," she sobs, holding me tighter than necessary. "They killed him, Portia. They killed your father."

I swallow at the utter devastation I hear in her voice. "What are they planning on doing?" I ask, needing to know what the animals are going to do with us.

She pulls me behind her back as we walk into the office. There are five men standing around the room, positioned in a way to ensure we don't escape. My mama keeps her hands tight against my arm, blocking my view from the men's view.

“What do you want from us?” Mama asks, her voice shaky but clear.

“You, Cagna, are going to do as I tell you or I’ll shoot your daughter, just as I did your husband.”

I hear my mama’s sharp intake of breath. “What is it that you want me to do?”

I peer around Mama and see the smirk the man’s wearing.

“You’re going to become my wife, and that daughter of yours is going to live with us.” He pulls out a long knife from behind his back. “If you don’t, then her pretty throat will be slit.”

I gasp awake, my body drenched in sweat, every inch of me covered. I’m struggling to breathe as memories from the night of my papa’s death haunt me yet again. It’s been three months and I’m not over it. I dream about it every single night. No matter how hard I try, I can’t stop the nightmares from coming.

I blindly reach out for the night light, needing my room to be illuminated as I try to suck in some much-needed oxygen. My body is in pain. I disobeyed Marco, and that’s something he doesn’t take too kindly to.

Over the past three months, I’ve only felt his wrath a handful of times. All of which he twisted around to make it seem as though it was my fault. He’s never to blame for anything that happens. He’s a monster. And I’m not the only one he hurts. My mama has it worse than I do. She tries to take the brunt of what’s happening to protect me.

Once I'm able to calm down and get my heartrate to a normal rhythm, I climb out of bed and creep out of my room in search of a drink. I need to take a few minutes to let the lingering memories of the nightmare fade away.

I tiptoe down the hall, careful not to make noise. I come to a stop when I see Marco's office door is ajar, and there's light spilling out. I edge closer, hoping I can get past the room without him seeing me, but his words have me freezing.

"Yes, the girl is going to catch a pretty penny. She's a virgin, which means she'll go for a lot more." Marco's words are filled with glee.

"Your wife won't take too kindly to you selling her daughter," Montoya says with a chuckle. He's Marco's righthand man, and he's sleazy and won't stop looking at my boobs whenever I'm around. "Then again, your wife doesn't say much anymore."

No. She's been brutally trained to keep her mouth shut and not disobey the man of the house. My mama's terrified of upsetting him because that leads to him hurting her. I don't blame her. She's stuck in a position where she has no escape, and she's doing whatever it takes to survive, to keep the both of us alive.

"Tomorrow night, the bitch will be gone and out of my hair for good," Marco says. "The shipment of girls is leaving at three am. There's two million on the line for this deal. Anyone who fucks up will pay the price."

My eyes are wide and my breathing is heavy as I realize what they're talking about. I quickly tiptoe back to my room

and close the door, my heart racing.

He's selling me. He's trafficking me.

Tears fall from my eyes as I climb into bed and pull the sheets to my neck. A tremor runs through my body as I hear the floorboards outside of my room creak beneath the weight of someone. I hold my breath, hoping and praying they'll continue on past my room, but they don't.

My tears continue to fall, and I clutch the sheets to my body tightly, praying that whoever's at my door, they move away.

I pull in a sharp breath as my bedroom door slowly opens. I close my eyes tightly when the bedroom light illuminates the room. My stomach drops as I hear a click. I know that noise. I've heard it so many times before. It's the sound of a gun cocking.

"I know you're awake," Marco jeers. "I know that you eavesdropped on my conversation."

Something cold and hard presses against my temple, and my head lulls with the brutal force. My eyes open, and I see Marco standing above me, his gun pressed against my head. I release a soft whimper. My entire body is trembling. I can't breathe right now. Fear, unlike anything before, takes hold of me; captures me in a moment of paralysis.

"You should have stayed in bed," he sneers, his eyes wide and his teeth bared. He looks half feral, like a dog that's killed and needs to be put down. "You should have never heard what we were discussing."

“I won’t say a word,” I breathe. “Please,” I whimper. “I promise.”

He shakes his head. “I have no way of knowing if you’re truthful.” He pulls the trigger, and the gun goes off. The sound is muffled by the silencer, but it’s still loud enough that I flinch. I wait, expecting pain and death, but there’s nothing.

Laughter hits me, and I swallow back the fear as I once again look at Marco.

“Tut, tut,” he growls. “You really think it would be that easy? This is a six-barrel chamber, Portia, and only one bullet. Will you be lucky again?”

The bastard’s playing Russian Roulette. He thinks this is a game, that my life is something he can toy with. God, he’s a sadistic fucker. I hate him with every breath that I take. I wish I had the strength and courage to kill him, to do to him what he’s done to me and my father.

The gun clicks once again, and I can’t hold back the flinch as he shoots. Once more, there’s no bullet. Over and over again, he does it, pushing me to the brink of insanity. Just one more barrel left. This is it. This is when he kills me. I can feel it in my soul. He’s not a nice man. He’s never been one to show mercy. He’s torturing me, making me so scared that I can’t think straight. Every time he cocks the gun, I think this is it, and nothing. He’s playing mind games.

“Look at you,” he growls. “So fucking weak. So feeble. You’re useless, just like your father.”

He clicks the gun once again, and I close my eyes, not wanting to see his twisted smile as he pulls the trigger. I won't give him the satisfaction of being the last face I see when I die. No. I close my eyes and remember my father—the man who was the best man in the world, who was my best friend. I remember his smile and his warmth. He'll be the last image I see when the fucker puts a bullet into my brain.

The gun cocks, and I take a steadying breath. This is it. This is the end. He pulls the trigger, and it's as though time stands still. I hold my breath, waiting for the bullet to sink into my skull. But it doesn't. There's no pain, no blood, nothing.

I open my eyes to see the asshole laughing. “You really thought I'd lose out on the money that's coming to me by killing you?” His eyes are filled with mirth, his laughter loud and boisterous. “No fucking way. You're gone tomorrow, Portia. There's no way in hell I'm going to lose the money you're worth.”

My hands won't stop shaking, my entire body has goosebumps, and my blood is ice cold. This man has instilled a fear in me like no other. I truly believed I was going to die, and for what? To give him and his asshole friends a laugh? God, I'm so stupid. So damn stupid. I should have known that if he was going to kill me, he'd have done it as soon as he entered the room. There was no other reason for him to be here other than to torture me.

“Tomorrow, Portia, you're going to understand what it means to become a whore,” Marco says as he exits my

bedroom. He flicks the light switch off as he exits, leaving my door ajar. No doubt wanting to hear if I move around again.

Darkness settles over my room once again, and I remain where I am, lying on my bed, tremors running through my body. I don't think I'll ever get the chill from my bones. I've never been as afraid as I was mere moments ago.

I feel wetness between my legs. My pajamas are soaked with urine. I hadn't even realized I wet myself until now. Tears tumble down my face as I lie on the bed and try to calm my frayed nerves. I'm pathetic. I should have known Marco was just tormenting me. He's a bastard who lives to have people fearful of him, and he's just done that.

I'm not sure how long I lie in bed, the wetness soaking through me and the tears falling freely. I'm still shaking, my body frozen with fear and worry. The light from Marco's office is still lit, and I know he'll be up for a little while longer. He's rarely out of the room, always planning his next move, always trying to be one step ahead of everyone.

With shaky legs, I climb out of bed and rush to the bathroom. I need to shower and get clean. I'm horrified that I've wet myself, and I need to get clean, get rid of the fear, and warm up.

I clutch at the wall as I walk across the room, my footsteps uneasy from the tremors that are still running through my body. I'm a mess. An utter mess.

This is not the girl my father raised. He'd be disappointed that I'm acting this way. My papa didn't raise a quitter. No, he

raised a goddamn fighter. Someone who knew their worth and knew what they had to offer the world.

I climb into the shower and let the hot water cascade down my body, washing away the fear that's trapped inside.

My papa raised me to fight back and not become a woman enslaved to a man. He taught me how to protect myself, and tonight, I forgot every single thing he taught me. I was utterly paralyzed by what Marco was doing. I've never had a gun pointed at me; never been shot at, not knowing the barrel was empty. Russian Roulette is one of the deadliest, sickest games known to man, and yet Marco loved playing it with me.

But my papa was right. I am a fighter. I'm better than this. The fear may have paralyzed me for a moment, but it won't own me like it does my mama. No fucking way. I'm a Leone. I'm a motherfucking Leone. My papa was a man who was loved and feared at the same time. He wouldn't hurt you unless you betrayed his family. He showed everyone respect, and in return, they gave it back. He wasn't a man who would take being betrayed lightly. He was still capable of evil things, but he wouldn't show you what they were until you wronged him or the family. I am him. Everything good about my papa, I am. Everyone would always tell him I was his mini-me, and my papa loved that.

I'm not going to let Marco destroy me. I won't let him get to me any longer. Tonight, I break free of the terror he has me under. It's not going to be easy, but I have no other choice. I have to escape. If I don't, there's no hope for me. I'm praying that when I enter the night, I can disappear without a trace.

I quickly end my shower and dress for the occasion. I won't be able to bring anything with me other than the clothes on my back. I need to ensure that I dress warm and have anything of importance on me.

I glance around my bedroom and see the photo of me and Papa. It was taken not long before his death. It's one of my favorite photos of the two of us. Mama took the picture—she's never been one to like having her picture taken. She'd much rather be the one taking them. I grab the locket that's hanging on the frame and take that too. It doesn't take me long to have everything I need and my window open, ready for my escape.

I should go to the Famiglia, to the family my papa gave his life for, but there's a knot in my stomach that's telling me not to. There's something warning me that it's not safe, and I've been taught to always trust my gut. I glance back at my room. My cell is on the bed, switched off. There's no way I can bring it with me. If I did, they'd be able to trace it and it would lead them right to me. I take a deep breath and smile.

This is it.

I climb out of my window, careful not to make a sound. I've been sneaking around this house since we arrived after my papa was killed. I needed to know the lay of the land, and I found all the blind spots from the security cameras, along with the blind spots of the patrolling guards. This is my one chance. My only chance to escape. And I'm taking it with both hands.

I hurry down the drainpipe, careful to keep close to it so that I'm not seen. The moment my feet touch the ground, I'm moving quickly, pressing my back against the wall, my feet

not once making a sound. I see the break in the trees, the one place I can escape through.

Marco has a forest that edges the land at the back of his house. Why? I have no idea. It's the easiest place for an attack, and it's also my way out. I reach the corner of the house and take a steadying breath, watching the revolving camera hit the tree line as I count.

8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, go.

I run like I'm in the hundred-meter sprint, and I don't stop to look around as I make a mad dash for the trees. The second I reach them, I dart into the thick, overgrown bushes and hide behind the branches. They'll conceal me from the security camera and the men on patrol.

I wait a few moments, listening, watching, waiting. But there's no sound, no noise, nothing. I take a deep breath and push further into the thick trees, not ready to smile yet, not wanting to curse myself by believing I'm free.

I keep pushing hard, moving quickly but as quietly as I can through the forest. I know when I reach the clearing, I'll no longer be in Marco's territory. I've made it past the first hurdle. Now I need to get out of here and into the city, into the bustling streets, where I can blend in with the other homeless people of Chicago.

I'm almost free of the Outfit. I'm almost free of the life they wanted me to lead. I move through the forest at a run, needing to find the way out, glad I'm under the cover of the thick and dense trees. I'll be able to hide if I hear anyone coming.

It's almost daybreak when I find the clearing. I see a man dressed in leather sitting astride his bike. Normally, I wouldn't approach a stranger, but today, I need some help.

Here's hoping he doesn't murder me.

TWO
DARIO
FOUR YEARS LATER

“**W**hat’s going on with you?” Ade asks me, her voice soft and filled with worry.

Guilt eats heavily at me as I see the scar on her cheek. I wasn’t to blame for what happened to her then, but I hold some responsibility for the pain she went through from our parents. I should have been a better brother, one that took care of my sisters. Instead, I was so wrapped up in my own shit that I didn’t see what was right in front of me.

“Dario,” Ade says again, reaching for my hand and squeezing. “Talk to me, please?”

I’m watching her today. Her husband isn’t comfortable leaving her right now and I don’t blame him. My sister is pregnant and she’s vulnerable. She’s still dealing with the fallout of the bombs that took the lives of our youngest sister and Ade’s husband’s uncle. Our sister, Vivianna, was like Ade’s daughter. She was the one who took care of her, and her loss has affected Adelina the hardest.

“I’m sorry,” I tell her. “I should have checked in with you. I should have known he would have turned on someone else.” The guilt is eating me alive. I let my sister feel the wrath of

our father because I got too strong for him to continue that shit with me.

She pulls in a ragged breath. “No,” she breathes. “Oh, Dario, no. It is not your fault. None of what’s happened is. You helped me,” she whispers. “You knew something wasn’t right, so you went to Elio. Your distrust is what saved me from that hell.”

She throws her arms around me and hugs me. “I still should have done more.”

“You couldn’t have,” she tells me. “I assure you, Dario, I do not blame you for what happened. I do think you should have told us about what our father was doing, but not for me, but for you. You went through all that alone, and I wish you had told us. We could have helped you.”

I wrap my arms around Ade and hold her tight. “I was ashamed,” I confess.

She nods. “I know. I get it. I was too.”

Of course she was. You don’t expect to be beaten by a fucking grown-ass adult. The shame of it hits you out of nowhere. You battle internally, wondering if you should speak out, but then think against it, worried people will blame you for it happening or tell you to do things differently. It doesn’t matter. Nothing you do will change an abuser. You can be the quietest, most well-behaved person, and change everything about yourself, but they’ll always find something to fault, some reason to take their anger out on you. In the end, it was easier to hide it than feel the shame of someone finding out.

“You are so much better than he was,” she tells me. “I’m so glad he’s dead, Dario, so happy that he can’t hurt us anymore.”

The fucker took the easy way out. He put a gun to his head and killed himself. The fucker knew he was going to die, but he decided to be a coward and not face the wrath of Hayden, Rocco, Elio, and I.

“He died too easy,” I growl. I’m still pissed that I wasn’t able to kill him.

Ade’s laughter is soft. “I know. But he’s gone, and you are going to be an amazing man, Dario. I know that with every fiber of my being.”

“You’ve got too much faith in me,” I tell her. I’ve fucked around a lot. I didn’t take my responsibilities seriously and have a lot to make up for.

“No, I don’t. I have the right amount of faith in you. You do not see what I do, and that’s okay. One day, you will. You’re one of the best men I know, Dario. You’re protective, loyal, determined, and caring. That’s all that anyone could ever want. I know if something happens, you will be there. I can count on you.”

Seriously, she has me on a fucking pedestal and I don’t deserve to be on it. I failed her, and I failed Vivi. I should have protected them from our parents. Instead, Ade was almost beaten to death and we lost Vivi.

“Have you thought more about what Rocco said?” she asks, and it finally clicks as to why we’re having this

conversation.

“Ade—”

She shakes her head. “You’re going to be a good underboss, Dario. You’ll be fair but strict. The men respect you already, and I know if anyone can make it work in Missouri, it’s you. You’re going to be great, and you’ll grow the Famiglia to become just as powerful as the Irish.”

She has so much faith in me that my heart fills with pride at how amazing she is. After all the shit she’s been through, she’s standing strong and being Adelina.

“You’re too good for that Irish brute,” I quip, knowing that my sister loves her husband and nothing anyone says will ever make her see him as anything other than the man she loves. Hayden Gallagher cherishes her. He’ll do whatever it takes to make her happy and that’s all any of us want.

Her laughter is soft but filled with happiness. “You’re crazy. But, Dario, I think you should take it.”

“You’re wanting to get rid of me?” I laugh.

Her expression falls. The happiness that was once in her eyes has gone, and she’s watching me, horrified. “God no. Oh, Dario, no. I’ll miss you but you’re not going to get away that easily. You know I’ll be calling every day.”

I smile at her. She’s the sweetest, most pure person I’ve ever encountered.

“I think you should take it so you can start fresh. No more living in the shadows of what happened. It’ll be a new beginning. A chance for you to forge your own path without

having the past at your back. You'll be the only Gallo in Missouri. They won't know of our father. All they'll know is you."

"Never thought of it like that," I muse. It's a great way to view it. "Why didn't I think of that?"

She lifts her shoulders and shrugs. "Maybe because it'll hurt your head?"

My lips twitch at her words. "If I go, who's going to watch out for you?"

She sighs. "I can take care of myself. Besides, I have a husband who will kill anyone who dares to even think about trying to harm me. Not to mention, Elio lives less than twenty minutes away, and it's not as though you're leaving the country, Dario. You're like a three-hour plane ride."

She's given me a lot to think about. I've been putting off accepting as I wanted to stay close to Ade. After all the shit that happened, it didn't feel right leaving her, but she's made some great points. I think speaking with Rocco and trying to sort out the logistics of it all is a good idea, and if it comes together, then I'll become the Underboss of Missouri. Christ, I never thought I'd rise that far within the ranks of the Famiglia. I always believed I'd make it to captain—a position I got at a young age due to my father being the Boss. I never thought I'd rise higher.

Ade's cell buzzes, and a wide smile forms on her face as she reads the message. "Hayden's on his way home."

“Once he’s here, I’ll get out of your hair,” I tell her, and she gives me a blinding smile.

Not even fifteen minutes later, Hayden walks into the house and moves toward my sister.

“That’s my cue to leave,” I comment as he pulls her into his arms. I like the guy and I know he’s married to Ade, but I’m still not okay with him mauling her.

“Bye, Dario,” Ade calls out, laughter in her voice. “I’ll call you later. Go and talk to Rocco and make a decision.”

I shake my head as I leave their home. Damn, that woman always knows what I’m thinking. Since marrying Hayden, she’s become a lot more assertive and confident. She’s come out of her shell and is able to be herself. We owe Hayden for helping our sister through the darkest of times. I don’t know if she would have made it if she didn’t have him.

“I’ve been expecting you,” Rocco says as I enter his home.

I raise a brow at his words. How the hell did he know I would be stopping by?

“Ade,” he says with a smirk.

Christ, that woman is on a fix Dario kick right now.

“She’s worried,” he tells me. “She wants the best for you, Dario, and that means she’s going all out to get it for you.”

I shake my head. “She needn’t be worried. I’m fine.”

It's his turn to raise his brow, and the look of disbelief on his face has me biting back a curse. "Let's go to my office," he says, and I dutifully follow behind him. "Ade didn't tell me about what you spoke about. She just said you could be coming to see me."

I nod as I take a seat. "Hayden had business to attend to and I wanted to check in on Ade. It made sense that I stayed and watched over her while he was gone."

"Christ, Dario, I wasn't asking why you were there. I was wondering what's going on?"

"That's between Ade and I," I respond without emotion. It's one thing that I fucking love about my sister: she'll never repeat anything that's said between us to anyone.

"You're a hard-headed fucker," he growls. "Okay, so have you thought more about Missouri?"

I nod. "I have. I'm just wondering what the logistics would be. How many men would I have with me when I move there?" We'll need to start from the ground up and it's going to take time. Having men already inducted into the Famiglia to move with me means I'll have men I can trust to help me grow the organization.

"I have fifteen men willing to relocate with you. Those fifteen men are trusted and have requested to be with you. They respect you and want to be at your side as you build the Famiglia."

"Who?" I ask, confused that fifteen fucking men would want to be with me.

I've fucked up a lot. I should never have been made captain. I didn't take the job seriously and I was always a joker, acting out against my father, something that Rocco and Elio fucking hated. I wasn't punishing anyone but the Famiglia when I refused to do shit that was expected of me. But when Rocco took the helm, I respected him, and I knew that I'd do whatever it took to show him that I could be good captain.

"Dario," he says with a sigh. "You've proven yourself as a captain. The men respect you. The only person who doesn't see that is you. What happened when our father was alive has long been forgotten. You are not the same man you were when he was around. You are Dario Gallo, the Underboss of Missouri."

I sit up straighter, keeping eye contact with my brother, my boss, the man I respect above everyone else.

"Which men have requested a move?" I ask, and he smiles. "Are they good at recruiting?"

"There he is," Rocco murmurs. "Constante wants to come, and I think he'd be a good fit. He is extremely loyal to the Famiglia, and he will not be able to rise if he stays with me or Elio. He could rise with you."

I nod. Constante is one of the most hardworking, loyal men the Famiglia has, and he was passed over for promotion by my father, then when Rocco took the helm, he promoted those who had been with the Famiglia longer than Constante.

"I think he'll be a good captain," I say, and my brother grins in agreement. "Who else?" Rocco goes through the

others, all of whom are known to me, and most are friends. I respect that they want to help me grow the Famiglia.

“There’s also Beppe,” he says, and it’s my turn to smile. “I assume you’ll be making him your right-hand man?”

Beppe has been my right-hand man since we were kids. He’s my best friend and the only person who knew what the fuck was going on in our home. He knew that my father was beating the shit out of me on a daily basis, and I spent a lot of time at his home when growing up to escape my own. There’s no one I’d rather have as my right-hand man than Beppe.

“I think that’s enough men to get us started,” Rocco says as he hands me a thick manilla file. “Here are some properties I’ve scouted. Find a home, Dario. Once you’ve done that, we’ll get the ball rolling.”

I rise to my feet and take the folder. “Sounds good. I’ll have an answer for you tomorrow.”

Rocco stands and shakes my hand, pulling me into a hug. “I’m proud of you, Dario. You’re going to be a great underboss.”

“Thanks,” I murmur, still not okay with the praise that’s being heaped on me. “We’ve a lot of work to do to get Missouri on the map for the Famiglia. Tomorrow, we’ll get to work.”

I leave my brother’s house with a renewed determination. I’m not going to fail. I’m going to make it my mission to have the Famiglia be the biggest organization in the state. It’s going to be a lot of work, but I’m up for the challenge.

I'm not going to fail.

THREE
PORTIA
THREE MONTHS LATER

“**W**hat’s going on?” Nell asks me, her red hair whipping around her with the wind. “You’re on edge, Portia.”

I look at the woman who’s been at my side for the past four years and wonder why she always sees the good in people, why she always manages to find something pure in every situation. “Nell, I’m always on edge,” I remind her.

Nell has lived on the streets all her life. Her entire family has been homeless, so she knows no different than the life she’s living. I, on the other hand, have known a life full of comfort and love. I know what the other side feels like, and I know the things that I am missing. A life on the streets isn’t easy. It’s hard, it’s painful, and it’s scary. I’m always on edge, always wondering what’s going to happen next. It’s hard to be constantly on the lookout, never letting your guard down, but I’ve survived the last four years. I’ve managed to grow stronger, wiser, and more confident as each day passes. I’m no longer that scared girl who wet herself while her stepfather held a gun to her head and played Russian Roulette. No, I’m once again Portia Leone, the daughter of Davide Leone. I’m not a pushover. Not anymore.

“You are, and I don’t understand,” she says softly. “We have to be careful, we have our rules, but, Portia, your edginess is on another level lately.”

I press my lips together. I’ve shielded Nell from a lot of things over the years. She’s my friend, the only real one I’ve had in a long time. She’s been at my side since the first week I ran away. The biker didn’t murder me, but he was extremely cautious about leaving me at the bus station. I didn’t tell him where I was going or where I came from. I just needed a ride, and he thankfully gave me one. I got on that bus and went to Indianapolis, where I’ve been ever since. It’s also where I met Nell.

“Where are we sleeping tonight?” she asks, thankfully not pushing me to give her answers. I don’t lie to Nell, ever, but I also don’t tell her the entirety of what happens.

I always believed that I would never be able to kill anyone. The only person who angered me enough to even contemplate it was Marco, but even then, I didn’t think I had it in me. That was until I was six months living on the street and a drunken asshole crept up to Nell while she was sleeping. Being on the street, I find it hard to sleep, so I’m always woken up by the faintest of sounds. The asshole had his pants down and was fisting his cock. I truly believe he was going to rape my friend. So I killed him. He was the first but not the last person I killed for trying to come for Nell. She’s the sweetest person you’ll ever meet, and she pulls on every instinct I have to protect her.

“We’ll try the shelter,” I tell her, knowing that I need to sleep. In the shelter, people are better behaved. They’re

grateful for the warm bed and hot food they get. I'm able to sleep better there. I don't take advantage of the shelter, only using it once a week, maybe once every two weeks. I know there are a lot of people who need warmth more than I do.

Nell gives me a wide grin, and I know she needs the shelter. She needs to be around more people. She misses her family, and being in the shelter gives her a little bit of her family back. They used to stay there a lot, so it's a place Nell loves. "What about Ursula, Markus, and Paulie?" she asks.

I try not to show the irritation on my face. Nell loves them and always sees the best in them. However, over the last few weeks, I've come to realize just how much those three use Nell. My girl is amazing at finding food and clothes for everyone she meets. She'll give you her food if she thinks you need it. So Ursula, Markus, and Paulie only come around whenever they're low on food. It pisses me off that they do that, but on the other hand, they do protect her. They'll watch out for her when I'm not around, and for that I tolerate them.

"They'll find us whenever they need us," I tell her with a forced smile. "You know those three, they like to be alone."

She nods, a huge smile on her face. "Okay, so I'll meet you at the shelter this evening?"

I sigh. I hate it when she wants to go off alone. I raise a brow. "Rule number three," I remind her, and she blinks and then nods. "I'll come with you."

She gives me a grateful smile. "I want to go to the graves."

I nod. "Let's go," I tell her.

I stand in the line, really regretting not coming earlier. There's a crowd starting to gather already, so it's going to be chaos trying to get in. Nell's speaking with her grandmother's friend, the two of them catching up. The city is alight with the rumors of a turf war between the local motorcycle chapter against the Gallo's and the Gallagher's. The local MC has a lot of guts going up against two of the biggest families in this city and in Chicago. That's some bold moves, but so fucking stupid. My heart aches when I think about the Gallo's. The Gallo Famiglia were the family my father worked for, and the moment he was dead, they turned their backs on me.

I spot a timid brunette walking toward the line, her eyes wide as she walks toward me. "Hey," I call out, and she turns to face me, her eyes wide and filled with a pain that hits me deep. "You're new."

She nods but doesn't say a word. She's cautious. I get that. I reach for her and pull her into the line beside me. "What's your story?" I ask her.

"My dad died, and I have nowhere to live," she tells me. I see the heartache in her eyes, but I feel as though I'm missing something. Like it's not the full story.

There's an aura about this girl that pulls at me. It's just as I felt when I met Nell. My gut is never wrong, so I'm going to pull this girl under my wing and keep her with Nell and me.

“I’m sorry about your dad. Girl, stick with me. We’ll get you sorted. I’m Portia,” I tell her with a smile, hoping I don’t scare her off. The last thing I want is for her to get spooked and run away.

She gives me a soft smile. “Hey, Portia. I’m Tee.”

I know it’s not her name. It could be a fake name or it could be a shortened version of her name. Either way, that’s the one she’s given me and that’s what I’ll call her. “They’ll be opening the doors soon. We should be good to go in and get a bed. Some nights, it’s chaotic with people trying to get one. It’s always worse when the weather turns nasty.”

I need to explain things quickly to her. I also need her to understand that being alone is dangerous.

“There are a few rules you have to learn, Tee. Rule one: don’t steal anything from another one of us. That shit’s not tolerated. We band together in groups. There’s now six of us. There’s Ursula, Markus, Nell, and Paulie. It’s always better in numbers. Remember that.”

She nods. She’s listening attentively, which is good.

“Rule number two,” I say as I check each finger. “Don’t trust anyone. No matter who they are.”

Her eyes flash with acknowledgement.

“Rule number three: never, and I mean never, be alone. No matter where you go, you have to do it in pairs. The streets are dangerous, especially now that the motorcycle club has been taken out. It’s every criminal for themselves right now trying to fight for that turf.”

Her eyes widen. “An entire chapter was taken out?” There’s a little off key to her voice and it’s got me wondering who this girl is.

I continue, wanting to give her the full low down so she knows what could happen if she mixes with the wrong crowd. “Get this: the Gallagher’s took them out. Or so the word on the street says. Well, them along with the Gallo’s. From what I’ve heard, the Demons took a Gallagher girl, and the family were out for revenge. As for the Gallo’s, the Demons sideswiped one of the Gallo’s cars, injuring the second brother. It’s fucked up, if you ask me. Who the hell goes after the biggest and most connected crime family of them all?”

She shakes her head. “Crazy,” she murmurs.

Yeah, this girl is definitely hiding something, and from the way her body has tightened while speaking about the motorcycle club, I can only assume she had a run in with those animals before.

“Exactly. Only those who are either crazy or power hungry would try and take on such a force.” I release a tut. “Stupidity. And now look where it’s got them. Six feet under.”

“Who are the Gallo’s?”

My eyes widen. How the hell has this girl survived this long without knowing the who’s who of the mafia world? “Girl, the family dynamics of the Gallagher’s are crazy, but I can give you a quick rundown on the Gallo’s.” I pull in a sharp breath and scan the crowd, making sure Nell stays in my line of sight at all times. “You know Jade Gallagher, right? The daughter of Liam—he’s the boss of Chicago? Well, she

married the Capo of the Italian mafia in Chicago. The two of them are the modern-day Bonnie and Clyde. Vicious, ruthless, and so in love it's sickening. But Rocco is a Gallo. Hence why you'd be stupid to take on the Gallagher's. They're connected, but more than that, they're powerful."

Her lips part in surprise. It's not easy hearing about the criminals that run the city, but I know the Gallos. I have known them since I was a child. My dad was the captain four years ago. He helped build the Famiglia from the ground up. He loved the family. He'd have done anything to protect them.

"The Gallo family is as follows. Aldo and Natalia had five children. Three boys and two girls. No one knows what went down between the family, but word is that Aldo was sick with cancer and handed Rocco the reins of the mafia before he killed himself. His wife died not so long after he did."

From everything I remember about the family, Natalia was like my mama: all about appearances in front of other people. The real truth is no one ever knows what goes on behind closed doors. They could be the nicest people you'd ever meet, but the moment they're in their own home and the doors are closed, they could be brutal bastards like Marco.

"Their youngest daughter was only thirteen when she was caught in the crossfire of a war the Gallagher's were involved in. They almost lost their other sister too. She's also married to a Gallagher. Hayden is the boss here in Indiana."

Vivianna was the sweetest girl you'd ever meet. She was adorable, and I hate that she lost her life.

“Oh, here we go. Are you ready?” I ask, as I realize she’s gone deathly pale. I’ve scared her. Which is what I wanted. She needed to know everything. I just hope she doesn’t run.

“You said not to go anywhere alone, but you are,” Tee says pointedly.

I smile at her. She’s good. “I’m not. Nell is ahead of me. She’s talking to a friend of her grandmother’s. Nell was born on the streets and has never left them. She’s a social butterfly. She knows everyone there is.”

“Any more rules I should know?” she questions, and I hear the hesitation in her voice. She’s not yet made her mind up about staying here.

“One last one. Rule number four: information is money, Tee. If someone has money, you’d better believe that most people on the street would give up their own mother if it meant they’d get cash.”

I watch fear creep into her eyes. “I don’t know anyone or anything,” she stutters.

I smile. She’s going to be fine. “That’s the best way to be, Tee girl. Never give up information on your friends. That’s a line we don’t cross.” I link my arm through hers and pull her into the shelter. “Yo, Nell,” I yell, needing my girl to see if what I’m feeling is right about Tee. “We got a live one. This is my girl, Tee.”

“Oh, newbie,” Nell cries as she runs toward us. “Oh, honey,” she says as she holds Tee at arm’s length. “You really have been through it, haven’t you?”

Tee glances at me, confusion written over her face.

“This is Nell, Tee girl. Nell, this is Tee.”

Nell nods, her red hair flying everywhere. “Portia, she’s now ours to protect,” she says softly yet fiercely, so that she’s not overheard. “Ours.”

Anger whips through me. Christ, what has happened to her? “Nell here is an empath. She can feel pain.”

Tee takes a step back, horror etched on her face.

“Don’t do that,” Nell whispers. “I’m so sorry for the pain you feel. I don’t know what happened, but I do know how terrible it was.”

That’s all I need to know for me to keep Tee with us. I won’t let anything happen to her while she’s here with us. No fucking way.

“Come, let’s get you some food,” I tell Tee as I pull her into the shelter. Nell links her arm through Tee’s other arm.

We won’t fail her. No way. The girl is scared, so we’ll make sure she’s going to be okay. Just as Nell and I have for each other. Sometimes we need someone to help us, and it’s okay to reach out for that help.

FOUR
DARIO
ONE MONTH LATER

Anger. That's all I fucking feel. Utter fucking anger. Those assholes burnt my brother and yet we don't get our revenge. It's been a long time since I felt this rage building inside of me.

No one hurts my family and gets away with it.

But the Dirty Demons Motorcycle Club did. They almost killed him. Those fuckers were working with a player from Ireland and wanted revenge for Chloe Gallagher slighting them. So they came for her, and Elio got caught in the crossfire. He was burnt, his chest completely scarred from what those assholes did. He was in the hospital and needed skin grafts and operations. Thankfully, he's home now and ready for war.

The Famiglia have been geared up, ready for revenge, only for me to discover that Rocco, my brother, our boss, gave the revenge to the Gallagher's to take for those Demons taking Chloe and holding her hostage. They took the entire chapter out without a second thought for what the Famiglia needed. Not one asshole thought to have us with them.

Fucking assholes.

It's not the first time Rocco has pushed aside what is best for our family in return for what he and his wife want. When the shit came out about Ade being beaten by our father, Elio, Hayden, and I wanted to kill him then and there, but Rocco wanted to ensure that he would have the reins for the Famiglia. So, we waited it out, let that fucking asshole of a father spew even more hate at Ade while Roc got his ducks in a row.

It's becoming a habit, him putting the Famiglia second, and it needs to fucking stop.

“Dario, I know you're angry—” Rocco begins.

“You have no fucking idea how angry I am,” I say through gritted teeth. A lot has changed since our father killed himself. Rocco has grown the Famiglia from strength to strength, but there's a lot he has to learn, and one thing he's forgotten is that the Famiglia comes first. Always. “We spoke about this, Roc,” I growl.

“They kidnapped Chloe,” he snarls.

“She's not our business,” I snap back. “She belongs to the Gallagher's, Rocco. She does not belong to us. Our brother, our fucking brother, almost died and you let those fucking Irish bastards deal with those who harmed him. Where the fuck is the man I respected?” I ask, knowing damn well that I'm treading a very thin line. “Hmm? Where's the man who would kill anyone who dared come after the Famiglia? Where's that man?” I laugh mirthlessly. “I'll tell you where he is—in the pocket of his fucking wife.”

“Watch it,” he hisses at me.

I shake my head. He has no idea just how worse he's made everything. How fucking stupid he was to allow the Gallagher's to take their revenge above us.

"Dario..." I hear the soft Irish lilt but shake my head. "Please," she pleads with me.

"Stay out of this, Jade," I say thickly. I'm beyond pissed, and right now, the way I'm feeling, I'm not going to be able to watch my mouth and the words that come out. I could hurt her feelings if she stays.

"Watch it," Rocco snarls, advancing toward me. "Do not speak to my wife like that."

"Your wife," I hiss back, "is the reason we're all at fucking war."

"What?" he snaps, rocking back on his heels.

Once again, my laugh is without humor. "Seriously?" I ask him, looking between him and Jade and seeing that neither of them have any idea what I'm talking about. "Fucking hell, Rocco. You should know how the men talk. You should have known the moment you let those fucking Irish bastards take our revenge that the men would be riled, and rightly so."

"Now wait a minute," Jade hisses. "My family needed revenge too."

I nod. "Never said they didn't. But what happened to our revenge Jade? Hmm? When did your family come above us? What makes the Irish so fucking powerful that the Famiglia gets pushed aside? If anyone should have wiped out that fucking MC, it should have been Rocco, me, Denis, and his

sons. Not you. But of course, you've got Rocco wrapped around your finger. He's lost his balls."

Jade's face pales, and she looks at me with wide eyes. "Dario," she whispers, shaking her head.

"You think that?" Rocco says, his words filled with bite. "You truly think that."

I stare at the man who I know will lead us without fail, the man who has our respect, our blind loyalty—had it all—and see that he's lost his way somehow. "I do. And I'm not the only one. What you allowed to happen, it let everyone know that the Famiglia isn't your first priority. You took the oath, brother. You took it just as we all did. *La Famiglia prima di tutto*. You have it fucking tattooed on your skin, brother."

"What would you have done?" he sneers as he runs a hand through his hair. "Hmm? Tell me, Dario, what would you have done?"

"I would have made sure I was there when those cunts died, Roc. I would have ensured that I was part of their deaths, that I knew I did everything I could have to ensure I got the vengeance the Famiglia needed." I move toward the door. This conversation is going nowhere. "Rocco, it's time to decide where you stand. No one is telling you to not love your wife. We're demanding that you put the Famiglia first against anyone else. You failed to do that, and you need to make amends."

I leave the house, not willing to argue about it any longer. He fucked up, and he needed to know he did. I would never disrespect him by having this discussion in public, hence why

I had it at his home, where it was just the three of us. It's not just Rocco who needs to understand that he fucked up, but Jade also. She's so involved in her own family's business that she thinks it's okay to be involved in ours. It doesn't work that way. She is not Famiglia, and she never will be. She's Irish, and an underboss at that.

"Dario," Rocco says as I reach my car. I turn and raise a brow. "You're right," he begins. "I should have put the Famiglia first."

Well, at least he can admit it. "It's not me you need to apologize to, it's Elio. You betrayed him." I slide into my car and start the engine.

There must be something I can do to ensure Elio gets his revenge.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Beppe asks, his arms folded across his chest. "Is this about Rocco and his wife?"

I raise a brow. "What about them?"

He sighs as he glances around the bar, wanting to be sure we're not overheard. It's loud enough that we shouldn't be. There are asses on every seat here, and it's always this way. It's why I like coming here. That and I'm part owner of it. It brings in a lot of money and is one of the legitimate businesses that I own. "Dario, I was inducted into the Famiglia the same day you were. We both have worked our way to where we are.

We know the ins and outs of what goes on within the Famiglia. So tell me, why are you acting as though I'm stupid?"

He's right. Everyone knows shit's going down. "I'm just pissed at what went down."

He nods. "You have every right to be. You're also not the only one. The men are angry that the Gallagher's got there first. A lot have questions about why Rocco was never told. Many think his wife is playing him."

Christ, that's some take on it, but I can't deny that it's not a reach, especially when you don't know the full story of what's gone on. "What are your thoughts?"

"I think Rocco's juggling too fucking much and needs to realize he's the boss," Beppe snaps. "I respect your brother. I respect the boss. But no one respects the decision that was made. Elio is Famiglia, man. That means something to us."

And therein lies the problem. Those that know Rocco will know he's fucked up, and it's going to take a lot to make amends for what he's done. The first step is to make sure Jade stays the fuck out of Famiglia business. She does that, we'll all live a fucking happy life.

"Now, what else is bothering you?" he questions.

I think of what could give my brother peace. The woman would be his ultimate revenge. "Bear has a daughter. No one has seen her since the clubhouse was raided. It's as though she vanished into thin air."

Beppe's eyes widen. "Who knew that fucker had a daughter? Christ." He sits back in his chair. "Where would

someone who hasn't got family go?"

I shrug. "The fuck would I know?"

He chuckles. "Come on, Dario. We're going to pay a visit to an old friend." He finishes his drink and gets to his feet.

I down the rest of my drink and follow him out of the bar. I have no fucking idea who he's talking about or where we're going, but the one thing about Beppe is that he has spies everywhere. He knows someone who'll know someone who can get him information. He's got a chilled, laid-back vibe that works for him, whereas I have no patience for bullshit. I'm direct and to the point. It's why he's my best friend, my right-hand man.

"I met this informant a few years ago. He's in dire need of money and he's done well so far. He hears and sees everything." Beppe pushes his hands into his pants pockets and stands taller. "He's one of my go-to informants for information."

"Want to catch me up?" I ask, still not having a fucking clue what he's talking about.

"Homeless people, Dario. They're in need of money and will turn on their mother if it means getting some food and money."

"You've been using this guy for info?" I'm skeptical about asking them for information on a woman we want.

"Trust me," he says. "If he betrays us, we'll end him. No one is going to know he's gone anyway."

Fucking cruel but true.

“Okay, let’s go see what he knows.”

Beppe’s informant was legit. He knew everything that was going down and even gave me more information on a job that was happening that none of us knew about. Something that Rocco’s got Andrea looking into.

Harvey didn’t know where the girl was, but he had heard of a new girl who popped up on the map in Indianapolis. He told us to find Markus and Paulie, said they’ll do whatever it takes to get money, not to mention they know everyone on the streets.

It takes us almost four hours to find the men in question. When we do, they’re both as high as a fucking kite and smiling ear to ear as they smoke their blunt.

“Yo, dude,” the guy with long hair says. “You don’t belong here.”

They’re in an abandoned lot that’s completely filthy from the rain we’ve had over the past few days. Both men are covered in mud and grime. I don’t want to know what it is. I can see one of them has piss stains on their pants, and I really don’t want to look further than that.

There’s a wall that blocks this abandoned lot from the rest of the street, and from the look of the amount of homeless people around, watching us but not getting close, this seems to be a favorite hangout for them.

Beppe shakes his head. “Christ,” he says quietly. “No shit, man. I need your help. Harvey said you’d be able to help. I’ve got a hundred dollars for each of you if you can help me out.”

Both men lean forward. The bald man rubs his hands together with glee. “Whatever you need, we’ll help.”

“We’re looking for someone. Teagan Mitchell. She disappeared about four or five weeks ago and hasn’t been seen since,” I say, though I don’t have much hope that they’ll help me.

The men nod. “Yeah, I know Tee. Pretty woman, she is,” Baldy says with a salacious grin. Seems as though he wants her.

“She didn’t say her name was Mitchell or Teagan, just that her name was Tee. But she came on the scene around then,” the guy with the long hair says. “What’cha want with her?”

Holy fuck. Could this be who we’re looking for?

“Where is she?” I ask.

They share a look. “I want the money,” Baldy says. “I want the money right now.”

I don’t hesitate. Hell, I’d fucking give them a fuck of a lot more than that if they held out. But these two really need to rethink their negotiation skills. They’re seriously lacking. I hand the guy two one-hundred-dollar bills. They can share them. “Now, where can I find Teagan Mitchell?”

“Tomorrow night, she’ll be at the shelter. It’s the best place you’ll be able to see her,” Baldy tells me.

I glance at Beppe, and he smirks as he steps forward, pushing into their space. The two of them scurry backwards toward the wall. “You tell anyone we were here or what we’re looking for, you’ll pay. Do you understand?”

The two of them nod, their eyes wide, fear seeping into them. They’re scared and they should be. Neither Beppe nor I are going to take them betraying us lying down.

“You had better hope she’s at the shelter tomorrow,” I say with enough menace that they begin to tremble. “If she’s not, I’m coming back to find you.”

“Markus and Paulie, we know who you are, and we also know who your woman, Ursula, is too. You’d best remember that,” Beppe says with a wicked grin. That was some information Harvey gave us so that we could use it if needed.

“She’ll be there. She always goes once a week. She’ll be with two other women. They’ve promised to meet us there tomorrow.”

I nod. “If not, I’ll be seeing you soon,” I tell them as I turn my back and walk away from the abandoned lot.

“You think she’ll be there?” Beppe asks once we’re walking back to the car.

I nod. “I know she will be.” There’s no fucking way they’d let us down. Hell, if it came to it, I’d say they’d get her there one way or another. They’re scared, afraid for their lives, and people like that will do anything to ensure they save their own hides, and those two assholes are going to do just that.

“Then tomorrow, you and Elio will find her.”

I nod. “And then we can get our revenge.”

His grin is just as mine is. It’s filled with triumph and is on the sadistic side.

We’re not men who will do the right thing. We’re no knight in shining armor. We’re people’s worst fucking nightmares. We’ll do whatever it fucking takes to get what we want, and we don’t care who we kill to do it.

Tomorrow, Teagan’s time is up. She’s got one day before we’re coming for her.

FIVE
DARIO

“**Y**ou ready for this?” I ask Elio, unable to keep the glee from my voice. I rub my hands together, ready to get into the action. We’ve been sitting in this car for the past hour and thirty minutes. I can feel the energy simmering beneath the surface. It’s been a long time coming. Not to mention, there’s been no action in a fucking long time. I’m beyond bored. Having something to do helps my trigger finger.

“The sooner I have her, the better,” he tells me as he once again looks at the picture in his hands. The picture is grainy, but even so, you can tell how beautiful the woman is. Teagan Mitchell is a looker for sure. The guys last night weren’t wrong. Elio’s a lucky bastard.

I scan the street, watching and waiting. I’m like a predator, ready to pounce. A brunette woman walks toward the shelter, her head held high and her strides purposeful. She’s fucking gorgeous. There’s something about her that is familiar to me, but I can’t put my finger on how I know the woman. Before I can even think about where it is I may know her from, Teagan steps into view.

“Oh, here we go,” I say. I’m shocked when the gorgeous brunette stops and starts talking to Teagan. Are they friends?

Elio nods and we exit the car. It’s time to get this over and done with. Both women are extremely in tune with their surroundings. They’re aware that we’re here and walking toward them. Smart women.

“Teagan Mitchell?” Elio asks, his voice casual. He’s trying not to scare her.

I watch as the woman narrows her eyes. “What’s it to you?” Christ, she’s got some balls.

“Just want to talk, sweetheart,” I say softly and flash her a smile, one that usually disarms the ladies.

“Firstly, I’m not your sweetheart,” she says as she crosses her arms over her chest. “Secondly,” she sighs, “I don’t know you, and I’m not in the mood for talking.”

The gorgeous woman beside her places her hands on her hips and taps her foot. “We’re in a rush, so if you don’t mind.” Christ, that velvety voice is sexy as hell. My cock jumps at it, and I suddenly want to know a fucking lot more about her.

“I forgot to introduce myself,” Elio says coldly, and both women’s spines straighten. “Elio Gallo, and this is my brother, Dario.”

Teagan’s face pales. “What do you want?” she questions.

Elio tells her friend to go, and after a few seconds, she walks toward the wall and stands there waiting. I don’t hesitate to follow her. “Where do I know you from?” I ask.

Her big brown eyes are beautiful. They've got specks of gold in them. They're captivating even when she's not looking at me. "Your dreams, honey, 'cause that's the only place I'll be."

I chuckle. "Funny, love, but I know you."

She rolls her eyes, not once looking in my direction. She's keeping her gaze firmly on Teagan and Elio. "No, you don't."

"I do," I repeat. I can't place how or where I know her from, and it's bugging me.

"Seriously," she snaps. "I've just told you that I don't know you. Or are you standing here flirting with me? If that's your flirt game, then you need some serious lessons. It's not working."

"Funny," I bite. "You've either got a death wish or you know exactly what I'm talking about. And, love, trust me, if I wanted to flirt with you, you'd be putty in my hands."

She shakes her head. "Typical man," she tuts. "You have no idea how to deal with someone like me. I'd rather stab you in the heart than flirt with you."

I grin. Christ, she's refreshing. "I like to call that foreplay."

She shakes her head in disgust, but there's a smirk on her lips. Oh, she's loving this just as much as I am.

"What's your name?"

She raises a brow haughtily at me. "Thought you knew me?" She shrugs. "Either way, I'm not telling you my name."

I stand back against the wall and put my foot up, my arms crossed, and watch Elio and Teagan. They're arguing. Seems as though the gorgeous brunette isn't the only fiery one.

"Is she going to be okay?" the mystery woman asks, and I hear the hint of worry in her tone.

"Honestly?" I say, and watch as she nods. "No, she's not. But if she does as he asks, she will be." I'm a lying sack of shit. There's no way Teagan's going to be fine with what happens after today.

"How did you find us?" she asks, just as Elio and Teagan glance over at me. "We've done a good job of hiding her. So how did you know we'd be here? It was as though you were waiting for her to turn up."

She's astute. "That's because we were. We knew you'd be here tonight."

"Who told you?" she hisses, and I see mama bear is out to play. Interesting.

"What do I get if I tell you?"

"Nothing," she fires back. "There's nothing in this world that I'll give you. I fucking despise you assholes."

Oh, the anger she has is palpable. The question is: why does she hate us?

Elio nods, and I know it's time for us to go. "Be safe, love. I have a feeling I'll be seeing a lot more of you."

She turns her nose up at the thought. "Fucking yippee," she says sarcastically as I move toward the car.

Christ... It's been a long time since someone grabbed my attention the way she has.

I watch as Elio practically drags Teagan toward the car, and I know the gorgeous woman is going to be beyond pissed, but right now, I'm focused on Elio. I slide into the front passenger's seat as Teagan is ushered into the back.

The drive to Elio's house is silent. I have a feeling that shit's about to hit the fan. But fuck, we've been waiting for our revenge for a long fucking time, and this is it. Finally, Elio drives through the gates of the gated apartment complex, and I realize he's going to put her up in one of the apartments we have.

I open the car door for Teagan, and I'm surprised when she says thank you. Her voice is soft but also clear. She's doing a good job of hiding her fear. I wonder how long she's known her friend. They're very similar.

Once again, silence spreads as we enter the apartment complex and step into the elevator.

"So, is this where you bring all your women?" Teagan asks. I press my lips together to stop my laughter from bubbling over.

Elio doesn't hesitate to answer her. "No. You'll be my wife, Teagan. That means there are no other women."

She stares at him head on. "Oh, that's a shame," she mutters.

Christ, she's fucking hilarious. My shoulders shake with my suppressed laughter.

Elio's nostrils flare. "Why would you say that?"

"If you're fucking other women, you're staying the hell away from me."

Damn. This woman has no fucking filter. I have a feeling she's going to be a handful for Elio. The way he's watching her, it's not like a man hell bent on revenge. It seems as though my brother is a lot more interested in Teagan than I thought he was. Interesting.

We reach the penthouse apartment, and I watch as Teagan takes it all in, wandering around the apartment as though it's the first one she's ever seen.

"Where are your clothes?" I ask, noticing that she doesn't have anything with her.

She lifts her shoulders and shrugs. "I don't have any."

What the fuck? "What do you mean?" I ask as I stand in front of her. "Are they still in the clubhouse?"

"No, I just don't have any." She's looking at me as though she doesn't understand why I'm asking.

My brow furrows as I watch her. What the hell is going on? "Did you not live in the clubhouse?"

She nods. "I did, but I don't have any clothes. Now, are we done? I'm tired and would like to sleep."

I leave her be, but I know for sure there's a fucking lot more to Teagan than we realized. I'll be damned if she gets one over on my brother though. I'll be keeping a close eye on her.

I hate that I'm in the dark about everything that surrounds her. There's something about her that doesn't sit right with me.

I leave her and Elio to talk, and I think back to her friend. I definitely know her from somewhere. The woman is gorgeous, funny, and she takes no shit. It's those big brown eyes of hers, filled with hardness and sorrow, that captured me the moment we spoke. Those are what are familiar to me. It's as though I remember seeing them when I was younger.

Fuck. Why can't I remember?

I think back to when I was younger, trying to remember who I was around and who had kids close to my age. I run through the men that were around then. Niccolò, Andrea, Gabriele, Edoardo, and Davide. Those were my father's closest men.

The only ones who had kids that were anywhere close to my age were Gabriele and Davide.

I swallow hard as I remember the pretty little brunette girl who would sit by her father and watch everything that happened around her. I remember how she would glare at anyone who told her to go sit with the women. She was defiant yet respectful. She was also close to Chiara—Niccolò's daughter.

Portia Leone. The only child of Davide and Marianna.

I've finally figured it out. I knew that I knew who she was. It took me a while, but it clicked.

Davide Leone was the best enforcer we had. He was the best killer the Famiglia had. A very good man. He was one of

the best. He was killed by Marco Scaffidi. Davide killed Marco's son because he raped a nine-year-old girl. In retaliation for his son's death, Marco killed Davide and married his wife, Marianna. It was the ultimate revenge.

No one has seen Marianna or Portia since the death of Davide. It was thought that Marco had sent Portia away to boarding school. Turns out, she's been living on the streets.

Well, now that I have found her, I'll be keeping my eyes on her. Portia is Famiglia. That means she's ours. She should have been protected when Davide died. It's what honor dictated. Instead, my father did nothing and allowed her to slip through our fingers.

The woman isn't going to know what's hit her. Portia Leone is now under my protection, and anyone who dares to touch her will die a slow and painful death.

SIX

PORTIA

“We have to find her,” Nell whispers, horrified. “Where can she be, Portia?”

I grit my teeth, the cold seeping into my body. I haven’t slept a wink, too busy searching the city in the hope of finding my friend. I have no idea where the hell Tee is, nor does anyone else know. I’m beyond pissed. I should have done something to stop them from taking her. I should have slit their throats the moment they approached us. If I had, then Tee would have been safe.

“Let’s head toward the shelter,” I tell Nell, hoping Tee will head back there. Both Nell and I are bone tired, but we’re not giving up. Neither of us would ever forgive ourselves if we did. We may not have known Tee as long as we’ve known each other, but she’s our sister, and we’ll do whatever it takes to get her back.

“No way,” Nell whispers a while later. “Tee?” she yells, and my brow furrows. My confusion fades as the woman turns around, and my breath leaves me when I see my friend standing there. I run toward her, barreling into her and holding her tight. God, she’s alive. Fuck. Thank God she’s alive.

I pull her into an alleyway once we've all hugged and reassured each other she's okay. She tells us what went down with the Gallo's, and my temper rises. I've always known that the Gallo's are assholes. I'm fully aware of the shit they've done and what they're capable of. But not once did I think they'd ever harm a woman, yet that's exactly what Elio wants to do. My heart hurts for my girl. She's been abused her entire life and now that fucker wants to add to it. No, he can't. I won't let it happen.

She has to return to her apartment, the one her asshole of a fiancé has given her, and I won't let her walk home alone. Rule three: never be alone. No matter where you go, you have to do it in pairs. It's what has kept us alive for so long. It's what's managed to keep us safe and protected. I'm not going to let anything happen to Tee.

"What I don't understand," I begin as we walk toward her apartment complex, "is how did they find you?" Dario wouldn't tell me last night, and I've been wracking my brains trying to figure it all out. But every scenario that I play out doesn't ring true.

Nell nods in agreement. We've spent the time that Tee was gone discussing this. "You have no physical trace, Tee. You don't have social media, you don't have a cell, no bank. There's no evidence that you're even alive and yet those two assholes pulled up on you as though they knew exactly who you were. How is that possible?"

"Someone told them," Tee whispers.

And that right there is what confirms my theory all along. Someone gave up Tee in exchange for money, and I know exactly who it was. There are only five people who were close to Tee and two of them are standing here with her right now. There's no way that Nell would ever go against her sister. No fucking way. That leaves three. The three I've always been skeptical about.

“No. No way. There's no chance, Tee. Why would they?” Nell cries as she shakes her head in disbelief.

Tee looks at us with such sadness, my heart clenches. “Rule number four: Information is money.”

My girl has learned the hard way how true that statement is, but I'll be fucking damned if those bastards see the light of day again. They betrayed me, my friend, my sister. For that, they'll pay. I don't forgive people, and I certainly don't give second chances. Those bastards knew what they were doing when they sold information on Tee, and they'd do it again in a heartbeat.

I glance at Nell and see she's still not believing those bastards could do it. That they'd betray us. She sees the very best in people. She'll never see the bad, no matter what.

“Those fucking assholes. They were flush this week. I wondered why but thought they'd had a good few days picking pockets. But no, they fucking sold you out.”

Something I'll be making sure never happens again. No one gets close anymore. Not one fucking person. It's the three of us against the world.

“But, Portia,” Nell begins, her voice soft. I hate that she’s going to feel that betrayal deeply. “They wouldn’t. Markus and Paulie are family. Surely you know that?” she implores.

I don’t answer. I can’t. Those assholes have shattered everything she’s ever believed about them, and they’ve done it by hurting someone she loves.

The rest of the walk toward the apartment complex is quiet and filled with sorrow, both women thinking about those who have betrayed us. I, on the other hand, am dreaming up ways of killing the bastards. They deserve everything they’re going to get, and I can’t wait to see their faces when they realize they sold out the wrong person.

We say our goodbyes to Tee for tonight. We’ll be back tomorrow to ensure she’s safe. She’s in a secure apartment complex, and I’m relieved it’s high-end. The Gallo’s don’t fuck around when it comes to their men. This seems to be one of the buildings that house their single men. I feel a little bit better knowing they’ll be around if something happens.

“What happens now?” Nell asks once we’ve watched Tee walk into the building. “I know that look, Portia. You can’t be thinking of getting rid of them.”

“We’re going to talk to them,” I tell her. “That’s all. We’ll find out why they sold Tee out, and then we’ll go from there.” I’m not lying. I will be talking to them. I want answers, a fucking lot of them, but I also want blood. Their blood. “If you’d rather, I’ll leave you at the shelter with Miss Magda and I’ll go it alone.”

She looks away, and I know she's battling with the decision of what to do. She's not stupid. She knows it's not just going to be a talk that I'll have.

"Stay at the shelter, Nell. I'll be back in the morning," I promise her.

"I don't want you to be alone," she whispers. "You know the rules, Portia."

I nod. "I do. That's why I'm going to leave you with Miss Magda." The woman watched Nell grow up. She will ensure she's safe while in the shelter.

"Okay," she whispers. "I'm sorry."

I shake my head. "Don't apologize. It's all going to be okay."

I get her to the shelter, and she's fourth in line. I know she'll be safe here while I'm gone. I quickly say my goodbye and promise her I'll be waiting for her in the morning. The look of sorrow on her face would make me stay on any other day, but I can't. Not today. Not after finding out what Tee went through. I can't allow them to get away with selling her out.

It's been a while since I've been to the abandoned lot. We tend not to stick around here as it can be a bad spot. Especially as it's a place where the drug addicts hunker down for the night. It's why Paulie, Markus, and Ursula love it so much. They love getting high and off their faces any chance they can.

By the time I reach the abandoned lot, it's the dead of night. Everyone's asleep, and those who aren't are so fucking high they're soaring. It's not difficult to find the three assholes

I'm looking for. They're in the midst of fucking. I have no problem with that. Hell, I'm happy for them. This life isn't easy. You're alone, and it gets really lonely. Having someone—or someones—you love helps ease that loneliness. If truth be told, I'm a little jealous of what they have going on.

I wait for them to finish, feeling more generous than I should. My rage is burning through my veins, flowing through me like an inferno. The three of them collapse onto their makeshift bed, exhausted and filthy. They haven't been to the shelter in a long time and haven't had a change of clothes either. When they were around Nell and I more, we'd always try and get clean clothes. Whether it was from stealing money and buying them in the thrift store, or stealing from stores, we'd always have clothes. But these three have stopped doing that altogether. I think their need for drugs has taken over their need for anything else.

I keep my footsteps light as I move toward their spot, making sure I blend in so that if anyone sees me, they won't think twice.

“P.” Ursula smiles as she sees me standing over her. “Where are Nell and Tee?”

Christ. The fact that she's even asking angers me further. “I don't know. Some guys came yesterday and took Tee. Nell and I haven't been able to find her.”

Ursula's face falls, and tears form in her eyes. “What?”

Paulie and Markus glance at one another, and I realize that Ursula had nothing to do with this. Fuck. It's going to pain me to do what needs to be done, but I have no choice.

“Ask them where she is,” I snap, my voice low, but they hear me.

“What?” Ursula asks as she looks between them. “What did you do?”

Paulie shrugs. “It was two hundred dollars. We just told them about the shelter,” he says as though it’s no big deal.

Ursula shakes her head. “Oh, Paulie, that wasn’t nice.”

Nice? I scoff. It was beyond fucking stupid. “You’re going to pay for selling her out.”

Ursula throws her arms around me, clutching at me. “Please, Portia,” she whispers.

I move her to my side and hold her tightly. She’s in the perfect position for me. I don’t think too hard about what needs to be done. I reach for the knife in my boot and bring the blade to Ursula’s throat. I swallow hard as I slice across her flesh, hating every second of what I’m doing, but I know it’s the only way. If I leave Ursula alive, she’ll go to the cops, and that’s not something I can allow.

“You bitch,” Markus hisses as I drop Ursula to the bed and lunge for him. Paulie’s eyes are wide as he watches the lifeless body of the woman he loves. His stupor is giving me the time I need to deal with Markus. My knife slides into his side, and I twist hard over and over again. His eyes are wide as his face pales. I’ve done some serious damage to his internal organs. I pull the knife out and thrust it back in, this time pushing hard and piercing through his heart.

“I’m so sorry,” Paulie whispers, his voice hollow as he continues to stare at Ursula’s body.

“You fucked up, Paulie. You should never have given Tee away. For that, you’ll pay. Had you any idea about what that girl went through, you never would have done it. Then again, you probably would because you’re a selfish bastard.”

Just like I did with Ursula, I slit his throat from ear to ear. He doesn’t put up a fight. He knew his time was up the moment I killed his woman.

Tee and Nell are safe from them. They’ll never sell them out, nor will they sell me out either. Those fuckers deserved what they got. I’m just saddened that Ursula was with them. She didn’t deserve to die, but I had no choice. I made my decision the moment I decided to kill them for what they did to Tee.

I move in the shadows as I get away from the abandoned lot. I need to clean my knife or get rid of it and get another.

I never thought I’d be this person, but I’m a lot more like my papa than I ever thought.

I’ll kill anyone who hurts my family.

I’ll do it without a second thought.

SEVEN
PORTIA
ONE MONTH LATER

O ver the past month, a lot of things have changed. Nell and I now live in the apartment complex Tee moved into. Being able to live in an apartment without worrying about having to pay for things has been a huge weight off my shoulders. I was very skeptical about moving in, but Nell wanted to. She'd never lived in a home before. My girl has grown so much since we moved in with Tee. She's come out of her shell even more, and she's got a job. One she loves. I'm so fucking proud of her. I know she's dreamed of this her entire life. Of finding the courage to get a job and find a home. Tee has given her that, and I get to watch both my girls live a happy life. Especially today, when Tee gets married.

My body hums with the feel of Dario's stare on me as I take a seat on the pew. The church is full of people and yet it's him who has my attention. He looks handsome. I can't take my eyes off him. I should be watching the bride and groom as they say their vows, but Dario has my rapt attention, as always.

"She looks so beautiful," Nell whispers. "God, Elio's a lucky man."

I nod. Oh, he has no idea just how lucky he is. If the tables were turned and I was forced to marry a man I didn't love, I wouldn't be happy, but over the past month, Teagan and Elio seem to have grown closer. When my girl looks at her husband, it's no longer a gaze filled with pain and suffering. There's a little hope in her eyes.

"Black suits her," I comment, loving the fact she didn't go the traditional route of having a white wedding dress. Instead, Teagan turned everyone's head and wore black lace with matching veil. No one can deny just how amazingly breathtaking she looks.

"Do you think she'll be okay?" Nell asks. I know she's worried about her. We both are.

"She'll be fine," I say easily. "She'll have us no matter what happens." My words seem to ease her worry somewhat. She turns her attention back to the ceremony and watches Teagan and Elio continue their vows.

My heart skips a beat as my gaze collides with Dario's. He gives me a wicked grin that lets me know he's watching me. Over the past month, whenever I've met him, he's made it his mission to try and make me uncomfortable, whether that be asking how he remembers me or telling me how pretty I look. I'm not used to the attention. Unlike Nell and Teagan, I don't stand out in a crowd. I've made it that way since I left home. I needed to blend in, to assimilate myself with the rest of the homeless people around me. All I wanted to be was another person no one would care for. That's what I've become. So having Dario ply me with attention, it makes me anxious. It's

like I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop to see what he's actually up to.

“Sooner or later, you're going to have to just fuck him and be done with it,” Nell mutters quietly so no one can overhear her.

My brows knit together. “What do you mean?” I ask, acting as innocent as I can.

She doesn't look at me. Instead, she continues to focus on the bride and groom. “Who are you kidding?” she scoffs under her breath. “The tension between the two of you is turning me on.”

I bite my lip to stop my laughter from bubbling out. “Nell,” I hiss, shocked she said that.

“Look, Portia, it's been years since you fled your home. You've got to start living. Look at Teagan. She's taking the plunge, hoping this marriage will work out. I feel the anger he has, but Elio cares for her, whether he wants to admit it or not. It emulates off him, albeit it's hidden beneath the rage.”

“What about Dario?” I ask, wishing I hadn't as soon as I feel her tense.

“He's been hurt. I can feel the pain in his soul. His father affected him deeply—”

“But?” I say, knowing it's coming.

“But he's dark, Portia. His soul is dark. It's swirling around his aura like a cloak.”

I laugh softly. “You say that about me, too.”

She nods tersely. “You have the darkness because you did what you had to do to save us, Portia, not out of fun.”

That’s not entirely true. The people I’ve killed, they were either going to hurt my friends, or they had already done so. I wouldn’t say I didn’t enjoy killing them because that’s a lie, but I also didn’t feel good after I did it.

“He’s troubled,” she says as the priest tells the groom to kiss the bride. “He’s going to always be troubled.”

“So, you’re telling me to let him fuck me even though he’s completely deranged?”

Make it make sense.

“I never called him that, and I could be wrong. He could be hiding something dark and traumatic that happened to him. Whatever it is, it’s affected him deeply.”

Don’t we all have something that has marked us? That has taken our path of life in a different direction than what we planned?

I smile as Teagan and Elio walk down the aisle. The darkness that surrounds Tee will always be there, just as it will be for Nell. They both suffered unimaginable things, and it’s never going to leave them. They’ll always have the memories of what they endured.

Four hours later and my best friend is now married, she looks happy, but the darkness is still etched in her eyes. I’m not sure

if she'll ever be able to get passed what's happened to her. I wish I could kill every bastard that hurt her.

“You look gorgeous.” I hear Dario's deep voice in my ear. We're at the reception and everyone seems to be having a good time. “I haven't been able to take my eyes off you all day.”

“I've noticed,” I reply dryly. “Something that has annoyed your date, I might add.”

I hadn't realized he brought a woman with him for his plus one, but the blonde model-esque woman is glaring at me as she watches Dario speak with me.

“She's not who I want, but rather a woman who's got a fucking pushy father.”

“Ah, you're doing business with her dad, and in return, he wants you to date his daughter.”

“Got it in one. The thing is, I'd rather have a woman who isn't all about herself. I like someone who's got a bit of depth to them.”

“You're an ass,” I say as I step away from him.

“We've had this discussion before. I am an ass, and I make no apologies for it.”

I sigh as I turn to face him. “What is it that you want, Dario? I'm not a woman for you to chase. I don't do relationships, and I certainly won't be having one with a member of La Famiglia.”

His eyes darken. “Funny,” he murmurs. “Only those in said La Famiglia call it such.”

My heart pounds against my chest. Shit. “I’ve heard it said. I had no idea it was a member’s only term.”

His lips twitch. “Nice save, Portia.”

Not for the first time, I wonder if he knows who I am. He watches me with those assessing eyes of his, and he holds himself as though he knows everything there possibly is to know. But could he really have uncovered my secret? I don’t know how. It’s been years since anyone thought of my papa, and I have no doubt that he wasn’t even on Dario’s radar growing up, so how could he possibly know who I am?

“Dance with me,” he says thickly as he reaches for my hand.

Not wanting to cause an argument on my girl’s special day, I do as he asks. “What is it that you’re wanting?” I ask, hating how he gets my back up against the wall.

“You,” he replies. “Is that not obvious?”

I nod. “It is, but as I have told you, I’m not interested.”

He gives me that know it all smirk of his. “Liar,” he hisses. “Come on, Portia, you can do better than that.”

“What makes you think I’m lying?” I ask with a raised brow.

His laughter has my stomach clenching. “Your nipples are hard, your breathing has deepened, and your hands are shaky. Need I continue?”

I glare at him. God, the man is pushing me. How the hell is he so damn cocky? “Again, I’m not interested. Just because I’m attracted to you, it doesn’t mean I’m looking to become another notch on your bedpost. I have a feeling there’s a hell of a lot of notches.”

There goes that stupid grin of his. “But none are you.”

“Oh please,” I say dryly. “Does that really work? Seriously, Dario, I’m not worth the fight. I’m not the one you want.”

There’s no way I’m ready for a relationship, and I don’t want to have a one-night stand. I’m a mess, and Dario’s extremely well known. If I were to have sex with him, the news would spread like wildfire and then it would get back to Marco. That man has his spies everywhere. He knows everything there is to know about the Famiglia—any boss would know the ins and outs of their competition.

I hurry away from him, needing to put some distance between the two of us. He’s getting too close. No matter how hard I push him, he keeps coming back, digging himself deeper beneath the walls I have built to protect myself.

“Portia,” he says, his fingers tightening around my wrist as he pulls me to a stop. “You aren’t ever going to be a notch on my bedpost. Do you think I’d chase any other woman?”

I sigh. “You’re not listening to me. I’m not interested.”

“Ah, baby,” he says as he steps closer to me, his fingers caressing my cheek. I pull in a sharp, ragged breath at his

closeness. “You shouldn’t lie to yourself. Would it be so wrong for us to do this?”

I close my eyes. He’s getting to me. Why is he not letting this go?

When I open my eyes, he’s watching me carefully. I swipe my tongue across my bottom lip. “You have no idea who I am, what I’m capable of, or what I have done.”

“The same goes for you. I’m not the man that everyone sees now, Portia. I’ve done things I’m not proud of, things that would make you sick to your stomach. I’m irredeemable. But I’m hoping you’ll give me one taste.”

I blink. What?

“One taste. Let me show you just how good it can be.”

“One,” I breathe, hoping I don’t regret it.

My heart beats wildly and my stomach flips as he flashes me the most beautiful smile I have ever seen. When he looks at me with those deep brown eyes of his, the ones that are so filled with heat and want, I feel as though I’m the only woman in the world for him, despite knowing that’s not true. He brought another woman with him tonight.

“Relax, baby, you’re wound up tight.”

Well obviously. I’m about to be kissed and I have no idea what the hell I’m doing.

He presses a soft kiss to the corner of my mouth. It’s quick and very sweet. I take a deep breath as he does it again, this time at the opposite corner. He continues to feather soft,

butterfly kisses against my lips until I'm putty in his hands, needing more.

He finally presses his mouth to mine, and it's urgent and strong. His hand slams around the back of my neck as he claims me. I'm helpless under his hold. I melt into him and open my mouth to his tongue. It slides past my lips and dances against mine.

My arms wrap around his neck and pull him closer, and I moan into his mouth. God, this is better than I could have ever imagined. I want more. I want him.

He pulls away for breath, his forehead pressed to mine, then I feel his lips at my ear. "I fucking love how greedy you are for me," he says. And then his lips slide along the side of my face, and he pulls away.

I blink at him, standing there with my mouth hanging open.

He turns to go. "I'll see you around," he says with that wicked grin.

I stand breathless as I watch him leave. What the hell just happened? One minute I'm having the best kiss—my first ever kiss—and the next minute he's walking away as though nothing happened.

Damn Dario Gallo. Him and his stupid games are making me rethink everything I have ever wanted or thought. Why, oh why, did I have to start to fall for the damn man?

I was so happy to sail through life with my girls and not have to worry about a thing, and then he crashed into my life

like a damn tornado and tilted my axis.

I just pray that I can get through whatever it is he has planned with my life and heart intact.

EIGHT
PORTIA

“So, are you a soldier or have you worked your way up?” I ask Mattia as he drives me back to the apartment complex.

“Ms. Portia, please don’t ask questions you have no idea about,” Mattia answers, his voice low, but there’s a little bite to it.

It’s funny. Growing up, Mattia was one of the boys who would always be around. He was who I spent the most time with, but he has no idea who I am. It’s almost as though everything my papa did for the Famiglia died the day he did. No one cared enough to look after my mama and I when he died.

I sit back in my seat and leave him alone. Over the past month, I’ve got used to being passed over as a nobody, just someone the men have to watch because the boss has ordered it. None of the men give a fuck what happens to Nell and me. Hell, they’d be happier if we weren’t near them.

Mattia pulls up into the parking lot of the complex, and my blood runs cold instantly. There’s a lot of commotion, too

fucking much. I'm out of the car before Mattia's even switches off the engine. "Portia," he growls, chasing after me.

My sisters are in that building, and I'll be damned if I don't get to them. Mattia pushes me behind him as we enter the apartment. As much as he finds me annoying, he's being protective, and I know it's in his nature. He's always been that way. Even as kids, he always had that protective streak.

"What the hell?" I gasp as I see Lorenzo—Tee's guard—lying by the elevator, blood pouring from a bullet wound to his leg as the doctor works on him. "Where the hell are Teagan and Nell?" I demand. My heart is battering against my chest. The fear that I feel has me paralyzed to the spot. I can't lose my girls. I can't. They're the only thing I have in this world. My anchor in the darkness that threatens to pull me under.

The elevator opens and my gaze moves to the doors, where I see Elio and Dario Gallo walking out, both with grim looks on their faces. What has my knees buckling is that Elio's carrying an unconscious Teagan in his arms, blood soaking her clothes.

"Tee?" I cry out, hoping she can hear me. "Is she okay?"

Elio turns to Dario and gives him a nod. My heart sinks as I watch the usually flirty Dario look at me with such sadness, I feel it in the pit of my stomach.

"No," I hiss at him. I don't want to hear it. I can't.

He reaches for me, his hands gentle but firm as he pulls me into the corner of the lobby. "Portia, I need you to take a deep breath. Can you do that?"

I glare at him. “I’m not a fucking moron. I know something’s happened. Is Tee okay? What about Nell?”

He doesn’t answer my questions. “Portia, take a deep breath and we’ll talk.”

I shake his hands off me. “Dario, fucking tell me,” I urge. My body is bound tight as I wait for the news I know is coming. I can feel it. I know with every piece of my soul that something terrible has happened. “Are Tee and Nell okay?”

“She’s been shot. The bullet grazed her. She’ll be okay. She’s just unconscious,” he tells me, and I watch him, waiting for him to tell me about Nell. “I’m so sorry, Portia. Nell was also shot, but she didn’t make it.”

I swallow hard. God, Nell... Pain slashes through me. My best friend is gone. The woman who has been with me throughout the past four years is gone, and I wasn’t there. I didn’t keep my promise. I vowed that I’d always protect her, and I failed her.

“Are you listening to me?” Dario asks, and I blink as I look up at him. “You can’t stay here. Diego is going to bring you to another apartment complex we have. You’ll be safe there.”

I want to laugh. Safe. Wasn’t that what we were supposed to be here?

“Diego will be here shortly. Don’t move, Portia. I swear, you leave, and I’ll come looking for you.”

I roll my eyes. Fucking asshole. Where the fuck does he think I’m going to go?

“I’ll be back later,” he says, almost as if that’s supposed to make me happy.

I don’t want to see anyone. I can’t even breathe without pain lacing through my heart. My tears are threatening to fall, but I don’t let them. I’ve never cried in front of anyone, and I never will. I’ve buried my pain inside of me for years, and I’m always going to do that. There’s no letting it out. I can’t.

Thankfully, Dario leaves, and I press against the wall and wait for Diego. He’s one of the soldiers that I also knew growing up. He’s very much like Lorenzo, all about the Famiglia. It’s the way they were brought up. To them, nothing is bigger than the Famiglia. This is what they live and breathe. They’ll do whatever it takes for the family. They’ve lost themselves within it, and I don’t think there’s any coming back.

“Portia.” I hear the deep, gravelly tone of Diego. “Let’s get you to the apartment.”

I swallow back the bile that burns my throat. “What about Nell?” I ask, thankful I’m able to keep my voice even and without emotion.

His jaw clenches. “Portia, she’s gone, honey. There’s nothing we can do. The boss will be ensuring she’s buried properly.”

“How did this happen?” I ask, wondering how the fuck a sick bastard made their way into a secure building.

His eyes harden as he slides his arm around my shoulders. “The fucking bastard shot Lorenzo then pushed his way inside

and got to the penthouse apartment. I'm sorry for the loss of your friend."

I nod in thanks, but I can't speak. Something about this doesn't sit right. With how powerful the Famiglia is, no one should have been able to get this close to the underboss' wife. No one. This isn't the first time someone has gotten so close. At Teagan and Elio's wedding, one of the guests was poisoned and died. Elio switched to Italian when he was speaking with his men, a language I'm fluent in. I heard what he said. He believes that someone is after him, and after today, I have to say, I think he's right.

I could have lost both sisters today, and I came so very close to doing so. My breath catches in my throat. I will not break down right now. I can't. Not yet. When I'm alone, I can.

Diego leads me to his vehicle, and I climb into the back seat. I'm silent the entire ride to the other complex. I can't speak. I don't trust myself not to break down if I do. Diego keeps trying to speak to me, but I ignore him. I don't have the capacity to have a chit-chat right now.

"This apartment is going to have the best security, Portia. You'll be safe here," Diego tells me a while later as he leads me into a fully furnished apartment. It's spacious and beautiful, but it's cold and empty to me. There's no Nell, no Tee. Just me alone.

"If you need anything, just call. One of us will be here. I'm stationed downstairs if you need anything."

I nod, not looking at him. I know he's trying to say something. Every time our eyes meet, I see the urge to speak

in his, but I can't deal with whatever shit he wants to say.

"I'll leave you be. I'm truly sorry about your loss."

"Thank you," I whisper as he walks out of the apartment. I quickly move to the door and flip the lock. Diego told me that only the Gallo's have keys to the apartment. I know I'm alone now. There's no way any of the Gallo's are going to come here, not today.

I sink to the floor and let the tears flow. I'm unable to keep them at bay any longer. My body wracks with sobs as the loss of my friend—my sister—hits me. What am I going to do without her? How am I going to live without her? She was a shoulder to lean on when times got hard. She was the purest person I had ever met, and now she's gone. As much as I try to hold back my tears, they just keep pouring out of me. Each sob is like a knife twisting in my chest, a constant reminder that she's gone. I don't know how to live without her, how to face the world without her. But I know I have to try.

I'm not sure how long I sit here and cry, but darkness settles over the city. I take a deep breath and wipe away my tears, trying to gather my strength. Tears aren't helping anyone. They're not going to bring her back. She deserved more than being murdered. She deserved a fuck of a lot more. She had an entire life ahead of her. I walk over to the window and look over the city, a place that I loved at one stage. Now I look over at the streetlights and feel such an emptiness, so much pain. Just like I did in Chicago.

Death is so final. It's so painful to know your life will continue and the person you loved won't be by your side

through it all. I watch the bustling city from my window, trying to figure out what the hell I'm going to do next. Just yesterday, all three of us had a happy life ahead of us, and in a matter of hours, it shattered, and we're once again filled with pain and sorrow.

The front door opens, and I don't have to turn to know who it is. I can smell the gentle muskiness of sandalwood and mint. Dario Gallo. I guess I should have taken him at his word when he said he'd be back.

"Not tonight, Dario," I say, my voice croaking with tears. "I'm not in the mood to argue with you."

His footsteps move across the floor until he's behind me. His breath is hot against my neck as his hands slide around my waist and he pulls me back against him. "That's good, love, because I'm not here to argue."

I swallow hard. I don't know what game he's playing, but I want no part of it. Having him this close is dangerous. Dario Gallo makes me want things I shouldn't, and right now, with the heartache I'm feeling, I don't think I'm strong enough to keep him at arm's length.

He presses a kiss to my head, and the tears once again threaten to come.

"I'm not leaving, Portia. Not tonight. You need me, no matter how much you'll deny it. You do."

I hate that he's right. I do need someone. The thought of being alone tonight, of all nights, just makes me anxious. I can't deal with being on my own. Not now.

“Thank you,” I whisper, hating that he knows me so well, when we’ve only spent a few moments together.

But there’s something about Dario Gallo that makes my heart race. I just pray that he doesn’t break me.

NINE
DARIO

I know she's been crying. I can hear it in her voice. I hate that she thinks I'm an ass. It's been over a month since I last saw her, and I haven't been able to forget about her. There's something about Portia Leone that has me captivated. No one has made me feel as though I want to consume them the way that she does, and I know it won't go away until I have her.

Whenever I'm around her, I can't help but watch her, making sure she's okay. There's such a magnetic pull to her that I can't deny how much it affects me.

I hold her close to me, loving the way she just fits against me, like she's meant to be here.

"How long were you and Nell friends?" I ask into the silence.

"Four years. She was the first friend I made on the street. We were inseparable after that first meeting. There was something fragile about her, something that pulled at me. She became my sister."

"You protected her," I state. The way she talks about her, and the fierceness in her voice, I know she's been protecting not only Nell but Teagan since she met them.

“Someone had to,” she whispers. “She’d been abused by so many before I found her. It was all she knew. From a very young age, she’d been spat at, looked down upon, and assaulted physically and sexually. It was her norm.”

Christ. How the fuck did these women survive? “Until you.”

She lifts her shoulders and shrugs. “I did what I had to do.”

“Who protected you, Portia?” It’s a loaded question. I want to know why she ended up on the street, but I don’t want her to resurrect the six-foot wall she built. I’ve managed to get through it, but I know the fragility of it. One wrong movement or word and it’ll be resurrected and reinforced quicker than I can blink.

She shakes her head. “I do,” she tells me honestly. “I have for a long time.”

Since her father died. “I’m real sorry about your father,” I tell her, and feel her tense beneath me.

“You know?”

“It took me a while. The first time I saw you, I told you that you were familiar. I’m pissed it took me so long to recognize who you were.”

“How long did it take?” Her voice is soft but there’s an edge to it.

“That night. It took me a few hours, but I figured it out.”

She turns in my arms and looks up at me, her eyes red and puffy from crying. “You never told anyone. Why?”

“Not my place to do that, Portia. You went to the streets for a reason. My guess is someone’s after you. You hid yourself well. I’m not going to be the reason that whoever’s after you, finds you.”

“Not even if it means Rocco being pissed?”

I grin. “I anger my brother on a daily basis, Portia.” Her grin drops and I watch all humor fade from her face. The sincerity that fills her eyes has my heart racing. “We failed you. The Famiglia failed your father. There’s no way you and your mom should have been left vulnerable. That asshole should never have been alive to marry your mom.”

She juts out her chin and glares at me. “Mama never wanted to marry that man,” she hisses at me, her eyes no longer filled with sorrow but flashing with anger.

“How did it happen?” It was beyond fucked up what happened once Davide died. It was as though everyone forgot about Marianna and Portia. My father let that cunt Scaffidi get away with murdering Davide and did nothing to get our revenge. He said there was no proof that Scaffidi killed him, yet we all fucking knew he did. Aldo Gallo never wanted a war. He would do whatever it took to stay out of conflict, including sending his men to die like pigs to the slaughter.

Since Aldo’s death, I’ve learned a lot about the man who fathered me. I always knew he was a piece of shit, but the things I’ve learned... God, I’m so fucking glad the man’s dead. He deserved a fuck of a lot more than what he got.

The shit that I give Rocco about Jade isn’t because I don’t love or respect either of them. It’s because the Famiglia has

had the worst leader at the helm for a long fucking time. We had a man who put himself before anyone else, and it's time for a change. We're growing the Famiglia and we need a strong leader, one who has the best interests of the men at heart. One who will lead without fear. Rocco letting Jade help puts the Famiglia at a disadvantage. It's also letting our men know that once again they, the Famiglia, are not priority.

“Marco wanted revenge for the death of his son,” she tells me as she pulls away from my arms.

I bite back a curse. I want her as close as I can have her, but right now, she needs the distance, and I get it.

“His son was a rapist, a child fucker,” I snap, pissed that my father didn't have the guts to deal with this shit when he was at the helm.

She nods. “Yes. Papa told him so when he came into his office.”

I blink. “Don't fucking tell me you were there when Davide was killed?”

“He pushed me into the secret tunnel he had in his office. He knew he was going to die, and he saved me, but I fucked up. I didn't run. I didn't escape. I stayed in that tunnel and couldn't move. I was trapped in my own fear.” She takes a steadying breath as she turns to face me. “Marco vowed that he'd make my mama his, and I would become his whore.” She shakes her head, tears shining in her gorgeous eyes. “Papa said over his dead body, and Marco shot him. Killing him instantly.”

Fuck. She listened to her father's death. There's no way in fucking hell that hasn't scarred her.

"Portia... What happened then?" I need to know what the fuck happened. Did she manage to run away then?

"Marco found me hours later. I was still in the tunnel. I hadn't moved. I was numb, paralyzed, and scared. He told my mama that she'd marry him, or he'd kill me. She had no choice. She'd already lost Papa, and now she was faced with losing me. She didn't have a choice," she implores, her hands shaking as she brings her fingers to her lips. "Dario, she had no choice."

I cross the room and pull her back into my arms. "I know. That fucker should have died the moment he killed your father. Who were his men?"

She looks up at me with wide eyes. "What do you mean?" That fucking look... It's as though I'm the only man she fucking sees and I hung the moon. I can't deny that I'm probably looking at her with the exact same expression. I want to take her pain from her. I want to let her know she's not alone.

She's not ready for what I want. She's nowhere near ready.

"Your father was a captain, Portia, which means he had men that he kept close. Who were they?"

Her brow furrows. "Umberto and Amadeo. Why?"

Those fuckers are still within the ranks of the Famiglia. "Just curious, that's all. Do you know if they were injured when your father was killed?"

“I don’t know. I couldn’t even go to his funeral. I haven’t been to his grave.”

Fuck. This woman is killing me. I want to give her everything and take away the pain. I have no fucking idea what the hell is going on with me. “Tomorrow, I’ll take you.”

She looks up at me with those big, beautiful brown eyes, those gold specks sparkling with her unshed tears. “Dario,” she whispers.

It’s as though an electrical current zaps through me. I can’t hold back, not when she’s fucking begging me with those eyes of hers. I swear, this woman sees right through me. She sees too much. She steps closer to me, pressing her breasts against my chest. My cock jumps, and I grind it against her stomach, loving the little hitch in her breath.

“Portia...” I groan. This isn’t the time.

“Don’t,” she whimpers. “Please.”

I swallow hard, gritting my teeth as my hands tighten around her waist. “I’m trying to be a gentleman,” I say. Never have I had the inclination to be one before, but Portia’s different.

“You have been,” she tells me. “But right now, Dario, I don’t want a gentleman. I want you to fuck me until I can’t think straight.”

The air goes static around us, and I can’t say no to her. My hand tangles in her thick, shiny brunette hair and I tug slightly, giving me better access to those pouty lips of hers. My tongue

slides into her mouth, and I take everything I have craved from her.

She clings to me, and I love the little moan she releases as she grinds her stomach against my cock.

“I fuck you, Portia, that makes you mine,” I snarl. I’m not sharing her with anyone. Not fucking ever.

“Dario,” she says with a glare. “Honest to fucking God, just fuck me.”

I tug on her hair once more, pulling her head backwards as I bring my lips to her neck, where I proceed to show her just how fucking mine she is. I brand her, letting everyone who will see her after this know that she’s mine. I’m an asshole. I fucking know that. But I’m not rational about this either. The only person who makes me feel this way is Portia.

The moment I saw her again, I was captivated. I knew I’d have her. But seeing this soft side to her, seeing her vulnerable and letting me in, it solidified that I was right, that she’s what I want.

I want her, and I’m going to do whatever it takes to show Portia just how all in I am. She can push me away all she wants, but I’m not going anywhere. Not unless she truly wants me to. That glint in her eyes, the way she clings to me, the hopefulness in her expression, they all tell me that she wants this too. But she’s scared, and I get that. It’s fucking scary giving someone everything you are in the hopes of not losing yourself or having them hurt you.

I'd fucking kill for her. That much I know. I'm not sane, and I've never claimed to be. I'm just following my gut and what it tells me. It's never led me astray. I know that being with Portia is going to be hard. We've both got shit in our pasts that haunts us every day. Mine's guilt and trying to come to terms with that. Hers is losing the people she loves.

It's going to be a hard road to get to what I want, but I know that Portia's going to be more than fucking worth it.

TEN
PORTIA

Having his lips on my neck is more than enough to have me wanting more. His eyes are filled with lust, and it turns me on in a way I've never experienced before. Hell, I have no experience at all. I left home before I could fully understand the changes my body was going through. I was a virgin when I ran, and I've remained one until this day.

Not any longer. I want him. I've never felt so connected to anyone as I do with Dario.

Shivers run along my skin at the heated gaze he gives me. I'm scared about the unknown of what's going to happen. These feelings are something I've never felt and that alone makes me want to run for the hills, but I know Dario's not going to hurt me. He's proven that by not telling anyone who I am and not pushing me into explaining why I'm hiding. He listened to me and held me when I needed it. I've never had a man do that. On the streets, they were aggressive or would want something in return. I made sure no one got that close.

I'm not sure if it's because of Nell's death and I've realized that once again, life is short, but I want Dario and I need him now.

“Please?” I beg him.

He starts to pull off my clothes, his movements tense, but he’s still got that heated gaze. “I swear to you, Portia, I’m not going anywhere.”

I swallow hard. How the hell does he manage to do that? How can he know what I’m thinking? No one ever stays around. Those that I thought would have, haven’t. Dario is getting too close, and I’m not sure how to deal with it. I’ve only let two people in and that’s Nell and Teagan. I’m not sure if I can tell it all to Dario.

Once I’m stripped, I return the favor. I love that he’s letting me do it, that he’s giving me some control. I swallow hard when I see his cock. It’s thick and full. I want to touch it, to hold it, feel it, but I’m too afraid to let him know that I’m inexperienced. I don’t want him to reject me. I don’t think I can handle that.

He frames my face with his big, calloused hands, his mouth descends on mine, and I’m putty against him. I sink into him, giving over to the kiss, letting him know that he has me. I’m not sure for how long. I don’t trust. It doesn’t come easy for me. And giving myself to another the way that Dario wants is something I’m not sure I can do.

The kiss is passionate, both of us pouring everything we feel into it. I cling to his body as though it’s my lifeline. His hands skim down my body, causing my skin to heat beneath his touch. How does he make my body burn with just a touch?

“I need you,” I moan, tearing my lips away from his. “Please, Dario, I need you.”

My body is on fire. It's burning with need, and I'm dying to quench it. I'm craving him in a way that scares but delights me.

"Get on the bed," he says thickly.

I don't hesitate. If I think about things right now, I'm going to second guess myself. Right now, I need Dario. I pad to the bedroom, my feet soft against the floor. I can hear him following me, can feel the heat of his gaze as he stares at me. The feel of his gaze against my skin is hot, and I fucking love it. I look back over my shoulder and give him a salacious grin. His eyes narrow and darken.

"Onto the bed, love, or I'll redden that delicious ass of yours."

I press my thighs together as heat pools between them. God, how can he do that with just words?

I climb onto the bed and sit and wait, my heart thumping around with excitement and nerves. I've never felt as wanted as I do right now.

He stalks toward me, his gait powerful, his stride filled with purpose. He gets that wicked gleam in his eye and pushes me so I'm lying on the bed.

"You want me to fuck you?" he growls, his voice deep and filled with lust. I nod, unable to speak right now. "How wet are you?" He runs his hand along my folds and sucks in a deep breath. "Fucking soaked," he grunts.

Shivers run through my body at his words, and then he slides a finger into my pussy.

I release a low moan. God, never did I think it would feel this delicious to have him touch me. I never thought it would feel good.

“So fucking tight,” he growls as he continues to thrust deep inside of me with his fingers.

“Dario,” I breathe.

He gives me that fucking amazing grin that makes my heart skip a beat and my toes curl. It’s one that’s a cross between cheeky and sexy. I love it.

His nostrils flare as he leans down, and his mouth attaches to my nipple. I pull in a shaky breath as he feasts on it.

I swallow hard, my pussy rippling with need. “Please,” I beg him, unable to wait any longer. I can’t. I need him. I want to feel him inside of me. I want to experience what it feels like.

He releases my nipple and pulls his finger from my pussy. I watch with fascination as he brings his fingers to his mouth, and I can see they’re slick with wetness. My wetness. He wraps his lips around them and sucks my juices from them.

Holy fuck.

“You taste divine, love. I can’t wait until I get to feast on that pussy of yours. But I’m so fucking hard, I can’t hold back. I need to be inside of you.”

I need that too. God, I’ve never wanted anything more than to have his cock inside of me.

He looms over me, positioning himself with his cock at my entrance. His hands go to my ass, and I release a stunned squeal as he pulls me down onto his cock. I cling to his shoulders as pain hits me as he breaches my innocence.

“You’re so fucking tight,” he grunts.

I can’t hold back the scream that rents the air as he pushes into me once again. He pulls back, his eyes wide as he stares at his cock. “Fuck,” he growls as he looks at me. “Baby, why didn’t you tell me?”

I shake my head as my cheeks flame with embarrassment. “I didn’t want you to leave.”

He presses a kiss to my lips. “The moment I walked into this apartment I made the decision that I wasn’t leaving. You’re mine, Portia. It’s going to take some time for you to understand what that means and what it entails. But I ain’t fucking leaving. I wish you had told me. I would have gone gentle.”

I shake my head. “No, this was perfect,” I assure him. The want that was in his eyes, the heat he had that was solely for me... it was the best feeling ever. I wanted him this way. “It’s getting better,” I promise him.

He releases a growl when I wiggle beneath him. “Don’t do that,” he snarls. “Christ, Portia, you do that and I’m not going to be held responsible for my actions.”

I do it again, wanting to see what he’ll do in response. I squeeze my pussy around his cock and watch that heat enter his eyes again.

“Portia,” he growls once again.

I look at him with a smile as I wiggle beneath him once again. There’s no pain. None whatsoever. I want him to take me the way he planned to.

“Give it to me, Dario,” I whisper as I run my fingernails along his back. “I want to feel all of you.”

“But—”

I shake my head, digging my nails into his skin a little more, loving the hitching of his breath. “No buts. I’m okay. I want this. I want you. You want this. I’m so far from fragile, Dario.” I press a kiss to his lips. “Don’t make me beg.”

His lips curve into a smile. “Oh, baby, don’t you know that I love when you beg.”

“Never,” I bite back, knowing I’d beg anytime he wants. I’m not stupid. I know a man like Dario loves control, and having me beg him to take me will make him feel like he’s got all the power.

His hand tangles into my hair as he punches his hips into me, driving his cock deep into my pussy. “You want my cock, baby? Then you’re going to have to beg for it.”

I swallow hard at that gravelly tone, my stomach flipping with excitement as I see that overpowering look of heat in his eyes.

“Please, Dario, take me. Be my first.”

He slams his lips down against mine and kisses the breath from me.

“Wrong,” he snarls as he withdraws from me, pulling his cock out until it’s just the tip that’s left. “I’m going to be your first and last.” He slams back into me with such force, I cry out, my fingers clinging to him as pleasure starts to build inside of me.

“Dario,” I whimper as he continues to fuck me hard and fast. I’m merely along for the ride. Not that I’m complaining. This is so much more than I could have ever wanted, that I could have ever imagined. Dario is an amazing lover. He’s setting my body alight with pleasure.

His mouth attaches to my nipple again, and he begins to feast once more. The pleasure from having him suck at my breast sends shivers through my body. His thrusts get harder and harder, until I’m mewling like a kitten, my head pressed against the mattress and my hands clawing at his skin.

“I’m so close,” I gasp, my pleasure building. Tingles are starting, my body tightening. It’s not going to take long until I’m shattering.

He bares his teeth, his lips pulled back into a snarl as he pistons his hips into me, his movements pushing him deeper. I awkwardly grind against his cock as he goes balls deep inside of me, and he grunts at the movement. So I do it again, and again, and again. I keep going until I’m barely able to breathe, my pleasure at boiling point.

“I’m going to come,” I hiss. “Please, Dario,” I plead with him.

“Fuck, baby, that pussy of yours is fucking amazing,” he grits through clenched teeth. “Now, be my good girl and come

for me.”

It’s like he’s a magician, his words working their magic. My back bows and my body shatters as my orgasm rips into me. Pleasure, unlike anything I’ve ever felt, tumbles through me. I call out his name, my words slurred and barely audible.

His eyes darken and his hands on my ass tighten. He hammers into me, his movements so precise that when he hits me deep inside of my pussy, it feels as though he’s batting against my cervix, but there’s no freaking way. The pain that I feel from his thrusts hits and then is swept away by the pleasure that takes over.

“Dario,” I cry out, clinging to him. I can feel the pleasure building once again. He’s driving me to the edge.

He tilts my hips to get a deeper angle, then bites down on my nipple and presses his finger against my clit. That’s all it takes. My body bows, my eyes widen, and I lurch forward, my head resting against his shoulder as he thrusts into me. The pleasure becomes too much, and my body shatters. Fuck seeing stars, my entire body collapses against the bed.

“Fucking magnificent,” he growls as he continues to fuck me. “Nothing, no one, is better than you, baby. You’re all fucking mine.”

“Dario,” I whimper.

“Yeah, baby, that’s who’s fucking you.”

“Please,” I beg him. “Come, please.” I’m utterly exhausted. I’ve never felt so connected to someone in my life.

He grits his teeth and fucks me over and over again. His cock swells, and he stills, hovering over me, his gaze firmly on mine as he slides back in and groans my name. He buries his head in my neck and holds me against him. “Fuck, baby, that was—” he pauses almost as if he’s trying to figure out what to say.

“Amazing,” I breathe as I close my eyes. “So fucking amazing.”

He chuckles as he pulls out of me. I wince as pain hits, but I can’t move. I’m too damn exhausted. “Amazing doesn’t even come close.”

He’s right, it doesn’t. I never expected that I’d want more from this. I truly thought we would have sex and then he would leave, but the look in his eyes and his declaration of claiming me let me know that he and I are feeling very similar. I just don’t know how to deal with it all. I’ve never had a partner. Never had someone to rely on. I love Nell and Teagan. They’re my girls, my sisters. I’d die for them. But I’ve always been the strong one. The girls went through hell and needed me to be the one they leaned on. I don’t know how to be anything but strong.

Dario... He’s like a fucking tornado, and he’s going to want me to give him everything. I’m not sure how to do that.

I hear him move away from the bed, and he returns a few moments later. “I’m just going to clean you, baby. Just lie back and relax. I’ll run a bath. You’ll need it. It’ll help with the pain.”

I feel something wet and warm touch me, and I open my eyes to see Dario kneeling between my thighs as he cleans me.

“I’m too tired to move,” I tell him, closing my eyes once again, my heart pounding at the sight of him taking care of me.

It’s too much, way too much. I’ve never had anyone do that for me before. He’s getting under my skin and burying deep.

I don’t know if I can let this go any further. No matter how much I’d love for it to.

I have no idea how to be what he wants. I don’t even know who I truly am.

ELEVEN

DARIO

She's fast asleep. She's exhausted. I never intended for it to go that far. I never came here for that. I wanted to be here with her, to let her know that she's not alone. But I couldn't hold back. The moment she told me what she wanted, I couldn't say no.

I reach for my cell and call Beppe. "Boss," he answers.

"Busy?" I ask, hearing music in the background.

"I'm in Jefferson City. Tonight was recruitment night."

I grin into the darkness. I forgot about that. Tonight, Beppe and the rest of the men who are moving to Missouri with me are recruiting new members to join the ranks of the Famiglia. "How did it go?"

"Better than expected. We're doing extensive background checks on the guys, but from the reaction we got tonight, it looks as though Missouri could be bigger than Indiana.

Fuck. That's a lot of recruits. Elio's done a fucking great job expanding Indiana. If we're able to grow Missouri, it means the Famiglia will be the second biggest family in the US, behind the Gallagher's.

“Good. When are you back?”

He pauses. Beppe isn't stupid. He's far fucking from it.
“What's going on?”

I give him the low down on what happened today, letting him know that Lorenzo was hit, and Nell lost her life.

“Fucking bastard. Who the fuck was it?”

“He's taken care of. He was paid to do it. He has no idea who it was that paid him.” Such fucking bullshit. There's no normal fucker taking a job without knowing who's paying you to do it. Just no fucking way.

“What do you need?”

“What I ask from you, Beppe, is not to be repeated to anyone.”

“You know I would never do that,” he says fiercely. “I'll never betray the Famiglia, Dario. More importantly, I'll never betray you.”

“I know, but this is confidential.”

I hear him moving, the music getting lower and lower as he does. “I'm listening.”

“I need you to find out everything you can on Umberto and Amadeo.”

“You smelling rat?” he asks, the anger in his voice coming out like a whip.

“We both know that my father made a fucking lot of mistakes when he was boss. The biggest one was letting Davide Leone's death go unpunished. I've been thinking a lot

about that, and I'm wondering where the fuck Umberto and Amadeo were when Davide's house was breached."

He releases a string of curses. "They should have been there. But they weren't. I remember the guilt they had for not being there, but there was never a reason as to why they weren't. Aldo never pressed for one and then it was swept under the rug."

"Exactly. I want answers. Why weren't they at the Leone house, and how the fuck did they know when the hit on Davide was going down?"

"I'm on it. No one will know that I'm looking into them. What are you planning on doing when you find out?"

"That's a question for another day," I tell him. I'm not sure. I guess I'll go to Rocco and see what he wants done.

"I'll be thorough," he assures me. "Now, there's something I found out this evening that I was going to tell you tomorrow. Those two assholes who sold out Elio's wife, the homeless guys?"

"Yeah, what about them?" I ask cautiously, wondering where the fuck he's going with this.

"They were found dead not so long ago. One of the guys had his throat slit, along with a girl, and the other guy was stabbed to death."

I hear light footsteps padding toward me, and I have no doubt that Portia's been listening to my conversation. I turn my head and watch as she enters the living room and takes a seat beside me.

“The cops have no leads and there are no witnesses.”

I glance at the woman who's got me in a chokehold. “Ensure it stays that way, Beppe. I want this case closely monitored.”

“On it,” he replies, not asking why. The man probably thinks I killed them.

“Call me when you have information.” I end the call and turn to Portia.

“You want information on Umberto and Amadeo. Why?”

I don't answer for a second, wondering if there's any benefit to lying other than not hurting her. But I decide against it. “Those men were your father's closest men. They also acted as his guards. One was always supposed to be around. You'll probably remember that one or both were stationed close to the house at all times.”

She nods. “Umberto more than Amadeo,” she tells me. “Papa always said it was because Umberto was his best friend.”

“The night Davide died, neither were there. That doesn't sit right with me.”

Her eyes widen, and she brings her feet up onto the sofa and wraps her arms around her knees. “They were in on it?”

“I'm not sure. Someone definitely was. There's only one person who would have given the order for them not to be there.” It's fucking shit to admit this, but it's true.

“Your father,” she says solemnly.

“Yes. So either my father ended up working for Scaffidi or Umberto or Amadeo were. Hell, maybe all of them.”

She’s quiet for a beat, and I leave her be.

“Why are you wanting to help me?” she asks softly. “I don’t understand.”

“Your father was a good man, Portia. He was one of the best men I knew. I always had an inkling that something about his death wasn’t right, but no one ever confirmed it. It was always swept under the rug. Until I spoke with you.”

She blinks. “Beppe, he’s still your best friend?”

I’m surprised she remembers. “He is.”

Her smile is bright and reaches her eyes. “You always were thick as thieves. How come you didn’t tell him about me?”

I reach for her, pulling her onto my lap and wrapping my arms around her. “You’re not ready for anyone to know, baby, and I’ve finally gotten to a place where you’ve let me in somewhat. I’m not a man who will betray you. If it means taking your secret to my grave, then so be it.”

She glances up at me, those big brown eyes of hers filled with mistrust and warmth. She’s confused. I get that. I just hope there will be a time when she’ll know that I’m not going to harm her.

“Now, there’s something else we have to talk about.”

She tenses against me.

“The homeless men who gave Teagan’s location away, were they friends of yours?”

Her lips curl in disgust. “No, why?”

“You’re very handy with your knife,” I say with a smile. I knew that when she uncovered who gave up her friend, she’d exact revenge, but I had no idea she’d kill them for it. “So far, there are no leads and no witnesses.”

She releases a heavy breath. “Are you disgusted?”

I laugh. “Not in the fucking slightest. I’m a little pissed that I didn’t get to see you in action.”

She slaps my chest, and I listen to her soft laughter. “You’re crazy, Dario. Absolutely certifiable.”

“Possibly. I’ve ordered food, and don’t argue with me. You haven’t eaten in hours, and you need food.”

She purses her lips. “I’m not sure if I like this bossy side of you.”

I can’t hide my grin. “You mean when I’m not fucking you.”

She gives me the filthiest look. If looks could kill, I’d be six feet under. “You’re an ass.”

“Definitely. Now, we’re going to eat and then we’re going to talk.”

She shakes her head. “That’s not happening. I can’t deal with having a deep conversation right now.”

I sigh. I can’t push her. If I do, she’ll rebel and raise her walls. “Okay, but you’re going to eat.”

“Fine. I’ll eat.”

It won’t take long for Diego to arrive with our food. Speaking of which... “Diego wants you.”

Her eyes widen and her lips part in surprise. “No, he doesn’t.”

“Trust me, he does.” I’ve seen the way he looks at her. It’s the same way I do. He wants her, but he can’t fucking have her. Portia is mine.

She releases a laugh, and my cock twitches at the sound. “He does not. God, Dario, you’re so crazy.”

“Babe, I’m not crazy. I know the look he gives you.”

Her expression falls. The laughter is gone, and she looks at me with horror. “No. God, no.” She shudders. “Growing up, we were friends. He’ll always be the boy who would chase me.”

I laugh, surprised she remembers that. “Even so, he’s been watching you, and he’s going to try to get with you.”

She shakes her head. “It doesn’t matter. I don’t want him, and I won’t be ‘getting with him’,” she says, using her fingers as quotation marks.

“Too fucking right. You’re mine, Portia. I don’t share.”

“I’m not yours, Dario,” she says with a sigh. “I don’t know what you want from me, and honestly, I don’t think being together is the best idea.”

Bullshit. “You’re scared.”

“Do you honestly believe that I’m scared to be with you?” she asks as though it’s a foreign concept. “Can’t a woman know her mind?”

“Sure, they can. I’m not disputing that a woman can. You, on the other hand... You want me. I know it. You know it. So why are you lying to yourself?”

She climbs off my lap and glares at me. “You’re an ass, Dario Gallo. A motherfucking asshole.”

Shit, I’ve angered her. Watching the way her eyes light up with anger, the way she moves fluidly as she stands in front of me, her hands on her hips and her lips pursed, she’s a sight to behold.

“You have no idea what goes through my mind, nor do you know what I’ve been through. You sit there on your high horse and think you’re God’s gift to women. Are you so insecure that it’s a hit to your fragile ego to have a woman turn you down?”

She’s firing jabs at me, and I know she’s trying to push me away. I get it. I’ve gotten too close to her.

“I don’t have a fragile ego, Portia. I just know what I want. But if you honestly don’t want me, then I’ll leave.”

The bluster leaves her, and her eyes widen in panic. “What?”

Fuck. Does she think I’d truly go? That I’d give up that easily?

I get to my feet and stalk toward her. “You should know better than to poke the bear, Portia. But Christ, I’m an ass, but

not with you. I promised you I wouldn't go anywhere and I'm not. You've lost your friend. Today is not the day to have this conversation."

"I hate you," she hisses, but there's no heat in her voice.

"Sure you do," I reply, pulling her into my arms. "It's going to be taxing to hate me while I'm here, but I'm sure you'll be able to do it."

She releases a soft laugh. "Ass," she murmurs.

I press my lips against hers. "I know that me saying you're mine makes you fearful, so I'll stop. But I meant what I said, Portia. You don't fuck anyone but me."

"That means you don't fuck anyone else either."

"Fuck, baby, tell me where the hell I'm going to get the time or energy? You're a fucking handful."

Her lips twitch at my words, and I know that the way to go with her is slowly. I can't push her. If I do, it'll only send her running.

The doorbell rings, and I know it's Diego with the food. "Get us drinks, baby. I'll sort the food."

I move toward the door, and when I reach for the handle, her voice stops me. "I know I'm crazy, but I really am thankful that you're here, Dario. It's going to take a while for me to trust you, to let you in."

"You're worth the wait," I tell her, and hear her sharp intake of breath.

I open the door, glaring at Diego as his gaze scans the apartment. “Keep your eyes to yourself,” I snarl at him, and watch as he steps backward, his brows knitting together.

“Boss,” he says respectfully. “I don’t see her that way.”

I raise a brow. “Really?” I don’t fucking buy it.

“Yes. She’s not my type,” he says, and then winces. “I’m not saying she’s not beautiful, just—” He shakes his head. “She’s not my type,” he repeats as he hands me the takeout.

I close the door and Portia starts laughing. “You have no idea what he meant, do you?”

I look over at her. “What?”

“I told you he didn’t look at me like he wanted me. You’re so dense sometimes. I’m not his type, but you could be.”

My lips part in surprise. I didn’t realize. Then again, I don’t know much about Diego. “How do you know?”

“I’ve known since we were kids. You know what the Famiglia is like, Dario. You know that being gay is frowned upon. I don’t want Diego to have to hide who he is.”

“He won’t. Rocco isn’t like our father, Portia. He’ll never turn Diego away because of who he is.” That’s not what we’re building. Being gay has nothing to do with the Famiglia. “I’ll ensure he knows that his secret is safe with me until he’s ready to come out.”

She beams as she’s sauntering over to me, and wraps her arms around me. “You, Dario Gallo, are a good man.”

No, I'm far fucking from it. I just know that I won't do anything to cause her pain.

"Eat, baby," I say softly as I lead her to the sofa.

I have so much to atone for. I don't deserve the goodness that is Portia.

The secrets I've buried would tear my family's life apart. The respect I have earned would be gone in an instant.

I'll keep my demons buried, praying they never see the light of day.

I'm not a good man. I'm so fucking far from it, I have no idea what one even is now.

TWELVE
PORTIA

One Month Later

My world has changed so much over the past month. Losing Nell was something that really affected me. It makes my heart ache whenever I think about her. I miss her every day. Waking up and not seeing her is the hardest thing I do. For the past four years, she's been such an integral part of my life that not having her with me hurts so much.

I haven't seen Teagan since Elio carried her away from our old apartment. I've called and texted her but there's been no reply. The only reason I haven't lost my mind is because Dario has been telling me about her. He said she's devastated from the loss, and I can only imagine the guilt she's feeling. I'm just praying she doesn't blame herself for Nell's death. It wasn't her fault. Not at all.

Dario eased off with the whole 'you're mine' thing, but that doesn't mean he's backed off completely. He's spent most nights in my apartment and has shown me pleasure I could only dream of. It's been amazing, and I've loved every single moment of it. But I'm still wary, still unable to give him all of

me. I just don't know what to do. I have a wall up between us, and I can't let it down. I don't know how to.

A knock on my door has me blinking, wondering who's calling. Usually, I'm called or texted before someone arrives. Only those who belong to the Famiglia are able to enter the building. I feel relatively safe being here, but it doesn't mean I walk around without my knife.

I open the door and see Diego standing there with a sheepish smile. "Ms. Portia, the boss has asked me to give you this." He hands me an envelope and four very large bags. "The boss is awaiting your call."

I watch, confused, as he walks away. What the hell?

Over the past month, Diego's come out of his shell. I never asked if Dario had a conversation with him about what he found out the night Nell died, but I assume so, as the next time I saw Diego, he was a lot more relaxed and at ease. He still doesn't know who I am, and I'm very grateful that Dario has kept it to himself. I'm not ready for anyone else to find out that I'm a Leone.

I close the door, bring the bags to the sofa, and tear open the envelope.

Mia bellissima terreso,

Tonight, there's a Gala I have to attend. I would like you to attend too. Here is everything you'll need for this evening.

I'll see you tonight.

D.

My heart pounds as I read the letter. It's direct and to the point, but it's thoughtful, and I'm stunned he called me his beautiful darling. He's never called me that before, and I'm dying to hear him say the words to me. I can imagine his gravelly tone saying them. Goosebumps break out over my skin, and I take a steadying breath.

I reach for one of the bags and open the box that's inside. I'm shocked when I see the deep purple dress. It's so beautiful, and something I would have chosen for myself. I lay it on the sofa and stare at it. Did he pick this himself? I swallow hard when I think about him selecting it, and I smile. Either way, he's gone above and beyond for me. He didn't need to do this. He didn't have to invite me. I wouldn't have known about it.

I open the other bag and pull out the box of shoes. A pair of Hot Chick Slink black Louboutin shoes are nestled inside. Holy shit. A pair of red bottom shoes.

The last bag has two boxes in them. I slide them out of the bag and see one has a small purse inside, one that matches my shoes perfectly, and the other has jewelry in it. A gold bracelet, a necklace, and earrings, all of which are simplistic yet beautiful. I adore them so very much. Dario must have gone to great lengths to choose what would look good on me.

I reach for my cell phone—the one he purchased not long after I moved into this apartment, telling me he needed to be able to reach me and I him in an emergency. I hit dial on his number, my hands shaking and my heart pounding.

“Portia,” he greets with that velvety smooth voice.

“Thank you,” I whisper, my throat clogged with emotion. “They’re all so beautiful.”

“You like?” he asks, and I hear a slight hint of worry in his voice.

“Love them. Seriously, Dario, you didn’t need to buy them. They’re beautiful.”

“I’m glad. I know you’ve wanted to see Teagan. She’ll be there this evening.”

My heart races at his words. “She will be?”

“Yeah,” he says softly. “Go tonight, Portia. Have fun while you’re there.”

My heart feels as though it’s about to burst. He has no idea how much I’ve missed Teagan. “Thank you.”

“I’ll see you soon, baby.” He ends the call and I smile. I may not see Dario this evening, but he’s giving me something better—my sister.

I’m anxiously waiting for Teagan to arrive. There’s a guy sitting on the other side of the room, watching me, almost as if he knows me. It’s eerie, and if he doesn’t stop, I’m going to go over there and see if he wants a picture or something. The man’s good looking if you like the rugged look, but he doesn’t do it for me at all.

My heart batters wildly against my chest as I see my best friend walking into the room looking a million dollars. She’s

dressed in a long, slinky black dress that is to absolutely die for. She's so damn beautiful, and yet her eyes are filled with such raw sadness that it makes my heart hurt. Watching her and her husband, I can see there's tension between them. If that asshole has done anything to hurt her, I'll kill him. I don't care if he's Famiglia. I'll take him out in a heartbeat.

I spot Dario, and my heart skips a beat. The man scrubs up so nicely in his fitted suit. Our gazes connect and heat rises through my body. God, this man is something else. If I'm honest, I think I'm falling for him. He's speaking with Elio, their heads close together so as not to be overheard, and my girl looks uncomfortable. It's time to intervene.

"Tee," I say loud enough for her to hear me. I watch the shock filter through her face as I move toward her. That shock soon turns to horror, and I quickly wrap my arms around her. God, this girl. She's hurting deeply and pushing me away. I'm not going to let it happen again. "I've been so worried," I whisper so only she can hear me. "I know what you're thinking, but you didn't cause this, Tee. It wasn't your fault. Nell and I, we love you and we'll always love you. You're our sister. Please don't push me away."

Teagan wraps her arms around me, and I know we're going to be okay. It's going to take some time for her to understand that what happened to Nell wasn't her fault. None of this is. I pull her toward a seat, wanting to get her to a place where she's comfortable. I promise her she's not alone. I need her to know that.

I've known from the very moment I met Teagan just how vulnerable she is. I also know that she wanted to die when she was kept in the basement of her father's motorcycle club. She needs love and support, and I have a feeling that for the past month, she's received neither.

I feel Teagan tense, and I turn to see what she's looking at. My anger whips through me as I watch Elio Gallo smiling at a woman who is not his wife. A woman who is too fucking close for comfort.

"Hey," I say, gripping her hand to get her attention. "Ignore him. He's an ass, and he doesn't deserve you."

If I was angry before, it's nothing compared to what I feel as the skanky blonde woman smirks at Teagan, all while she runs her hands over Elio's jacket. She whispers something to him before walking away. That motherfucking asshole fucking follows her.

"Fuck him," I hiss, wishing I could follow them and kill the both of them. But there are too many eyes, too many witnesses. Damn. "Seriously, fuck him. He's an ass."

"I need a drink," Teagan says as she gets to her feet. "Or three."

I'm shocked at her words, but fuck yes, I agree. "Hell yes. Let's go." I laugh as I too get to my feet and pull Teagan toward the bar. "Two Kamikazes, please," I ask the bartender, flashing him a flirty smile. It always pays to be nice to people. It doesn't hurt to be courteous, and giving a smile is free. "Sit," I say as I pull Teagan onto a seat. "We're going to stay here and get drunk."

The bartender gives us our drinks just as Elio returns. The fucker keeps his eyes on Teagan as he saunters toward her. My girl downs her drink, all with a smile.

“Another.” I grin. “And he’s paying.” I point to Elio. I’ll be fucking damned if he hurts my friend and gets away with it.

“*La mia bellissima moglie,*” he says as he stands beside Teagan. It’s taking everything I have not to punch the asshole. How fucking dare he flirt with another woman in front of her, then leave with said woman, before coming back and being all ‘my beautiful wife’ in Italian. Ugh, he makes me fucking sick.

“Go fuck your whore, Elio,” Teagan snarls at him. I’m so fucking proud of her. “Get your hands off me.”

“Teagan,” a deep British voice says. “It’s been a while. How are you?”

I notice it’s the guy who’s been watching me since I arrived. He presses a kiss against Teagan’s cheek, ignoring Elio’s dark glower.

“Um, hi,” she says softly.

I smile as he reaches for her hand and pulls her from her seat. “Let’s talk,” he says, and leads her to a table.

Elio makes a move to follow, but I block him. Hell fucking no. “You,” I snarl at him, and watch as his brows raise in surprise. “You disrespected my friend, your wife, this evening. How dare you? Did you fuck that whore?” I hiss at him, my hands clenched into fists.

“What?” he snaps. “No, I fucking didn’t, and even if I did, it’s none of your business.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, asshole. It is my business. Everything about her is my damn business. Do you really believe she doesn’t think you fucked that skank?”

His eyes darken as he gets in my face. I see Dario close by, watching our interaction carefully. “I didn’t fuck her. I haven’t fucked anyone since I was with Teagan,” he says low. “Stay the fuck out of my marriage, Portia.”

I grin at him. He doesn’t scare me. Not in the fucking slightest. “Then make sure my girl is treated like a queen, Elio, then we’ll have no problems.”

He pushes past me and moves toward Teagan and the guy she’s speaking with.

“Are you okay?” Dario asks as he comes to stand close to me.

“Fine. Just letting your brother know that I’m watching him.”

He chuckles. “I take it he took that well.”

“Is he always such a fucking ray of sunshine?”

Dario shakes his head. “He’s going to have to admit that he’s no longer in the marriage for revenge.”

My anger whips around me. “He damn well better not think about hurting her.”

“He won’t,” he vows. “He’s a lot of things, Portia, but he’s not a monster to Teagan.”

He’d better not be.

The mystery guy who spoke with Teagan makes his way over to us. “Portia, it’s lovely to meet you,” he says, and that British accent of his makes my stomach drop, God that sound is sexy “I’ve been wanting to speak with you all evening.”

I raise a brow. “You have, have you?”

Dario leans close. “Remember, I’m the only one who gets to fuck you,” he growls, his lips brushing against my ear, making me shiver. “I’ll see you soon, Portia.” He stands tall and glares at the man. “Best watch your step, Acaster,” he warns the man as he walks away.

“Those Gallo men are really something,” he says, and I get the feeling he’s not a fan of them. “I have a proposition for you, Portia. If you’ll follow me, we’ll sit down, have a drink, and discuss it.”

I raise a brow. “My mama taught me better than that.”

His laughter is much like his voice, smooth as hell. “No doubt she did.” His face sobers. “My condolences on the loss of your father,” he says, and my back instantly goes rigid. What the fuck? “I knew him. Not well, but I knew him. He was a good man.”

“How do you know who I am?”

His grin is cocky as hell. “I know everything, including that you and Dario are doing the horizontal mambo.”

I blink at his words. “Who the hell are you?”

He holds out his hand. “Kelvin Acaster. I have a job offer for you.”

I shake my head. “I’m sorry, but you’ve got the wrong girl.”

“No, Portia, I don’t. But do not worry, you’ll be working under an alias. No one will know where you are, unless you want them to.”

“Oh, now I’m all ears.”

He grins. “Let’s get you a drink. We’ve a lot to talk about.”

THIRTEEN

DARIO

Watching Portia smile at that asshole Kelvin pisses me off. That fucker seems to be close to all the women. Why can't he find his own?

"We're leaving," Rocco tells me. His words have a bite to them. He's still pissed that we called out his shit, and he's not willing to forget that we were disrespectful to his wife. I understand that he believes that. It was either speak to the two of them alone or have the conversation in front of the men within the Famiglia. It wouldn't have gone down well if Elio and I had brought it up to the men.

I nod as I follow him to the door. "Do you need anything?"

He shakes his head. "Not right now. Tomorrow, we're going to speak with Niccolò, see if he has any idea as to who the fuck has been killing our men." We've lost two men, not to mention Lorenzo being shot, and the Irish lost one. Someone's taking us out and we need to know who.

Niccolò is one of the most trusted men that Rocco has. He's the underboss of Chicago, a man who has the respect of the entire Famiglia men. He's also someone we use now that Davide is gone to extract information when we need it.

“Okay, let me know the time and I’ll be there.”

He gives me a terse nod, and he and Jade make their way down the stairs and toward Emiliano, who is waiting out by the vehicle to drive them home.

The moment Emiliano closes the car door once Jade and Rocco are inside, the air goes static, tires squeal, and I reach for my gun. It’s instinctive. I have my weapon trained as bullets are fired from a moving car. I don’t hesitate. I fire round after round, some hitting the asshole’s tires, others hitting the car. I’m fucking hopeful that one hits the bastard in his head, but no such luck.

It’s as though our men and the Irish appear from nowhere. They just appear, their guns out and trained on the car that’s started to slow, which tells me that either his tires are popped or he’s been hit. They swarm the vehicle as my feet move toward Rocco’s car, where Emiliano’s climbing into the front. Both Rocco and Jade climb out, both looking murderous.

“The fuck?” Roc growls.

“Exactly,” I snarl. “Go home, Roc. Take your wife and go. We have the man. You can deal with him once you get the fuck out of here.” I need him to be gone so I can make sure there’s no one else after him. He could have fucking died. This shit has to fucking stop. No more. We’re not losing any more men.

“You’re leaving,” he instructs. “Get in your car, Dario, and meet us at the house.”

It's a command, one I'm to follow. You do not disrespect the boss by ignoring an order.

I nod, knowing I'm about to take a detour. I have someone I need to check in on before I leave. "I'll meet you there," I assure him, and watch as both he and Jade climb back into the car and Emiliano starts to drive them away from the madness.

"Dario," I hear her soft voice call out, and I turn, my eyes sweeping over her body to ensure she's okay. She runs into my arms and crashes against my body. "God, I was so worried. Are you okay? You're not hit, are you?"

"I'm fine, Portia. I do have to leave though."

She nods. "I know, but I needed to see you, make sure you're okay." She releases a harsh breath, her eyes wide and her lip trembling.

I press a chaste kiss to her lips. "I'm fine, baby, but it's time for you to leave. Do you need a ride home?"

She shakes her head. "No, I'm fine. Go, Dario, you're needed. I understand. Honestly, I'm okay. I'll see you tomorrow?" There's hope in her voice, and I'm fucking glad that she wants this just as much as I do.

"Definitely. Go, baby, get out of here. Text me when you're home."

She flashes me a smile and moves toward the waiting car, which I recognize as Kelvin's. Fucking bastard. What the hell is he doing bringing her home? I glare at the fucker as he gets out of the car and opens the passenger's side door for her. He

must sense me staring at him because he gives me a look, one that tells me he's got her. She'll be safe with him.

Soon, me and him will be having a conversation. Portia is mine, and he needs to stay the fuck away from her.

Once I know Portia's away from this fucking mess, I go to my car. It's time to get the fuck out of here.

I pull into Rocco's drive just as he and Jade are exiting their vehicle. "Any word?" I ask.

Rocco shakes his head. "The men are holding him, waiting for me."

"Uh, Boss," Emiliano says as he climbs out of the car, his face pale and sweaty. The fuck?

"What's wrong?" Rocco demands, his eyes narrowed as he stares at Elio's right-hand man.

I watch as he pulls his arm away from his side, and that's when I see it, the deep red blood stain. He's been fucking shot.

"Shit," I snarl as I move toward him, his legs buckling just as I reach him. I manage to keep him upright. "Call the fucking doctor," I hiss as Rocco moves to help me get him inside.

"Why didn't you say anything?" Jade asks as she dials the doctor. "God, Emiliano, you should have told us."

"My job was to bring you home safely. That's what I have done."

He's one of the best soldiers we have. It's why he's Elio's right-hand man. He's dedicated to the Famiglia and will do

whatever the hell it takes to ensure the family is safe.

“Go,” I tell Rocco once I have Emiliano settled on the bed in the spare room. “Sort out those fuckers who shot him. Make them tell you who’s behind this. It’s gone on long enough. We’ve had men dying, our men shot, and they almost took you out. Find out who the fuck is gunning for us, Roc.”

He nods, his face grim. “He’s not going to make it.”

I shake my head. “No, he won’t. I’ll be with him. He’s ours. He deserves to be with a friend.”

Roc nods. “Appreciate that, brother.”

“You’re going to torture someone who’s hurt this family, Roc. You’re going to do it in front of our men. Remember what I’ve said. If I’ve noticed what’s happened, you can guarantee that our men have too.”

“You’re telling me to not let Jade touch them?” he says quietly.

“I’m not telling you to do anything. I’m cautioning you to remember who you represent. Who you are.”

“I won’t be long. Once he passes, call Elio. He’ll need to know.”

I stand tall. “Will do. Make it fucking hurt.”

He gives me a solemn nod and moves from the door. I keep my head high as I walk into the bedroom. Emiliano is lying on the bed, his face a ghastly gray color, almost translucent. He’s bleeding profusely through the bandage we

managed to do for him, but it's no use. He's already lost a fuck ton of blood.

"You know," he begins, his words low and slurred, his breathing hard. "You've grown a lot over the past year or so, kid."

I grimace. Even now, some of the men still call me a kid.

"I thought you'd end up like your old man at one stage, especially with the shit that went down with Gio and his wife. I don't know what made you do it, Dario. It was beyond fucked up."

"You know about that?"

He nods, his eyes wide and round with pain. "I had to clean that shit up, man. It was horrific. It gave me nightmares for months after that."

I bow my head. "I'm sorry," I say low. I hadn't realized that he knew what happened.

"You've got a lot of anger inside of you, kid, but you've changed. You've become a man that I respect."

I blink at his words. "I'll never be able to atone for what I did, Emiliano. Not fucking ever."

He nods in agreement. "No, you won't. There's a lot of shit that we've all done that we can't or won't ever come back from. That was yours, Dario. It happened when you were too young to do it and couldn't understand the ramifications."

"Bullshit," I fire back. "I knew what I was doing. I was nineteen, Emiliano. I knew better. She shouldn't have died. I

shouldn't have touched her.”

“Hindsight is a bitch. You'll live with their deaths for the rest of your life. Ensure you learn from it.”

I learned from it alright. It's haunted me ever since it fucking happened. I fucked up.

“I'm dying, aren't I?” he asks.

“I'm sorry, man, but the doc's not going to make it in time.” The doc's tied up on the other side of town.

“Fuck,” he grits out. “I fucking hope Rocco's making that cunt pay.”

“Don't worry, he will. We're going to find out who the fuck is after us, and they're going to fucking pay.”

He gives me a grin as his breath starts to slow. It's only a matter of minutes, now, until it's the end. “Take care of my mom.”

“You know we will.” She won't be wanting for anything. We're not like our father. We take care of our family.

“You're not your father, Dario. Remember that.”

I grit my teeth as I watch the life leave his eyes. Fuck. He's gone.

Rocco had better have some fucking information for us. If he doesn't, I'm going to lose my damn mind.

FOURTEEN

DARIO

I look at my brother, who looks scared. Never—I have never seen him like this before. He's terrified and I can't blame him. The deaths of our men, the attempts on our lives, are all targeted at Teagan. She's the intended target for the hit. We've been lucky that she hasn't been killed. Although she's come close a few times.

Before Teagan and Elio got married, she overheard a conversation between two men who were talking about offing 'the boss'. She had no idea who 'the boss' was or who the men were even talking about, but she heard enough that the men were worried and saw her as a threat to their plan. Teagan was then on their radar. They tried running her down, poisoning her, shooting her at her apartment when Nell died, and again this evening.

We still don't know who the men are, but we have narrowed it down to five men. It's not going to take us much longer to uncover which one of those assholes is responsible.

Elio has his foot on the accelerator, and his hands are tightly gripping the steering wheel. As much as he likes to

pretend that Teagan is revenge, she's not. He cares a fucking lot about her.

The moment he pulls into the drive of his rented house here in Chicago, he's out of the car and sprinting inside. I wait for Jade and Rocco, knowing that when my brother sees his wife, he's going to want alone time with her. Something I fully respect, so I will give them space. My brother's just had the shock of his life. He needs to know his wife is okay.

Jade and Rocco pull up, and they're both looking beyond pissed. This person has eluded us for too long.

"Dario," I hear Elio yell, his voice cracking. I don't hesitate. I turn on my heels and run into the house, my heart pounding as I put one foot in front of the other and push hard. "Call the fucking doctor! Now!"

Shit, did those assholes get to her? Where the hell were the guards? They're still outside, still at their spots, watching.

I call the doc, listening to him tell me he'll be here within minutes. He was on his way to Roc's house and is now on his way here.

I come to a skidding halt as I enter the ensuite bathroom. Elio's on his knees, and there's fucking blood on the floor and in the bath. Teagan. Christ, Teagan... She's got blue lips, her eyes are closed, and she's not moving. My brother's holding a towel to her wrist, a bloody kitchen knife on the ground.

God, Teagan, what did you do?

I'm dumbfounded, shell shocked, as I stand rooted to the spot, watching as Jade pushes past me. "She's alive," she says,

her finger pressing against Teagan's throat. I can hear Rocco's shocked curse. "We need to get her medical attention right away. Her pulse is faint, but it's there."

Christ. Oh God, what the fuck happened? Why did she do this?

"The doctor's on his way," I tell Elio as I run further into the bathroom, hoping I can do something to help. "What happened?"

"Let's put her on the bed," Jade says as Elio pulls in a ragged breath. She's got tears falling down her face. "Elio, keep your hand on her wound. Hopefully we can staunch the bleeding until the doctor gets here."

Christ. He needs to be here now.

I follow Elio into the bedroom and see there's a note on the bed. I reach for it as he gently lays Teagan on the mattress. I've never seen him look so devastated before. He's been through a fucking lot, especially with having his chest set alight, but nothing has gotten to him. Until now.

I move out of the bedroom and begin to read the letter. It takes me less than a second to realize it's a suicide note. I grit my teeth and read it, my heart heavy with guilt as I read the words she poured from her soul as she said goodbye to my brother.

I caused this. I'm the one who told him she was alive, that she was Bear's daughter. I'm the reason as to why he went looking for her for revenge. Had I done some more digging, I'd have uncovered something that would have stopped me

from putting her name forward. Instead, I didn't. I saw that she was alive and was Bear's daughter, the kin of the man who set my brother's chest alight, and ran with it. I saw her as an opportunity to get revenge for what happened to my brother.

I finish reading the letter and my stomach rolls. God, I never knew someone could be surrounded by people and feel so alone. How did Elio not see this? How did he not manage to see that she was drowning?

I'm angry. So fucking angry. Teagan Mitchell was the daughter of Bear, but she was pure and kind. I saw that in her the moment she married my brother. I could see that she didn't have an evil bone in her body. She was so fucking pure that she made my brother smile. I thought she had Elio rethinking his vengeance plan, but I was wrong. But the anger I feel lands solely at my own feet. I caused this. I'm the reason she's here. I fucked up. Again.

The doctor arrives and hurries into the room, but I don't breathe a sigh of relief. Is there really a way back from here? Can she survive the pain she's in? Will she even be able to live with what happened? My head is spinning. I know she deserves the best help she can get, but will having Elio and the rest of us around her help or hinder her?

Jade takes the letter from my hands and reads it. I hear her pull in a sharp breath and know she's feeling every bit of what Teagan wrote down. Jade's tears tumble down her face thicker and faster. "God," she whimpers. "Why did we not know she felt this way?"

I don't answer her. The truth is, we should have. Every single one of us should have seen that she wasn't okay. Instead, we were all so self-involved that we didn't even care.

Elio enters the living room with Rocco on his heels. Jade steps in their path, pulls her arm back, and lets it fly, socking Elio in the chest. She does it once again and hits him in his nose, managing not to break it. Which is some feat.

She starts to shout. She's beyond pissed. She's raging, and right now, none of us can blame her. We all failed Teagan, and we deserve everything Jade's throwing at us. She then tells us about how she met Teagan, something that Elio and I had no idea about. Teagan was held captive by her own family in the basement of the MC clubhouse. She was repeatedly beaten and raped by the men who lived there. She suffered so much before she managed to escape. She finally managed to be free—until Elio came along and forced her to marry him.

“When did it become okay for you to abuse your wife?” she asks Elio.

Guilt unlike anything I've ever experienced hits me hard. Bile rises up my throat. I shake my head and leave the room, needing a few minutes to compose myself. I'm a motherfucking asshole. I deserve to be in the seventh circle of Hell and held there.

I guess I'm a fucking lot more like my father than I realized. This is something he would have done, and he would have let it continue with a smile.

“I'm staying here,” Jade says. “I don't trust you around her. She's too vulnerable right now. I'm not arguing about this.”

I'm staying."

"So am I," I say as I re-enter the room. "I read the letter, and so did Jade. She feels alone. She feels as though she doesn't have anyone. She shouldn't feel that way. She's your wife, Elio." I shake my head. God, this is my fault. I'm a fucking bastard. "I think you should call Portia."

My woman is going to be devastated. Over the past month, she's been trying to contact Teagan to no avail. I know she's missed her. She's her sister. To find out that she's hit rock bottom is going to kill her. When Portia finds out, she's going to kill both Elio and I.

"I agree," Jade says. "Portia is her best friend. She'll want to be here."

"Not tonight," Elio says.

I know the right thing to do is to call her, but right now, Elio needs to be with Teagan and ensure that she's going to be okay.

The doctor calls Elio into the bedroom, and Jade, Rocco, and I wait to hear what he has to say. A few minutes later, the doctor leaves, and I know Elio isn't coming out of the room. If it were my wife, I wouldn't either. I'd be watching over her all night.

"Is she awake?" I ask him the next morning as he comes into the kitchen.

She isn't. He tells me he's going to get her help, that the doctor has given him the name of a woman who can help her through this. It's going to be a long road ahead of her.

"I'm sorry," I tell him as I give him a cup of coffee. "I told you to set this up. I gave you the idea to force her to marry you." I shake my head. Bile is sitting heavy in my stomach, mixing with so much guilt. "When did we become like our father?"

"You didn't force me to treat her like shit, Dario. It's my fault, my actions."

I wish that would absolve me of the guilt, but it doesn't. No matter what is said, I set up this marriage, this vengeance. I caused this.

Jade enters the kitchen. "That's the realest thing I've ever heard you say."

She tells him that he's taking accountability for his actions, but the truth is, I need to too. I'm an asshole. There's something wrong with me when my first thought for vengeance is to go after an innocent woman.

"When Teagan wakes up, she's going to be hurting, and as much as I know you want to help, seeing you or me could set her off. Portia is someone she trusts. Seeing her would be better," Jade tells him, and I totally agree. Right now, Teagan needs someone she can rely on, and the only person she has is Portia.

"Call her," Elio instructs as he walks past Jade and back into his room, where Teagan is.

“I’ll call Portia,” I tell Jade as I head toward the room I stayed in last night.

I’m going to call my woman and break the news that her best friend hurt herself and is drowning in depression and needs help.

Fuck.

FIFTEEN

PORTIA

I groan at the sound of my cell ringing. “Ugh,” I cry as I pull my pillow over my head and shut my eyes tighter. God, why the hell is someone calling me this time of the morning? The ringing doesn’t stop. In fact, it ends and then starts up right away.

I pull the pillow off and snatch the cell from the dressing table. “Hello,” I answer not too pleasantly.

“Baby, I need you to listen to me.” I hear the soft but tight voice of Dario.

I swallow hard, my heart racing as I sit up in bed. Tears sting the backs of my eyes. “Tee?” I ask, knowing he’s calling about her. I know it in my heart and down to my soul.

“She’s alive, but, Portia, she needs help.”

“What happened?” I ask as I throw the bedsheets off my body and climb out of bed. I need to get dressed and go to her.

“After Teagan and Elio arrived home last night, I called him, letting him know what happened at the gala, and how we lost a man—”

“You did?” I ask softly, pausing in my rush around the room. “I’m so sorry, Dario.”

“Emiliano was a good man. He was one of the best,” he says quietly. I knew Emiliano. My papa knew him too. Dario’s right, he was one of the best.

“I’m sorry for your loss.” I hate that they lost yet another man. It seems to be an occurrence that’s happening more frequently.

I quickly pull off my pajamas and reach for my underwear.

“Elio arrived home, and you spoke to Jade.”

I bite my lip, wondering if he’s mad that I told his sister-in-law about the conversation Teagan told me and Nell about the day we found out she was to be married. She’d overheard a conversation that included threats to kill someone. She’d never seen the men before, but she knew she’d been caught overhearing. That interaction left her shaky as hell. It left a mark on her.

“The car almost ran her over when she was dress shopping, the poisoning at the wedding, and last night... They were all hits on Teagan, Portia, not us. Her. When we found that out, we raced to her, but she had hit a dark point in her life.”

“Dario, what aren’t you telling me?” I can feel the words clinging to the air. I know what he’s going to say, but I can’t believe it. She was okay yesterday. I saw her last night. Sure, she was angry, but she wasn’t in her darkness. I’ve seen when it comes for people. I’ve lived on the streets long enough to see how bad depression can hit someone.

“She tried to kill herself. Had we not returned to the house when we did, she would have died. She needs you, Portia,” he says thickly.

Tears fall down my face. I can’t stop them. The pain I feel is something that has my knees buckling. I can’t stand any longer. I sink to the floor, my body bucking with the weight of the pain that rocks through me. “I’m on my way,” I whisper, unable to talk above that.

“Be safe, baby. I’ll see you soon.”

I end the call, unable to move as sobs wrack through my body. Oh, my girl. My poor girl.

It takes me a while to be able to get off the floor. I’m not shocked in the slightest to see Lorenzo waiting for me outside my apartment.

“Dario’s ordered me to bring you to Teagan. He wants to ensure you’re okay.”

I have a feeling some of the men know something happened between us, but they aren’t coming out and saying it outright. I don’t care right now. My main focus is on Teagan and trying to figure out how I can help her. I should have noticed that she wasn’t okay. I failed her. I was supposed to protect her, and I failed.

The drive to the Gallo house takes a while, and my heart pounds wildly as each second passes. I’m scared that she’ll be gone before I can see her. I can’t lose another sister. I’ve lost one already. Losing Teagan will kill me.

I walk into the house, and the quietness is unsettling. I spot Dario, who nods toward the bedroom. I don't make small talk or even say hello to anyone. Jade, Rocco, and Dario are sitting on the sofa almost as if they're waiting for something to happen.

"*Mia amata,*" Elio says, and I pause at the door to listen. He's holding her gently as he rocks her in his arms. Seeing how tender he is with her hurts my heart. How did we all miss how vulnerable she was, how she wasn't coping? The trauma Tee has been through is more than enough to bury someone. She's lived through so much pain and suffering. I'm in awe of how well she's managed to live her life without letting it take her over.

"I would like you to do something. The doctor who came to help you last night, she found someone for you to speak with. I'd like it if you'd give them a chance; just have a talk with them and see if they can help you?" he continues, and those words strike a chord with me. He does care about her. I just wish he had shown it before now.

"No," she whispers. "Please no." Her voice is so tortured, I find it hard to breathe. God, the pain she's in has my tears falling once again.

"Please, Tee. I know you're suffering. I wasn't here to help you last night." Something I'll never forgive myself for. I should have been here for her in her darkest time. "But I can see how much pain you were in. I'm begging you, please, just have one conversation with them?" I plead with her as I sit

down on the bed beside her. I need to be close to her. I need to see that she's breathing with my own eyes.

"No," she whispers, shaking her head.

"Teagan, please," I plead once again, my throat closing with emotion.

"Stop it!" she screams, and my heart shatters at the horrified sound she makes. I've never heard something so raw and painful before.

I reach for her hand. "Look at me." I demand, needing her to see me. "I've lost one sister. I don't want to lose another." I'm a bitch. I know I am. I'm not being fair to her, but it's the only thing I can think of to get through to her. "Please, just one conversation."

"I-I don't think," she stutters. "I don't think anyone can help."

Holy fuck. My girl is in so much pain.

"But I will try. I'll try anything. I don't want to feel this darkness anymore."

I grip her hand tighter, unable to speak right now. What can I say to her? She's suffering and there's nothing I can do to help but be here for her. I'm not leaving until I know she's okay. I can't lose her. I love Teagan like a sister. I can't lose her.

“Portia,” Jade says softly as I take a seat a few hours later. “I think it’s time I let you in on a few things.”

I stare at the woman who saved my girl from the basement of the clubhouse. “That would be good, because I have a lot of questions. Like how does a woman see another at her lowest and allow her brother-in-law to treat her with such loathing?” I can’t wrap my head around that. I don’t understand it.

“I didn’t know what Elio was doing.”

“Bullshit,” I fire back. I’m not scared of these people. I’d go to Hell and back for Teagan. Hell, I’d have done the same for Dario. I was falling so hard for him, but to find out that this is partly down to him, that he was the mastermind behind using her for revenge... it’s enough for that love to die. That was something I found out when Jade told me what had gone down after I arrived and saw how broken my best friend is.

“Excuse you?” she says, raising her brow.

“Bullshit. There’s no way you believed Elio was marrying her for love. I’m not blind, Jade. I know what these men are like. You do too, and you sit there with your holier than thou attitude and act as though you’re innocent in this. You fucking knew what Teagan suffered through. You knew what those animals did to her in that basement, and you allowed your brother-in-law to force her into a marriage.”

I get to my feet. The one thing I can’t stand is hypocrites.

“Portia,” Dario says as I step outside to take a deep breath. I turn and see he’s sitting on a swing, his gaze on me.

Teagan is currently speaking with the doctor, who arrived about twenty minutes ago. The woman seems nice, and I'm truly hopeful she can help my girl. I don't give a fuck how much money it takes or if we have to go abroad, I'm willing to get her the help she needs. If that means taking her away from this family, then so be it.

"What do you want, Dario?" I'm unable to keep the anger out of my voice. I'm so close to reaching for my knife and slitting his throat.

"I want you to talk to me."

I shake my head. "I'm so fucking close to killing you right now, I don't want to speak with you. I can't even look at you."

"I'm sorry," he says. "I fucked up. I should never have told Elio to go after her. Our father's sins are our father's, not ours."

I glare at him. The hatred I feel is more than I can handle right now. I don't know what to do with it. I want to lash out. I want to scream and cry. "You would know all about the sins of the father, Dario. Yours was a bastard, and you've just proven that you're exactly who everyone thought you were."

He gets to his feet and pushes toward me. "How do I make it right?"

I swallow hard and shake my head. "You can't. Your actions have led to my best friend—my sister—drowning so hard in the darkness that she couldn't see another way out. I don't know if I can ever forgive you for that."

He nods, his eyelashes thick with unshed tears. I hate that my heart aches for him. I'd love nothing more than to have his arms wrapped around me, promising me everything's going to be okay. But I can't have that. I can't allow him to get close enough to destroy me and Teagan again.

"Take good care of her, Portia. She's going to need you with her."

"I don't know if being here with you all is going to do that. I wouldn't be able to do it. I'd rather she have inpatient care, someplace she can heal without the memories."

"I'll bring it up to them," he says. "I'm sorry," he whispers as he presses a kiss to my lips. "I truly am. If I could go back and change it, I would. I'd pretend I'd never heard of Teagan."

"Then I'd have both my girls still with me," I tell him. My anger is whipping through me like a tsunami. I can't be around him. Listening to his apologies isn't easing the pain, anger, or even the guilt that I feel.

He nods once again and moves away from me. "Take care of yourself, Portia."

My throat clogs with tears, and I blink furiously, trying to stop them from falling. I hate that he's gone and isn't fighting, but at the same time, I'm glad that he isn't. I don't have the energy to deal with him. I don't have the patience to listen to more excuses as to why he targeted my girl.

"I don't think I've ever heard Dario be so sincere," Elio says as he enters the backyard. "My brother really cares about you. I think he has from the moment he saw you."

“Well, I should have listened to my gut that day. It told me you were both bad news.”

He sighs as he comes to stand in front of me. “You saved her from hell on the streets,” he says, and my brows furrow. How the hell would he know? “You’ve killed for her, for both her and Nell. So I get that you’re pissed. I get the anger, and hell, I get the guilt. I feel them all too. I fucked up, not Dario, Portia. It was all on me.”

I shake my head. “Wrong. He led you to her. He was the one who told you about her. If he hadn’t, she wouldn’t be in this position right now.”

“You’re right, she wouldn’t. She’d still be on the street. You all would. You’d all be living your lives as you had done. I know that. I have felt the guilt of forcing her to marry me. I can’t bear a life without her, Portia.”

I raise a brow. “Oh? And why is that?”

“Because I love her. I think I have for a while. It’s why I’ve kept her at arm’s length. I was too focused on the anger I felt to even contemplate any other feelings I had. But when I saw her lying in the bathtub, the anger disappeared, and the stark fear of losing her hit me. She’s my wife, Portia, and I do love her. I’m going to do everything it takes to ensure she never feels alone again.”

“Why did you do this? What did you sense to gain from it?” I ask, needing to know why he thought destroying my girl’s life was worth it.

He starts to unbutton his shirt, and I swallow back the bile as I see the red and puffy scars on his chest. I know what I'm seeing. The burns on his chest aren't ordinary ones. They don't appear to be anywhere else on his body, just his chest. This was deliberate.

"Her father did this to me. He burnt me with cigarettes, then when I passed out from the pain, he torched my chest. I needed surgeries to fix it. I was angry, Portia. So fucking angry at the world. I wanted revenge. Dario wanted revenge. My brother has seen violence so much in his life. He's felt it firsthand from a young age. Seeing me in pain affected him. He needed vengeance for me. But it was taken from us by the Gallagher's, and there was nothing I could do. I was helpless. The man who did this was dead, and I was stuck in limbo. I was angry at the world. I was dead inside, until my brother gave me hope."

"Teagan," I whisper, my hands shaking as I watch him carefully.

He nods. "I thought I could turn that deadness inside and use it against her, to keep her at arm's length. Dario knew the moment I saw Teagan that revenge wasn't the reason for me marrying her. I also knew it deep down. He's told me more times than I can count that it's more than that, but I wouldn't listen."

I stay silent for a beat. "Why are you telling me this?" I ask as he starts to re-button his shirt.

"Dario's made a fucking lot of mistakes, Portia, but those mistakes are made because he thinks he's helping those he

loves. He thought it would help me focus my life if I got revenge. He thought killing would stop the anger and self-loathing he felt, but it didn't."

"I'm too angry right now to forgive him. Every time I look at him, I want to kill him. I can't be near him."

"Then give it time. I never thought I'd see my brother in love, but he is. When you're ready, talk with him. He'll be waiting."

"What if I'm never ready?"

He gives me a wary smile. "Then I guess my brother will always be waiting." He walks back inside as I stare into the trees.

How am I supposed to forgive the man who made me almost lose my sister? How can I let go of the pain he's caused?

Right now, I can't think about that. I need to center myself and focus on Teagan and helping her get to a place where she's not surrounded by darkness. I need her to know that she's loved and not alone. Only then can I think about myself and what I want to do next with my life.

SIXTEEN
PORTIA
FOUR WEEKS LATER

“**Y**ou okay?” Kelvin asks, his brow furrowed. “You seem distant.”

I shake my head. “I’m good. So, what did you want to talk to me about?”

He grins at me. “The job offer we spoke about. I have a bit more information.”

I take a sip of coffee as I look around the small coffee shop. I’m shocked he wanted to meet me here. It’s out of the way and very inconspicuous. If I were walking on this street, I’d have walked past it without a second thought.

“Okay, hit me with it.”

He offered me a job the night of the gala. That was about a month ago, and I haven’t heard from him since. “It’ll be a team, one that will be working together to stop the trafficking of women.”

I blink, surprised he’s doing that. It doesn’t match the vibe I got from him. I assumed he was into organized crime. I thought he was the head of the mob, but to have a team that’s going to stop the trafficking, that’s huge.

“You do realize that trafficking rings are set up by organized crime bosses, right? Usually the Bratva?”

He nods. “I know. I also know that a lot of the people involved in buying women are high power professionals, such as judges, law enforcement, and politicians.”

I sigh. “It’s all profit for them. They’re involved because power breeds power. If one goes down, they’ll all go down. It’ll be a domino effect. But they’ll protect each other until they no longer can.”

“Exactly, but there’s rumors of another shipment coming in, and I want to hit the ground running with this team before it does.”

“Okay, so what do you need from me?”

His grin is cocky. “You, dear Portia, are the perfect candidate to help me with my team. You know the ins and the outs of the Famiglia. You know people; you’ve studied them for years—and don’t say you didn’t. You watched people while you were on the streets. You’ve got a good head on your shoulders and you can get information when others can’t.”

Okay, so he’s right with that. I can. It’s easy for me to know when someone’s lying, and I have a knack for making people tell me things without asking them to. They just voluntarily give me the information I need.

“Where is the team’s headquarters?” I ask, wondering what swanky building he’s got here in Indiana.

He takes a sip of his coffee, grimacing as he does. “That’s the thing,” he says. “It’s not here, it’s in Jefferson City.”

I blink. Oh. “Shit,” I hiss out a breath.

He nods. “I’m going there after this. Come with me, check it out, and then make a decision.”

“It’s a big decision, Kelvin. This means uprooting my life, leaving Tee behind.”

“Would you really be leaving her behind?” he asks with a raised brow, and I hate that he’s right. No matter where I am, Teagan is my sister and I’m always going to be in her life. “It is a big decision, but this is your chance to make a life for yourself. Like I said the night of the gala, you can have a fresh start. No one will have to know who you are. We can get you an alias or even a new name. But think of it this way, Portia: this would be your chance to help girls to get away just as you did.”

I glare at him. He’s not playing fair. I want that, but this is a huge change in my life, and I’m not sure if Teagan is strong enough for me to move.

“Look, come with me, check it all out, and then make a decision.”

I nod. “Okay, I can do that. How long do I have to give you an answer?”

“We set the ground running in two weeks, Portia. Like I said, there’s chatter of a shipment and we’re trying to gather the intel as we speak. I want the team to focus on this as soon as possible.”

“I get it. I do. I’ll have an answer for you before you and the team get into action. Let’s go check out the headquarters

and living space.”

He grins. The fucker thinks he has me, and to be honest, I think he’s right. This could be the perfect opportunity to start fresh, build something for myself, and get away from Dario. The man is constantly on my mind and I’m not sure what to do about him.

“That coffee tastes like shit,” Kelvin says as he gets to his feet. “I’ll go through a drive-thru on the way. Come on, let’s go.”

I blink but follow him out of the coffee shop. “Well, that was rude,” I say, still confused by his abruptness.

“The coffee was awful. It tasted like it was made from a cheap instant brand.” His lips curl in disgust. “They’d have more business if they had decent coffee.”

I can’t deny that. It wasn’t the best coffee I’ve had, a little on the weak side for my liking, but it wasn’t as bad as he was making out. “Okay, pampered princess, let’s go get you a fancy-schmancy coffee.”

His brow furrows and his lips tighten. “I’m not a princess. I’m just particular.”

I can’t help but laugh. He’s so serious. He needs to relax.

I can’t stop tossing and turning. My mind won’t shut off. I can’t get my brain to stop. I’m contemplating taking the job. Okay, I’m more than contemplating it. I just don’t know if it’s

the right decision. I have Teagan to think about. I need to ensure that she's okay before I make any life-altering changes. I huff as I reach for the lamp on my dresser and sit up. God, I need to make a decision and get it over and done with. I won't be able to deal with continuous sleepless nights, pondering if I'm making the right choice.

I notice my cell has a notification and reach for it. My brow furrows when I see it's a message from Teagan. My pulse races as I read it.

Teagan: Everything okay?

I quickly type a message back, needing to ensure she's okay. Does she need me?

Portia: I'm good, girl. How are you? How did it go with Lena today?

Her sessions with her doctor have really helped her, and I can see she's slowly pulling back from the darkness. I don't want to cause her to go back to that place.

My cell starts to ring, and I smile when I see she's video calling me.

"Hey, I thought you'd be asleep," I say. It's so good to see her though.

"I slept earlier. I won't be able to sleep for a while. Elio's in his office, working. So, tell me, what happened when you met with Kelvin earlier?"

I haven't told her I've been offered a job, just that he wanted to speak with me.

“It went really well. He’s offered me a job, Tee, but I don’t know whether I should take it.”

Her brow furrows. “What? Why? A job would be great for you. Unless you’re worried about that asshole Marco finding out where you are?”

“At first, it was that, but Kelvin’s assured me that won’t happen. He’s even offered to change my name.”

She laughs softly. “That’s never going to happen,” she says adamantly. “So, what’s the problem?”

“It’s in Jefferson City,” I tell her, and watch the blank expression hit her. “It’s in Missouri.”

Her eyes widen, and her lips part. “Oh,” she whispers. “I wasn’t expecting that. Kelvin’s expanding into Missouri?”

“Expanding?”

She nods. “No one really knows what he does, but he knows everything that happens in Indiana, as well as Illinois. It annoys the Gallo brothers and the Gallagher’s that they haven’t been able to uncover how he gets his information yet.

I laugh. “Oh, I love him even more. Anything to piss off the Gallo’s gets a huge hell yes from me.”

She shakes her head. “He misses you, you know.”

My heart constricts at her words. I know who she’s talking about. I don’t really want to talk about it though. Dario did something I don’t agree with. He made a decision that could have had deadly consequences.

“Please,” I rasp, hating that he affects me this way and he’s not even here.

Her eyes fill with tears. “Portia, you deserve to be happy.”

I nod. “But right now, I need to focus on you and getting my life on track. I can’t live here forever. I don’t want to be indebted to anyone, and that’s exactly what I feel to the Gallo’s.”

“So, you’re taking the job?”

I bite my lip. It sure sounds like I am, but there’s a piece of me that wants to stay.

“Do it,” she urges. “Take the job, Portia.”

“What about you?” I ask, needing to know she’ll be okay if I do take it. I can’t have her hit rock bottom again. I’ll never forgive myself if she does.

“I’ll be fine. You’re a call away, and it isn’t like Missouri is on the other side of the world. It’s going to be fine. Trust me. Go to Missouri, Portia. Go live your life. You’ve spent so long running and taking care of everyone. It’s time to stop, take a breath, and do something for you.” She gives me a blinding smile, and the weight that’s been sitting on my shoulders since Kelvin told me where the headquarters is, lifts.

“You’re amazing, you know that?”

She waves me off. “Not even close. But I’m proud of you, Portia. You’re doing something, and I know how hard it must be. Are you excited for the job?”

“I am. It’s something I hadn’t thought about before,” I tell her, then quickly explain what the job is. She starts to cry. “Please, Tee, don’t cry.”

She wipes her eyes, all the while smiling at me. “These are happy tears, Portia. That is the perfect job for you. If anyone can do it, you can. I have every faith that you’re going to save those women and girls and make their lives better.”

All three of us, me, Nell, and Teagan, have been affected by what men can do to us. I was the lucky one. I wasn’t hurt, but I could have been and there would have been no one to stop it. I saved myself, but not everyone is able to do that. They need someone to do it for them.

“Take it. You’re going to be amazing. I know you will.”

I smile at my girl, feeling the love she’s giving me. “Okay,” I whisper, having made my decision, though there’s a part of me that’s not happy. A piece of me that wants to speak with Dario and see if there’s a chance for us. But the thought of facing him hurts me.

Maybe it’ll be better if I just cut all contact and move away. Could that possibly be the right way to go?

“Stop stressing. You need to do whatever’s right for you, Portia. Not me and certainly not Dario. Do what you need to. Okay?”

I sigh. “Okay. Thank you.”

She gives me a blinding smile. “I love you, girl. Never doubt that. You’re stuck with me for life.”

“Right back at you. Now, go, spend some time with Elio,”
I tell her.

Over the past month, the two have gotten closer than ever. Finally seeing them both in love shows me just how much they're meant to be. That's not to say that I'm still not pissed that he hurt her, or that he was partly to blame for what happened to her, because he is. He's just doing everything he can to ensure he's making amends for it. Teagan's willing to forgive him, and as she's my sister, I'll always be civil toward him. I won't do anything to jeopardize her marriage. But if she wanted to run, I'd be taking her as far away from him as possible.

“Okay, I'm going. I'm proud of you, Portia. I'm so proud of you.”

I give her a watery smile, not wanting the tears to fall.
“And I am of you too.”

She'll never know how proud and in awe of her I am.
She's so fucking strong.

She blows me a kiss, and we end the call.

Thankfully, the tears don't fall and I'm able to breathe through my emotions. God, I suck. I shouldn't be on the verge of tears. Getting a job and knowing your sister is going to be okay should bring happiness.

I stare at my cell and wonder if I should call Dario or not. I miss talking with him. As much as he annoyed me, he also made me laugh a lot.

My fingers move over the screen. On the search engine, I type in his name. I'm not sure why I'm doing this. Maybe I just need to see a picture of him. If I see him, maybe I'll get a sense of clarity.

My heart stutters and tears fall down my face as I see him with the woman he brought to Teagan's wedding as his plus one. The two of them are coming out of a restaurant, and they look cozy and perfect together. I look at the timestamp and see it was taken last night.

My tears fall thick and fast. God, I was so stupid. I should have known Dario wasn't who he said he was. There's no way he was just focusing on me.

This has cemented my decision.

I'm going to Missouri and working for Kelvin.

SEVENTEEN
DARIO
TWO WEEKS LATER

“**S**he’s doing better,” Elio tells me. “It’s not an easy fix, and it’s not going to happen overnight, but it’s going to happen.”

I breathe deeply. The guilt is still eating away at me. “Can I speak with her?” I need to apologize. I’ve kept my distance the past few weeks, letting her heal, as I didn’t want to be a stark reminder of what happened.

He nods tersely at me, and I know he’s worried I’ll say something to make her upset. He’s still pissed that I suggested putting Teagan in an in-care facility that would help with her trauma. I didn’t want to tell him that Portia had thought it would be best. I didn’t want Elio losing his mind on Portia, not while Teagan was recovering. Hell not fucking ever.

The fucking bastards who put the hit out on her broke into the house to try to finish the job they started. Teagan managed to hide and get help, and those fuckers are gone, but being hidden in the closet while the men were in the house sent her into a panic attack, thinking she was in the basement of the clubhouse again.

I want to apologize, but I don't want her to relapse with the progress that she's made in her recovery.

I move toward the sitting room. Teagan's alone right now. Her doctor not long left, and usually when she does, Teagan goes to bed as the sessions with Dr. Lena take it out of her. The past few weeks, I've watched carefully as she's started to recover from what happened. I hate that she had to hit rock bottom for Elio to realize what he felt for her, but I'm glad she has him to lean on when she's not strong.

"Hi," she says gently as I enter the room.

"Hey. Do you have a moment?"

Her eyes widen slightly, but she recovers quickly, reaching for the remote control and switching the TV off. "Sure. Are you okay?"

Even with what she's going through, she still has a soft heart. I nod. "I am. I wanted to speak with you."

She bites her lip, then grabs one of the decorative pillows from the sofa and clutches it to her chest. I hate that I'm making her uneasy. "Okay."

"I'm sorry," I say instantly. "I'm so fucking sorry."

She blinks, almost as though she doesn't understand why I'm apologizing.

"It was me who found out you're Bear's daughter. It was me who paid the homeless guys to give me your whereabouts, and it was me who told Elio about you. I'm sorry."

She's quiet for a moment. "Did you know what had happened to me when you told him?" she asks, her voice soft and her words steady.

"No. I knew something had—I always had an inkling that something wasn't right. But no, I didn't know what those bastards did to you."

"Did you tell Elio to push me away and act as though I didn't matter?" Again, her voice is soft, but her words are strong.

"No, I didn't," I say as I look at my brother. I hadn't realized he did that to her.

"Dario was the one who told me that I cared for you. He said not long after we got married that it was no longer about revenge. He was right. I chose not to listen," Elio says.

As shit as this entire situation is, Elio's not brushing it under the rug. He's taken accountability for what he's done and hasn't passed the buck to anyone else.

Teagan nods. "You had the information, and you gave it to him. You did not cause this, Dario. You had no idea what could have happened. I understand your need and thirst for revenge. I've always known and understood it. I get it; my father caused unimaginable pain for you all and deserved to be punished." She pauses for a minute. "Does that mean that this is Jade's fault? Had she and her family not got revenge against my dad, you would have, which in turn means I wouldn't have had to marry Elio."

“No, she’s not.” Jade did what she and her family needed. It’s something I don’t agree with, but I’ve said my piece. She’s not to blame for what happened with Teagan.

“Then why are you to blame?” she asks with a raised brow. “Look, Dario, what happened between Elio and I is between us. You essentially handed him a loaded gun, but you didn’t tell him to shoot me. He did that himself. The guilt you have, let it go. I don’t blame you and neither does Elio. So drop it.”

I know by the forcefulness of her voice that she wants me to leave it be. So I will. But the guilt doesn’t disappear just because she says so.

“*Mia amata,*” Elio says as I make my way toward the door. “You need to tell him about Portia.”

Hearing her name has my back straightening.

“She hasn’t told him?”

“Told me what?” I ask as I look between them. The air tightens as Teagan sighs. “What’s going on?”

Teagan looks down at her hands. “The night this happened, Portia and Kelvin got to talking and he offered her a job. One that she’s taken.”

I blink. “Okay,” I say, not really understanding where this is leading.

“Out of the state,” she tells me, and my heart fucking sinks. “She’s leaving soon and she’s moving.”

“Where?”

Elio grins. “She’s moving to Missouri.”

I've still got a few months before the transition to me being there full time happens. But I'm going to ensure that I'll be there a fucking lot more than I have been.

"When does she leave?" I ask, hoping she hasn't left yet. I want to pay her a visit.

"Tomorrow," she tells me warily. "But, Dario, she saw a picture of you and the woman from the wedding. She doesn't want to speak to you."

Fuck. How the hell has she kept this secret from me? Why didn't I know before now? Christ. She hates me. I get it. I deserve the hate. I despise myself for the shit I've done. But I thought she'd at least speak with me. I guess she wants a fresh start.

"If I turn up there, she's not going to answer the door, is she?"

She shakes her head. "No. You've hurt her. Seeing you and the woman together, it pushed her further away."

Fuck! What have I done?

"Thanks," I say as I make my way out of the house.

I go home, hating that I'm not going to see Portia. Everything in me is telling me to go to her. But she's made her decision, and I should respect it. Right now, she needs space. She's got a new job and she's moving. That's stressful. But once she's settled in Missouri, I'm going to her. I'm not going to let her slip through my fingers.

The dinner I had with the woman was a business one. Her father, Francis Buchanan, is pushing her to front his empire

and has put Melanie at the forefront of all business meetings. I've been the one dealing with the asshole the entire time, and now I have to deal with her too. There's nothing between Melanie and I, but I've seen the pictures. I know what Portia has seen and it doesn't look good.

Yet another thing for me to apologize for.

I climb into bed and close my eyes. It's been a fucking long day. It's been years since I've slept through the night. Some nights, the nightmares don't come for hours, other times it's as though someone hits play the moment I drift off to sleep.

My mind is whirling. Everything is going around and around like a fucking record. I've fucked up everyone's lives, just as that fucking asshole Aldo told me I would.

"You fucking asshole," he growls as he reaches for his belt. "What have I told you? Hmm? What have I always said?"

I stare at the man who has made my life a misery since the moment I was born. I can't remember a time when he wouldn't hit me with that fucking belt. If it's not the belt, it's his fist. The man has gotten good at beating me where no one will see the bruises. He's a fucking pro at it now.

"Not to talk while others are around," I say, trying to keep the anger from my voice. He doesn't give a shit what I do. He'll always find a fault with it to unleash his anger.

"So why the fuck did you disobey me?"

I'm sick of this. I'm sixteen and the same height as him. Although he's got at least a hundred pounds on me, all of which is fat, I'm sure I can take him. But Aldo Gallo is a sly bastard. He'll claim that I attacked him, that I was trying to kill him, and taking out the Capo within the Famiglia is a huge fucking no-no. It's a certain death sentence.

"I was asked a question. Had I not answered Emiliano, you'd have found a problem with that too."

His lips twist into a snarl, spittle flying from his mouth. "Are you arguing with me?"

"No, sir," I reply sarcastically. I learned a long time ago that no matter what is said, he's going to take that belt and use it on me. I wish I could snatch it from his hands and turn it on him, but the fucker is too fucking slick. He has an answer for everything. He always has a way out of any given situation. It's why he's the Capo instead of someone more deserving of the role, like Niccolò or Davide.

He flicks his wrist, and the belt buckle snaps against my chest. The buckle pin cuts through my shirt and skin. I don't make a sound as he does it over and over again. I grit my teeth, not giving him the satisfaction of crying out.

He lives for the thrill of hurting people. That's what he loves. The man is a sadist, and I have to wonder if he takes that into his sexual life as well. Is that why my mother turns a blind eye to his shit, because she's into his weird kink too?

"You are nothing, Dario. Without me, you'll amount to nothing. You need me. You need the power of who I am to be a man."

Ah, we've hit the delusion early today. The man fully believes he's the reason why the Famiglia is strong. He doesn't give the men—our men—the recognition they deserve. If not for them, he would be a failure.

“My boys, they're good. They're great even. Then you came along,” he sneers as the belt once again cuts into my skin. “You are going to fuck up everyone's life, boy, just like you have mine.”

I stare at him, my jaw clenched tight. I fucking despise this man. I've dreamed about all the ways I could kill him, have come up with the darkest, most deranged ways a human could possibly hurt another and then made it even more painful. That's how much hatred I have in me for this so-called father of mine.

Over and over, he beats me, the sound of the buckle hitting my skin reverberating around the office. His words sound like gibberish as the pain becomes too much to bear. I can feel the blood dripping from my open flesh. No doubt the bastard is going to get angry that I'm messing up his office. But he can go to Hell.

As he continues to unleash his anger, I start to come up with a way to put a stop to this shit. I need this to fucking end. I can't continue with this fucking pain. But everything I come up with ends with him worming his way out of it. He's perfected the art of lying. He's made a career out of using his lies to benefit him. He's got so many men who owe him a favor that just one call would have me dead and my death pinned on

someone he doesn't like or someone getting too close to the truth about him.

I have studied him for years and learned everything there is to know about him. But the truth of the matter is, Aldo Gallo is a fucking coward. Always has been and always will be.

There's no saving me from his wrath. The only time that'll happen is when I move out, and that's not going to happen at the age of sixteen.

Two more years and I'm free.

That's all that's keeping me going.

Fuck Aldo and his bullshit.

EIGHTEEN
PORTIA

“Welcome, Portia.” Kelvin greets me with a smile.

I give him a shaky one in return. “Thanks,” I reply.

I’m still not sure whether I’ve made the best decision. Leaving Indianapolis was the hardest thing I’ve ever done. I had security there, I felt safe—as safe as I could be—and I had a life and a home, but more importantly, Tee was there.

I was shocked when Kelvin offered me the job, but it was one I knew I couldn’t turn down. I had hoped that he would give me the job at his local Indiana offices, but that was no luck. He needed me here, in Jefferson City.

My heart hurts knowing that my best friend is still going through so much and I’m not there to help her through it. We call every day, and we text multiple times, but it’s not enough. It’ll never be enough. I should be with her.

“Have you spoken to him yet?” Kelvin asks. I don’t have to ask him who he’s talking about. There’s only one man who counts.

“No,” I reply, my tone hard. I don’t want to talk about Dario. I sure as hell don’t want to be talking about him with

Kelvin.

I hear his deep sigh. “Look, Portia, I don’t know what went down between you, but leaving without letting him know isn’t the way to go.”

“Don’t involve yourself in my life, Kelvin. I’m here to do a job, not bitch about a guy I was seeing.”

A guy I was irrevocably in love with. It’s hard to walk away and not speak to him, but the love I feel doesn’t erase the anger I have for him. It’s not normal. I know that. Especially when I’m the only one who harbors that anger. But I can’t help it.

“Tell me about the next shipment,” I say to Kelvin, and he smiles. “When is it supposed to arrive?”

“Come on,” he says, waving me toward the conference room. I was here two days ago to look around and get the lay of the land, so to speak. “It’s time to introduce you to the team.” He opens the conference room door, and inside, eight people wait for us. Six men and two women. All of whom are watching me carefully. I get it. I’m new, and they’re already a team. They don’t want anyone to mess with their dynamics.

I saw a few of the guys hanging around when I went for the interview, which wasn’t with Kelvin but his right-hand man, Robert, who’s sitting at the table with a welcoming smile on his face.

Kelvin introduces me to everyone. It’s going to take a while for me to remember their names, but so far, they’re all welcoming.

“Two weeks ago, chatter started up about a shipment that was coming in,” Robert says as he gets to his feet and starts to hand out files. “From the intel we have, there’s forty-eight women in the shipment.”

He hands me the file and I open it up. My stomach twists when I see Marco’s face looking at me from the image.

“Marco Scaffidi is heading up the organization?” I ask, wondering why the hell it wasn’t mentioned before today.

“He’s been on our watchlist for years, Portia. The man has grown in the trafficking world over the past four years,” Robert tells me. “He and his men are stealing women and then selling them or putting them in whore houses. They’re profiting off the girls they steal.”

I take a deep breath. This should have been divulged to me before I walked into this room. Christ. Kelvin is an ass.

“Okay, so any idea as to where the shipment will be arriving?”

They shake their heads. “It’s moving from Chicago and coming west. We’re trying to figure out where else Scaffidi has connections. But so far, we’re coming up blank.”

“Which is where you come in, Portia,” Kelvin says.

I watch as the men share a look of surprise and the women smirk.

“I need you to hit the streets. You’re good at assimilating to your surroundings. You’ll be able to get us information quickly.

I nod. “I’m on it. Do you know anyone from the streets who could help me get the ground running?”

Robert and Kelvin share a grin. “We do. Jamie here has been living on the streets for the past three years. She’s going to be your partner for this case.”

“Cool. Once we’re finished here, I’ll go home and get ready.”

Kelvin nods. “From the little intel we do have, there are at least twenty girls who are underage.”

Fucking animal. God, I hope we’re able to find Marco. Then I might get the chance to cut off his balls. He’s a fucking bastard, and the sooner karma comes for his ass, the better.

Robert continues to talk about the case. This one is going to be a hell of a case, one that’s close to home, but I’m going to do everything in my power to ensure those girls are found.

Being back on the streets is weird. It feels as though it was a lifetime ago that I was here myself. It’s a different type of edge you need when you’re living the homeless life. You have to keep your eyes open at all times and be wary of everyone around you; not just your fellow homeless people but those who are walking the streets too. Drunken nights out have always been the worst.

“New girl?” an older man asks. His gray hair and matching beard remind me of when I was a child and I’d go to the mall with Mama and meet Santa. “What’s your story?”

I shrug. “Nothin’ much,” I tell him. “Been on the streets for years. Wanted a different vibe so I moved out here after meeting Jay here.”

Jamie is sweet and quiet but very astute, and I know that her years on the streets have hardened her too. She told me a little about her story. Her family perished in a house fire, and she was the only survivor. She was bounced around foster homes until one ass got handsy and tried to take her innocence. Jamie made the decision to run and hasn’t looked back since. I’m not sure how she met Kelvin, but from what I have gathered, they’re close.

The old man nods, seemingly happy with my answer. “Jay is one of the best. We tend to take care of each other on this side of town,” he tells me, and I get the feeling that it’s some sort of threat. “If you’re wanting trouble, head downtown.”

I glance at Jamie and see she’s trying to stifle a smile. “No trouble,” I assure him.

His shoulders slump forward, and he gives me a wan smile. “That’s good, girl, ‘cause I ain’t got a lot of fight left in me.”

I smile at him. “Neither do I,” I sigh. “I lost mine a while back.”

Everything I tried to build, it crumbled. Those I was supposed to protect, I failed. Then there’s Dario. God, I miss him. But leaving him behind was the only option I had. I needed to put some distance between us. The anger I had was too much for me to deal with, and I’d lost the trust he’d built in me. Rebuilding that trust isn’t easy. I don’t trust people, and

with Dario, he put a lot of work into getting past my walls, but he fucked up.

“That, girlie, is okay. As I said, we protect each other here.”

I smile as I take a seat on the thin sleeping bag I have. It’s worn but clean. It belongs to Robert, who’s ex-military and goes on a lot of camping trips.

“You hear the buzz, Eli?” Jamie says as she sits beside me. “The guys are coming back with another shipment. Everyone’s talking about it.”

She’s good. She’s so casual as she speaks, you’d believe she was telling the truth.

Eli nods. “Heard it alright. Ain’t heard anything but. Those assholes are recruiting from the streets too. There’ve been women snatched from their beds, women sold to them, and they’re going to hurt them all.” He shakes his head. “Disgusting. No man should do that. They deserve to die for it. The children...” he trails off, unable to speak.

“What do you mean they’re recruiting from the streets?” I ask. That’s news to us.

“It started with the prostitutes first off. They’d lure them to their cars and that would be the last you’d see of them. Then it was just women in general who lived on the streets. These men aren’t discriminating. They’re taking everyone and getting paid for it.”

Christ, he’s right, they’re not discriminating. They’re taking them all and don’t give a fuck.

“Best keep close together,” Eli tells us. “We’ll keep an eye on you too. No one’s going to take you.”

I stare at the old man. He has the vibe of a grandfather. I don’t want to pry as to what brought him to the streets, but I have a feeling it’s heartbreaking.

“Thank you,” I say softly.

Knowing they’re taking women from the streets makes me think that whatever they have planned, it’s happening here in Missouri, or close to here.

God, Marco... That man is a fucking asshole. The sooner he dies, the better. Killing him would make the world a fucking better place. If I see the asshole again, I’ll do whatever it takes to ensure I’m the only one who leaves that meeting alive.

NINETEEN

DARIO

“Talk to me,” Rocco says as he stands in my kitchen, drinking coffee.

“Fucking Buchanan,” I hiss, beyond pissed that he still hasn’t managed to get his daughter under control.

“What’s he done now?” Rocco asks with a sigh.

The fucker thinks this shit is funny, but it’s far fucking from it. The man and his fucking daughter are driving me crazy, and unless something is done about it, I’m about to lose my mind and end their miserable lives.

“Ah,” Elio says with a grin as he comes into the kitchen. “It seems Francis has taken a shine to Dario and wants his daughter to marry him. He’s pushing her to become the face of the business, which means our brother here has to deal with her pathetic attempts at trying to sleep with him so she can trap him with a baby and then force him to marry her.”

I grit my teeth. The fucking bitch thinks I’m stupid or something. Elio and I overheard her plan last night. She had no idea we could hear her conversation with her friend, Lizbeth, who works for us and came to tell us anyway. But she’s done.

“Who the fuck is this bitch?” Rocco demands, his jaw clenched and his eyes promising death.

“Melanie Buchanan,” I hiss. “This is what happens when you push me to do shit your underboss should be handling. Fuck, your consigliere should be. I get stuck with the crazy ass bitch.”

“They’ve been busy.”

I sigh. “My ass. You were punishing me. This shit has been going on since you took over. Just admit that you didn’t want to deal with the ass, and you wanted to punish me.”

“Not at fucking all,” he snaps. “You were a lazy, cocky bastard when our father was at the helm, Dario. You didn’t deserve the title of captain. You grew into that role, and you’ve become a man the Famiglia trusts and can count on. That’s why you’re dealing with Buchanan.”

I’m calling utter bullshit with that response. “Nice save,” I mutter sarcastically. “Now, tell me we’re going to do something about him. There’s no way the asshole doesn’t know what his daughter is planning.”

I wouldn’t be surprised if he put her up to it. The fucker is getting older and wants to secure his daughter’s life. I get it. But pushing her to marry someone within the Famiglia isn’t the way to go. We don’t marry outsiders, and if we do it’s for a good reason. Buchanan is rich and connected, but marrying Melanie won’t get us those connections. It wouldn’t make the Famiglia bigger or better. They’re deluded if they think they have something to offer us.

Rocco doesn't hide his smirk. "We're going to be paying Buchanan and his daughter a visit. Call him, tell him you want to discuss something with the two of them. The three of us are going to ensure this shit doesn't happen again."

"I'm surprised you waited this long," Elio says. "She orchestrated that entire dinner and called those fucking paparazzi there to snap those pictures. She was hoping it would push Portia away and it did."

I shake my head. "That was me who did that," I sigh. I'm not going to deny that my actions are what pushed her to run, but seeing the photo definitely made her not think twice about it.

"Either way, that bitch has been trying to get you into bed for weeks. Tell me you haven't slept with her," Rocco asks.

"Christ, I'm not desperate," I snarl. "Besides, clingy women are not my thing."

Rocco grins. "Try not to find someone who'll kill you when you sleep. It's impossible when you've pissed them off to get any fucking sleep."

I can't help but laugh. "Oh, bro, did you annoy your wife again?"

He glares at me. "What the fuck do you think?"

"Could it be that you've forgotten something?" I ask, seeing as yesterday was his wedding anniversary and he never once spoke about it.

He raises a brow. "Spit it out," he growls.

“What did you get her for your anniversary?” I ask as I move toward the front door. “I’m driving,” I announce. I can’t deal with either of those two doing it.

“Why the fuck didn’t you remind me?” he says as he stomps out of the house after me. “Christ, Dario, you should have told me.”

“Nope,” I say. “I didn’t marry the crazy lady who’ll burn my cock off if I piss her off. You did. And you should remember, I’m not your office manager.”

“That’s a good idea,” Elio says, snapping his fingers. “You should get one of those, Roc. You’ll be able to remember in future.”

“Or better yet,” I say as I climb into my car. “Put a reminder on your cell for a month before, then two weeks, then a week, then the actual morning.” I shake my head. How the fuck has he managed to be married for two years and not remember the date? I shouldn’t have to tell him how to deal with this shit.

“What the fuck do I do?” he asks.

I glare at him. “I reminded you why you’re in the doghouse, brother. Don’t ask me to get you out of it. You’re on your own.”

He flips me off, and I put the car into drive and pull out of my driveway.

“What are we going to do about the Buchanan’s?” I ask, hoping I can kill the two of them. Keeping them alive benefits no one. Their business isn’t that great. They’re not the only

bastards who have marijuana farms in Missouri. There's more than fifty of them who do, and most of them would work with us for a fraction of the price Buchanan wants.

"Let's see what the bastard has to say for himself and then I'll make a decision," Rocco tells me. "So easy on the trigger, yeah?"

"Seriously?" I sigh. "Wouldn't it be easier for us all to take him and that bitch out?"

"Yes," Elio says from the back seat. "It would. But we don't need the cops on our backs. We've got enough shit going on. The last thing we need is to catch a fucking charge."

It's been over two decades since a Gallo was in prison, and I fucking hope it remains that way. Though I'd happily do the time if it meant getting that crazy bitch off my ass.

"Fuck," I hiss. "So we let them get away with that shit?"

Roc laughs. "No. No one said she had to live. He's got a son who works for him. It'll be better for everyone if he takes over. The bitch can die."

I aim my grin toward the road. As long as she's dying, I don't give a fuck who else goes with her. The father should, but fuck, he'll need to train the son, and we'll go from there. If there's any more shit from them, I'll take them all out. Fuck what the cops do afterward.

We arrive at the house, and I see both Francis and Melanie's cars parked out front. Good, they're both here. It's time to remind these fuckers that the Gallo's aren't people to fuck with, and they've pushed us too far. Especially Melanie

and her plan to trap me. She should have clued in from the get-go. I'm not going to fucking go anywhere near her ass. There's only one woman I want, and I'm determined to make things right and get her back.

We enter the house undetected, fucking useless not having security. The second we enter, Francis' face pales.

"Dario," Francis says, his eyes wide as he glances between Rocco, Elio, and I. "What's the meaning of this?"

I don't speak. No, I let Rocco take the lead. If I were to lead, I'd have that bitch strangled the moment she tried to justify her actions.

"Francis, how stupid do you think I am?"

The old man blinks, confusion setting on his face. "I don't understand, Rocco. What's going on?"

"Why are you putting your daughter in charge of your business?" he asks him.

Francis folds his arms over his chest. "I don't see how that's any of your business."

I sigh. This shit isn't going to get us anywhere. I'd rather just off the lot of them and be done with it.

"Answer the fucking question," Rocco snarls, his lip pulling back as he glares at the old man. "Why?"

"She wanted to take the helm. She's my daughter."

"What about your son? Javier? The man has worked his way up your company. He started working for you at the age of sixteen. Why is he not taking the lead?" Elio questions.

“Melanie wanted it.”

I shake my head. “Bullshit. Lie again, Francis, and I’ll start pulling your teeth out,” I say with a wicked grin. “Now, why did you give that bitch the power?”

“Bitch?” Melanie hisses as she rises to her feet. “You do not call me a bitch,” she cries as she rushes toward me.

Now, I’m not one to raise my hand and hit a woman unless said woman is trying to kill me, but this bitch has pushed me to my fucking limit. I lift my hand and viciously backhand the cunt to the floor. She releases a horrified whimper and hits the floor with a thud.

“Now wait a damn minute,” Francis shouts as he moves toward his daughter. “You can’t hit a woman.”

“Wrong,” Rocco snarls. “He can do anything he damn well pleases when the bitch is trying to get him to sleep with her, just so she can trap him with a baby.”

Francis steps backward, his eyes wide as his mouth opens and closes. The man looks like a fucking damn fish. “What?”

Oh, he’s a shitty actor. “Whose idea was it?” I demand. “Answer me,” I yell as I step toward the bitch who’s lying on the floor, whimpering like a damn fool.

“Mine,” she cries, bringing her knees to her chest and curling into the fetal position. “I thought you were playing hard to get. Everyone knows that the Gallo men don’t settle down unless it’s out of obligation.”

My anger rises through me. Christ, this bitch. She’s fucking ballsy.

“You thought this shit was a good idea?” Rocco asks as he steps into Francis’ space and goes face to face with him. “Answer me,” he says thickly, his voice not raised, his body tight. He’s about ready to kill him, and I’m hoping Francis does something that’ll have Roc reaching for his knife or gun.

“She was convinced that she was in love with him and vice versa. Do you have children, Rocco?”

“What’s that got to do with anything?” my brother snarls. “If I did, I’d ensure that they didn’t try to destroy someone’s life because they’re fucking crazy. Now, Francis, you’ve fucked up and you’ve done it majorly. Right now, I’m close to ending you and your daughter. So, you have a choice. You either have your son take over the business, and the Gallo’s will still do business with you, or you let this bitch continue to ruin everything you’ve worked your ass off for.”

He glances at his daughter, who’s crying softly on the floor. She knows her days are limited.

“Let me rephrase,” Rocco says with a chuckle. “Pick your life or your death. It’s that simple.”

“She’s my daughter,” he whispers, his eyes downcast, his shoulders slumped forward. He’s utterly defeated. “Am I supposed to let her die?”

I nod. “Yes, that’s exactly what you do. She’s dying today whether or not you want her to. This is her own doing. Had she not been a crazy fucking bitch who wanted to trap me by getting pregnant, then this wouldn’t have happened. Now, do you keep your business and let your son take the reins or do you die and let your business crumble to the ground?”

He looks down at his daughter, and his lips quiver. There are tears in his eyes. “You lied to me, Melanie. You could have ruined this family with your antics.”

Melanie gets to her feet, her tears streaming down her face, disbelief clear in her eyes. “No, Dad, you can’t let them do this. You can’t.”

Francis turns his back on her. “Rocco, I’ll have Javier call you in the morning. I know I don’t have any right, but I beg of you, please, don’t make her suffer in death,” he says, and I can hear the tears in his voice.

Christ, the man is crying. If my child went to destroy everything I’ve worked for, I certainly wouldn’t be shedding a fucking tear.

“It will be a quick death,” Rocco promises him.

Elio takes Melanie by the arm, drags her from the house, and throws her into the trunk of my car. I’m not sure what Rocco has planned but it certainly doesn’t sound like my type of vengeance. Since when did we promise a quick death for anyone?

“Please tell me we’re going to have some fun?” Elio asks once I start driving, and I hear the confusion in his voice. We don’t do this shit. We don’t allow anyone to have an easy death. We dish out whatever punishment fits the crime.

“She’s going into the Chicago River with a bullet between her eyes.”

I blink twice, trying to ease the anger I feel. “Why?”

“The man’s losing his daughter. We’re close to having a fucking war with the Russians, and you think we’re going to play with the dumb bitch?” he hisses. “Christ, Dario. Grow the fuck up.”

“Tell me, Rocco, who’s been in your ear this time? Hmm? Normally, you’d be all for getting rid of the complication, so what’s stopping you this time?”

He glares at me. “Not my wife, if that’s what you’re thinking. Christ, I’m not wrapped around her finger.”

I look in the rearview mirror and see Elio raise a brow. Yeah, he’s full of shit.

“Do we have time for this shit?” Rocco asks. “I’m not asking for permission. I’m telling you that she gets a bullet between her eyes and that’s it. I don’t give a fuck which one of you does it. Someone will.”

The rest of the drive is silent as I take us to the most secluded part of the city where the river runs through. I’m wondering what Elio did to have that crazy bitch be quiet for the entire journey. Hell, I’m hoping he duct-taped her mouth and cut the air supply from her.

“Who’s doing the deed?” Rocco asks in a bored tone. The fucker’s pushing it.

“I am,” I say as I park the car. “The sooner this shit is done, the better.”

Tomorrow, Javier had better call Rocco, and we can start rebuilding the business deal we had in place before the crazy

bitch managed to somehow get her dad to hand the business over to her.

Elio drags Melanie from the car, and she's a whimpering mess. "Please," she pleads. "I'm so sorry. I promise I won't do it again."

I roll my eyes. She truly is deluded. Did she really believe that I'd let her go because she promised not to do it again? Fuck no.

Elio has her drop to her knees, and she stares up at me with big, wet eyes, pleading with me. It doesn't affect me. It never will.

I raise my gun and don't hesitate in pulling the trigger. There's a little kickback but nothing major, and with the silencer on, there's hardly any noise. Melanie crumples to the floor, her eyes still wide and staring at me, but she's dead. The bullet that went through the center of her head killed her.

"Elio, dump her into the river, then let's get the fuck out of here," Rocco instructs.

I chuckle as Elio hauls bricks over to her body. Where the fuck he managed to find them is beyond me. But he ties them to her ankles, carries her to the bridge, and unceremoniously throws her over the side of it. Her body crashes into the water with a loud splash, and I watch as she sinks beneath the surface.

She won't be found until someone dredges the river, and hopefully by then, she'll have been eaten by the wildlife.

I reach for the bullet that went through Melanie's head and pocket it. I'm not leaving any evidence around. I grin when I walk back to my car and see a stack of bricks to the side of the bridge. Someone obviously came here to drop a body and prepared for the future.

I jump into the car and look in the rear-view mirror and see Elio grinning. He's done this more than a few times, so I wouldn't be surprised if the bricks were his.

"Where to now?" Elio asks. "What's the plan?"

I shake my head. I have no plan. I'm just glad that bitch is off my back. "Don't care, but I do think you should move your bricks. I would hate for the cops to discover your fingerprints on them," I say dryly.

He chuckles. "Not mine. Andrea's. He fucking forgot them once and had to go and get them, then came back with more than anyone could need. But thankfully, he did, especially when we don't know what we're doing beforehand."

Isn't that the truth. I knew we'd kill the bitch. I had just assumed she would suffer. Not have a bullet sink into her and that be it.

"She's dead. Stop your bitching. I don't care what you two assholes do; I'm going home to my wife."

I roll my eyes. He's the asshole. Not me. "Don't worry, Roc, I'll make sure you're home before your curfew."

Elio chuckles. "Otherwise, Jade's going to whip your ass, right?"

“That’s Hayden,” Rocco growls. “Not me. Now shut the fuck up. Elio, you have your own damn wife. Worry about her, not mine. And as for you, Dario, maybe fix your own love life before commenting on mine,” he snarls as he glares at me.

“Someone hit a nerve. It’s the curfew, isn’t it?” Elio chuckles. “Or is it that she’ll be pissed she wasn’t here to do the killing herself?”

I laugh. “That’s it. Your wife is bloodthirsty, and she’s going to be pissed she wasn’t here for it.” I chuckle harder. “You’re so screwed,” I tell him.

He flips me off, but I see him fighting his smile. I’m happy for him. He and Jade are well suited, and he loves her psychotic side. I guess it’s only fair because he has one too.

“You good?” Elio asks as he slides into the passenger’s seat once I’ve dropped Rocco off at home. Elio’s car is at my house.

“Fine, why?”

I can feel the heat of his stare on my skin. “I know Melanie is the first woman you’ve killed since Angela.”

I swallow hard, hating that the memories hit me at the mere mention of her name.

“Don’t let the past consume you, Dario. You did what you had to do back then, and you ensured that Melanie couldn’t destroy this family. Remember that.”

It’s a fucking lot easier said than done.

“Angela and Gio,” he begins. “It was fucking awful.”

I laugh. “That’s putting it mildly.” It was fucking horrendous. What I did to her... Christ.

“But you’ve grown from it. You’ve moved on. Don’t let it swallow you.”

No one knows the true extent of what happened that night. I’ve never told anyone, and I don’t plan on doing so. I don’t have the courage to admit just how fucking depraved I truly am.

“Remember what I said, Dario,” Elio says as I park the car in my drive. “Don’t let it take hold of you again.” He climbs out of the car, and I watch him leave.

Does he not know that it’s never let go of me? It never will.

TWENTY
DARIO

I'm sitting in the car, staring out at the darkness. The moment Elio left my house, I couldn't move from the car. I needed to be here at the cemetery. Yet, the moment I arrived I can't bring myself to get out.

I reach for my cell phone and hit dial on a number I haven't called in a while.

It rings for a time, but eventually, she answers. "I was wondering how long it would take you to call. But then again, you've been busy with that leggy blonde."

Christ, it's so fucking good to hear her voice. It's been so fucking long. I've missed her.

"Funny, Portia," I mutter dryly. "She was taking over her father's business and pushing to have more meetings with me to grow the farms they have. The farms we use for our product."

She's silent, and I take that as my cue to continue. "I never slept with her. Not fucking once. The woman tried—oh fuck, she tried—but I wouldn't touch her. I haven't been with anyone since I kissed you at the wedding."

“Why are you telling me this?” Portia asks, and I can hear the hurt in her voice.

I fucking hate that I’ve caused this. That I’m the reason she’s sad.

“Because no matter what, you deserve the truth. You’re the only woman I want and that’s never going to change.”

“You hurt my best friend—my sister. How do we move forward?”

“I don’t know, but I’m hoping we can.”

She releases a heavy sigh. “Is there even a point? I mean, your life is in Chicago and mine isn’t.”

“Tell me you don’t want me, Portia, and I’ll leave you be.”

Her silence is more than enough answer for me.

“Tell that asshole, Kelvin, to keep his fucking hands to himself.”

Her laughter is thick and is a direct hit to my cock. “Fuck off, Dario,” she says, and ends the call.

I stare into the darkness and sigh. At least there is a chance for me. Every day brings my move to Missouri closer. Within the next three months, I’ll be there full time. Right now, it’s a pain in the ass to go back and forth, but it has to be done. My men have assimilated into the cities well and we’re growing each day. It’s already a success, with us bringing in the money from our drug trade. We’ve taken the streets of Missouri and we’re only going to get bigger.

I throw my cell onto the dashboard and open my car door. It's time to face this. I walk through the gates, my feet taking me on the well-worn path. I know where I'm going. Whenever the memories get too much, I always end up back here.

I reach the grave and stand over it. The guilt eats me alive every day. It's always going to. But then I think back, and I know I'd do it again if the same circumstances played out. I couldn't control it then, and I don't think I'd be able to control it if it happened now.

I read the epitaph as I push my hands into my pockets.

**In loving memory of Gio and Angela Conetti,
and their son, Angelo, who was born sleeping.**

I grit my teeth as I read the inscription on the headstone over and over again. I'm the reason all three of them are dead. I killed them.

I glance down at the flowers, surprised someone has been to their grave. They had no family. They had no one. Yet someone's been visiting.

I jangle the loose change I have in my pocket as I continue to stare at the grave. The guilt isn't for killing a woman. It's not even for killing the baby. It's the manner in which I did it. I was a savage, something I hadn't realized I had in me until I unleashed it.

I shake my head, not wanting to remember the anger and carnage from that day.

I turn on my heel and move away from the grave. Not even twenty steps away lie my parents. I glare at the flowers and

know that they're from Nonna. She's the only one with love left in her heart for them. My father more than my mother. Nonna is still reeling from the death of her only son, and she's trying to hide it. None of Aldo's kids care enough to look after the grave. Hell, we'd have preferred if they'd been cremated and then their ashes dumped into the trash, where they belong. But Nonna wanted them buried. Nonna wanted them to have a good funeral.

I spit on their grave, just as I do every time I walk past it, and carry on moving. If I could, I would kill them both all over again. I should have killed my father a fucking long time before he took it into his own hands. I should have ended his miserable life and done the same to my mom. But they're dead now and can no longer harm Adelina.

I climb into my car and turn the engine on. This will be the last time I visit the graves. I won't be coming back.

“Dario, what’s wrong?” Gio asks as I stand on his doorstep, his brows knitted together as he opens the door wide for me. “What brings you by?”

“Gio,” I say with a sigh as I step into the house. “You already know the answer to that,” I tell him. This stupid game of pretend isn’t helping anyone. “You’re the reason the Famiglia has lost money. What did you do with it?”

Over six million dollars have gone missing, and the only people who had access to that much cash was my father, his

consigliere, and Gio. After doing some digging, it was clear that Gio was the one who was siphoning funds from the Famiglia and sending them to an offshore account, one that then sent money to his wife's account.

The door closes behind me, and I hear his footsteps sound as he follows me into the kitchen, where his heavily pregnant wife, Angela, is standing at the kitchen island. She greets me with a blinding smile. "Dario, to what do I owe the pleasure? It's been a while. How are you?"

"Good. Not long left now until the little one's here," I say, making idle chit-chat, something I fucking hate, but it's required sometimes.

She beams at me, rubbing her hand over her stomach. "Yeah, he's due in ten days," she says with such happiness. "We're going to call him Angelo. It's a mixture of both our names. We couldn't settle on one we liked so we've agreed on Angelo."

I nod. "It's a good name," I say.

"Dario," Gio says from behind me. "Please, I don't want any trouble. I'll repay the money. I promise I will."

"Funny," I mutter dryly. "You're missing over half a million dollars from the money you stole. Now, I can only hazard a guess that you've gone all out for your son's arrival, that you wanted to ensure your wife had the very best care for when she gave birth to your son."

He nods, looking relieved. "Yes, I did. I'm sorry. I promise I'll pay it all back, every last cent, and then some."

“What’s going on?” Angela asks, sounding a hell of a lot like she’s about to go into a fucking meltdown. “Gio, what did you do?”

“Gio here has stolen six million from the Famiglia,” I inform her, and watch as the fucker closes his eyes and sighs.

“You didn’t,” she hisses. “Oh, Gio... Why?”

“I needed the money. I needed to pay for the nursery. I needed money for the hospital bill,” the coward says, keeping his eyes gazing at the floor.

“Why?” she shrieks at him. “Why did you need to steal? Hmm? We’ve had money. We’ve been saving.”

He shakes his head. “I’m in debt. I lost a few bets.”

“You gambled our money away?” she hisses at him. “What the hell, Gio? How could you do this to us?”

I’m not listening to these two have a domestic. It’s not what I’m here for.

“Gio,” I say, cutting through Angela’s shrill voice. “How long have you been a part of the Famiglia?”

“Almost ten years,” he responds.

“What happens to those who betray the Famiglia?” I ask.

“They pay for their sins. But I promise you, Dario, I’ll make this right. I’ll repay every dime I took, and I’ll pay interest.”

“Do you think you’ll be trusted?” I ask, laughing bitterly. “The money you took has already been transferred from your wife’s account back to where it came from, and the remainder

of it...” I lift my shoulders and shrug. “It’s really a toss-up. Do we make you pay it back or do we lose half a million dollars and be rid of the traitor in our ranks?”

He shakes his head. “No, please,” he pleads, his eyes wide, his hands shaky as he raises them to a praying position. “Please, Dario, please don’t do this. I have a wife and a child on the way. They need me.”

I tut. “Come on, Gio, you know better than that. You’re aware of what happens to those who betray us. You’ve dished out the punishment enough to know what happens.”

His face pales. “Please, Dario, don’t. Not my wife and child. Please. They’ve got nothing to do with this. They’re innocent.”

“Tell me something, Gio. Had you been heading this up, and you uncovered that the money was in the wife’s account, what would you do?” I ask, but the question is rhetorical. No matter what he says, they’re all fucking dying. I can’t and won’t have a witness, someone who’ll have my ass in jail. No. Besides, I don’t believe Angela is as innocent as these two make out. Fuck that. I have a feeling that Angela knows exactly what her husband has been up to. There’s no way he did this alone. He’s not a fucking mastermind. No, he’s working with someone, and it’s her.

“Dario,” Angela weeps. “Please.”

“Sit down,” I sigh, trying to work out what to do. How do I go about killing these fuckers?

Both Gio and Angela take a seat. I decided that tying them to their chairs would be the best. It doesn't take me long, and both continue to plead with me to leave them alone. Not fucking happening. They have some gall to fucking ask.

"Gio, you stole from the Famiglia. You should have known that when we uncovered your treachery, you wouldn't live to see another sunrise."

He nods tightly. "I know, but I didn't have any other choice."

Not fucking good enough. I reach for my knife and move toward Angela. She starts to whimper, moving against the bindings that hold her to the chair. "No," she cries. "Don't hurt me. I'm pregnant."

I stare blankly at her. "Not my problem," I snarl, a red haze of anger forming over me.

I never begged when my father was teaching me a lesson. I never cried, and I never asked for forgiveness. What gives these two fuckers the right to ask me?

I slice my knife across her collarbone, pushing the blade deep into her flesh. Blood trickles along the cut, dripping like her sins from her body.

"Dario, no," Gio screams. "Not Angela. Not the baby. Please, I beg you, do not take them from me."

I can't help the laughter that slips from my lips. "You should have thought about this before you stole from my father, from the Famiglia. You lost the right to dictate what the fuck I do the moment you siphoned money from our account."

I cut her loose-fitting tank top from her body and continue to slice along her skin, every cut to her flesh adding to the need for more. I've killed before, many times, but I've never tortured someone to death. Today, I not only get to do it to Angela, but also Gio. The man deserves everything he gets. He values his wife above all, and for that, he'll sit and watch as his wife dies before his eyes. His last thought will be that he's the reason for her suffering.

At least he'll follow her to the grave.

My knife cuts through her skin like butter. I ignore her screams, her pleads for me to stop, to not harm her. They all fall on deaf ears. There's no point in pleading. There's absolutely no reason for her to be begging for her life. There's no one here who will, or can, help her.

My knife slides deeper into her chest, just above her breast, and the shrill scream that rents the air sets the hair on my arms to stand up.

I slice her chest, then her arms, then her legs. The red haze of anger that has taken over me, darkens. It's as though I scent the blood in the air and I'm going for the kill. Her screams continue to fill the room, and the sound is like music. It goes on for hours. Dusk has settled and the room has darkened.

"Please," she whimpers, her body and voice tired. It's been a hellish few hours for her, but she's awake. She's breathing, but it's shallow. "He's not moving," she cries. "My baby, he's not moving. Something's wrong," she cries as she doubles over, the bindings making it impossible for her to do it properly. "Dario, please."

I turn to Gio. The man who once stood proudly as a Famiglia man is reduced to tears as he witnesses what I've done to his wife. "Please, Dario, save my boy."

I untie Angela. Her body is heavy due to her being tired, but I manage to lie her on the floor. The second I do, she points to a spot under her stomach. It's a direction as to where to cut. This woman thinks that I care what happens to her, Gio, or the baby? She's sorely mistaken. I couldn't give a fuck if they live or die. It's not my job to.

I slice along the point she indicated to. Seven different layers of fucking skin to cut through. She's silent as I do this, unmoving, and I know she's already dead. There was never a chance she would survive this. No fucking way. I slice through a fucking lot of skin, until I see the baby's head. It's easy for me to pull him out once I'm through the multiple layers of skin, fat, and muscle.

The baby isn't crying, nor is he moving. He's dead. No doubt he has been dead for a while, considering I was torturing his mother.

I get to my feet, the baby in my hands, along with my knife. I pass the baby to Gio, who's still bound to the chair with rope tied around his chest. His face has gone a deathly gray color. He sobs as he holds his baby boy in his arms. "Oh God," he cries.

"To think," I murmur as I come to stand behind him, "this wouldn't have happened had you not stolen from us."

I slice my knife along his throat. It comes as easy as breathing. Within seconds, he's dead. They all are.

I step away and drop the knife, my chest heaving as the red haze suddenly clears from my vision. I stare at the massacre in front of me and realize just how fucked up it is. Blood coats the floor, walls, and ceiling. I was careless as I carved Angela up. There's no way in hell the baby would have survived what I was doing to its mother. No fucking way.

I glance down at my hands. They're covered in the metallic coating of Angela and Gio's blood.

Christ... This looks like something out of a horror movie. It's blood and gore. Angela's lying on the floor, and her insides can be seen from where I've cut her open.

I swallow hard and move to the sink, needing to clean the blood off my hands. I don't give a fuck about what's on my clothes; they'll be burned before morning. Right now, I need to clean my hands, and then I need to get the fuck out of here.

TWENTY-ONE
PORTIA
SIX MONTHS LATER

The wind whips around me as I exit my apartment building. Once again, the hairs on the back of my neck stand up and I get the sense that someone's watching me. It's been this way for the past three months, and yet whenever I look, there's no one there. Either I'm going crazy or someone's doing a good job of watching me and concealing themselves. That feeling I feel, it reminds me of whenever I'd be around Dario.

I glance around, and as always, there's no one there. I strain my gaze around the parking lot, checking all the vehicles and coming up with nothing. I can't find anyone watching me.

I release a sigh and continue toward my car. My heart's heavy as I think back to six weeks ago. I spent the weekend in Bora Bora for Teagan and Elio's second wedding. For this one, my best friend got the choice to marry the man she loves, and it was the happiest I've ever seen her. She was smiling widely and just radiating happiness. Something I hadn't realized was missing from her before.

Of course, being in Bora Bora meant that I would be around Dario. It was hard to see him, but I couldn't deny how

fucking amazing he looked. Being so close to him was hard, and my resolve vanished. The next thing I knew, he was kissing me, and we spent an amazing night together. Dario's the only man I want. He's the only man I have ever wanted. But he knows how to infuriate me better than anyone else in this world. While I was basking in the afterglow of our loving making, he got all growly and demanded that I stay away from Kelvin.

I shake my head, pushing the thoughts of the asshole out of my mind. I need to focus on what needs to happen next. For six months, we've been trying to track Marco and his men, and we've come up empty. Women have been disappearing a lot more frequently than they had been, which means he's got enough buyers to keep him in business. It's hard to find out who he's working with. No one knows for definite, and it's just angering everyone involved in trying to bring the ring down.

My mind is on the case as I drive to the office. Jamie and I have been taking it in turns to go undercover on the streets. It's not uncommon for homeless people to drift from place to place, coming back every so often, and that's what Jamie and I have been doing. Every three weeks, we'll switch places and then do a three-week-long stint on the streets while the other person washes up, returns to the employment world, has a warm roof over their heads, and a place to bathe.

"There you are," Kelvin snarls as I enter the office.

I blink, glance at the clock on the wall, then down to my cell. "Yeah, and good morning to you too," I reply, my anger

raging through me. I hate it when he speaks like this to people. He gets so caught up with what he's doing that he turns into a huge asshole.

He runs a hand through his hair. "Shit, I'm sorry, Portia. I've had a lot on my mind."

I'm not sure what's going on with him, but I have a feeling it has to do with a woman, and she's really getting to him. He needs to sort it out and focus on this job. We can't afford to have anything go wrong. If I'm right, then Marco has already managed to get his first shipment through and he's now taking women from the streets to sell them in his next one. I hope I'm wrong, I really fucking do, but I can't see them sitting on a shipment for six months. They'd lose profits, and the women wouldn't be pliant enough to do as they wanted.

"Has Jamie checked in yet?" I ask as I take a seat at my desk. Every morning, Jamie and I are to check in when we're on the streets. It's to ensure that we're safe, and that if anything has happened, the rest of the team can bring help as soon as possible. It's as though everyone's on pins and needles as we wait for the call to come through. Everyone's holding their breath until it does.

"Not yet. It's still early. Give it time. Don't borrow trouble," he tells me, and I nod. He's right. Thinking that something's wrong means it will make bad things happen. It's always best to think positive, especially when Jamie's alone and doesn't have anyone to save her if it goes sideways.

"Any word on your friend?" I ask. Kelvin has a side to his business that he doesn't share with many people, and he has a

lot of contacts, even more than anyone realizes. And he's calling them in now.

“Stephen Maguire and Maverick O'Hara will be arriving within the next twenty-four hours,” he tells me.

I blink. Are those names supposed to mean anything to me? “And they would be?”

His lips twitch. “The two meanest sons of bitches on the other side of the Atlantic. They're good at uncovering information. Not to mention, both aren't known to Marco and his men, which gives us the upper hand.”

I nod. “Okay, so what do these men do?”

His grin is a little on the feral side. “Well, from what I've gathered, the men are prolific in making sure their prey's bodies are never found. They're the best men to ensure that when someone dies, there's never an investigation into their disappearance as there's never any evidence. But more than that, Stephen and Maverick have a lot of connections in Europe, and we all know that if Marco's selling women and girls, then he's going to be trying to trade them with Eastern Europe, as that's one of the biggest traders in women.”

Seems as though Kelvin has friends in high fucking places. I nod. “That's good. Hopefully, we can hit the ground running and have them dig deeper into Marco and what he plans on doing.”

He nods. “Yes. They've been digging already. The moment we set to work on this, I had them doing some work in their

off time, and they've managed to find something. What, I don't know, but we'll find out when they arrive."

I fucking hope that it's when and where this shit is going to go down. I'm not sure we'll be able to wait any longer, especially as the rate of women disappearing is growing by the day.

"What do you need from me?" I ask, and he sighs. "Oh God, what?"

"Stephen and Maverick have asked for a dossier on Marco. They want everything we can get on him. I'm sorry, Portia, you're the person who knows him best. I need you on it."

I take a steady breath. "I'll do it," I assure him. "I'll have it done by the end of the day." I know how important it is. I'm able to push aside my fears and tribulations and do what's needed.

"Thank you," he says softly. "If you need help, Robert's on hand."

I grin. "So, how do you know Stephen and Maverick? Where are they coming from?"

He runs his hand through his hair again. He does it a lot when he's agitated. "I met them when I lived in the UK. Stephen and Maverick live in Ireland. They work for a gang. Their boss is one of the biggest in Europe and has a lot of connections. Stephen isn't exactly a friendly guy. In fact, he rarely speaks to those he doesn't know."

"Ah, so like most of the men you employ," I quip, and he smiles.

“I’ve got to go. I’ve got a lot to get sorted before they arrive.” He sounds harried, and it leaves me wondering just how well he knows the two men who are flying over from Ireland.

I nod. “I’ve got to get the dossier ready. Let me know when Jamie checks in,” I ask, knowing it’ll be on my mind until she does.

I glance at the clock and see it’s almost eight in the morning. She usually checks in around nine, but sometimes before that. I’m going to be a wreck until I hear that she’s okay.

Every thirty minutes, I’m checking my cell for a message telling me Jamie’s okay, but I get nothing. I’m hoping it’s just Robert forgetting to let me know, so I try to push it from my mind.

I glance at the clock for what feels like the hundredth time today and see it’s three o’clock in the afternoon, and there’s not been a word about Jamie checking in. I tap my pen against the file I’ve created. I have everything that I remember about Marco and his son, along with the men he has. I’ve inputted the conversation I overheard that last night I was in the house, and I’ve listed everything I’ve learned since being on the streets. It’s not a lot, but it’s a hell of a lot more than what we had.

I push to my feet, lifting the dossier in my hand and marching out of the office. I need to know if Jamie has checked in.

“Robert,” I call out. He’s the only one in the office today. He’s working on trying to locate Marco’s cell and pinpoint his location.

“Portia,” he greets as he lifts his head to face me. “Is that the dossier?”

I nod as I hand it to him. “Everything I know and remember is in here.” I pause as I glance around his office. “Has Jamie checked in yet?” I ask.

His brow furrows together. “Now that you mention it, no, she hasn’t,” he says, his words slow and precise. “Portia—”

I shake my head and cut him off. “I’m heading to the streets. You call Kelvin and let him know she hasn’t made contact. We need to find her, Robert.” I turn on my heel and rush back to my office, flipping the lock and stripping out of my office clothes. It’s time to dress up as though I belong on the streets.

It usually takes me around two hours to perfect the look, but right now, I don’t have those hours to waste. I need to be on the streets and searching for Jamie as soon as possible.

“Portia,” Robert says as I exit my office. He’s shifting from foot to foot. “Be careful,” he tells me. “Kelvin’s not happy. He doesn’t want you on the street alone.”

“I need to be,” I say with a sigh. “No one else has made a connection with the people who live on the streets other than me. I’m the only one who can do this. For Jamie’s sake.”

He nods. “I know,” he says quietly. “It’s shit, but you’re our only hope. Find her, Portia.”

I nod and make my way out of the building. I take a steadying breath. This isn't going to be a quick search. This is going to take a long time. It could take days for me to find her if she's not in her usual spot.

“Well, lookie who's back. You've not been gone long this time, new girl,” Eli greets with an affectionate smile.

I shrug. “I didn't feel like drifting far this time. It's hard to know what to do these days, what with all the women disappearing. None of them to be seen again.”

He nods. “Tell me about it,” he growls. “I'm sick of it. There's nothing being done by the fucking cops. We don't matter to them. We're not important enough for them to take notice. What's another dozen homeless women and girls going missing to them? It means nothing.”

My blood runs cold. That means they've been reported, and no one has looked into it. Fuck.

“What do you mean?” I ask, playing stupid.

“That Teddy guy,” he says, nodding to the solemn guy who's sitting on the ground, his back against the wall. He looks downcast, and he's lost a lot of weight since I first met him. Back then, he had a woman, one I haven't seen since the first night I met him.

“What about him?”

“His girl, Pia, she’s one of the women who have been taken from the streets. She’s been missing almost two months now, girlie. Two months. Teddy went to the police, and nothing.” He shakes his head. “Not a word about it. One of the cops even joked about her having overdosed in a crack den.”

Fucking bastard. “How was she taken?”

He turns his head. “Some women have only one way to survive on these streets, girlie, and not one of us will judge them for it. They do what they need to do in order to survive.”

I hold my hand up. “I know,” I say softly. “I’ve come close a few times,” I tell him honestly. As much as it pains me to say it, it’s the truth. When I first hit the streets as a teenager, I learned pretty quickly that the best way to get food and money to stay alive was to sleep with guys. Become a prostitute. I would have done it if I hadn’t met Nell, so I won’t ever judge anyone who’s had to turn tricks to survive.

“They pretended they wanted her for a good time. No one has seen her since.”

Fuck. It makes sense now. They’re going after the women who are desperate.

“Since then, Teddy has been at the police station every day. He’s determined to find someone to listen to him. He’s got information on the make and model of the car that took her.”

Christ... Teddy could have some vital information that we need. I’ll be sure to let Kelvin and Robert know that Teddy’s the man they need to speak with.

“Have you seen Jay lately? It seems that I keep missing her whenever I’m in the area.”

His face darkens. “I warned that girl,” he says thickly, his voice breaking as he does. “I warned her not to go snooping. I tell you girlies that you need to be careful, that you need to stay near me. I can protect you. But she wouldn’t listen. She thought she’d be okay.”

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up. “Eli, what happened to Jamie?”

Tears fill his eyes. “Took her right in front of me. It happened in the dead of the night. They came for her.”

“Who did?” I ask, my heart racing, my hands sweaty. Who the fuck has Jamie?

“The men who have been stealing all the women. They knew that Jay had been asking questions. Questions that would get her into trouble. I warned her, girlie. I warned her no good would come from those pesky questions, but she wouldn’t listen, so they took her.”

“Last night?” I ask, horrified.

He nods, the tears he had in his eyes slowly tumbling down his cheeks. “They took her in the dead of the night. We’re never going to see her again, are we?”

I swallow back the bile. Fucking Marco, that bastard.

“I’m going to find her,” I vow.

He shakes his head. “Listen to me, girl. Don’t go looking for her. Save yourself, keep to the streets, and use your

knowledge of knowing what people to trust. You've led yourself well thus far. Don't do something stupid. Save yourself, girl."

"Why do you sound as though you've given up hope?"

"I watched those men take her. I watched how easily they overpowered her. There's no way she can get out of it."

I bury my head in my hands. God, what on earth is she going through right now? We should have had people watching her, eyes on her at all times. She should never have been alone.

"Go," he tells me. "Run, girl. Get the hell out of here. Make sure those animals don't come for you. I beg of you. You need to leave."

Fuck. I get to my feet, hating that I have to leave, but knowing I need to go back to the office and raise the alarm. "I'll be back," I promise him.

He nods. "Not until this has settled down and those fuckers have stopped stealing women like it's a normal thing. We've lost two of our women already, Portia. We're not going to lose anyone else. Go back to Indiana. You'll be safe there."

That may all be well and true, but my work is here. I need to be here. Had I stayed all those years ago instead of running away, I could have put a stop to this. I would have a lot more information to help us find out where they could have Jamie right now.

"Go," he urges me once again. "Go and don't look back."

I don't wait to be told again. I push my feet hard and run away from him, my feet pounding the sidewalk as I push myself harder than ever.

We need to find Jamie.

TWENTY-TWO

DARIO

“We need to talk,” Kelvin says as he steps into my office. I raise a brow and stare at him. It’s been months since I saw him last. Back then, he was wearing a smirk as he put his arm around Portia and pulled her away from me. He thinks he’s slick, that he’s pushing me into claiming her. But he doesn’t know everything like he thinks he does.

“Don’t know what we could possibly have to discuss,” I reply in a bored tone as I turn back to my computer and continue doing the ordering for my club. It’s opening night in less than six weeks, and I need to ensure that I have everything ready.

“Portia,” he says.

It’s the one word that would make me drop everything and focus on him.

“What about her?” I ask, not in the mood for pretenses. He knows she’s mine. That’s why he’s here. He’s got something to tell me, so he’d better spit it the fuck out.

“I know you’re the one who’s been watching her. If it’s not you, it’s one of your men. They’re good, making sure they stay hidden and away from the light so she never sees them.”

I grit my teeth. Is he trying to reprimand me for protecting her? “I’m doing what needs to be done, especially seeing as the job she has somehow managed to put her back on the street, a place she’s not familiar with. She doesn’t know the lay of the land.”

The day I saw her sleeping on the street here in Jefferson City, anger whipped through me. I thought she had lied and ran, so I stayed hidden, knowing she wouldn’t be happy if I took her. I’ve been watching over her, careful to make sure she doesn’t see me, and that’s how I uncovered that she is in fact working for Kelvin, and whatever he’s got her doing, it’s pushed her to the streets every so often.

“Her stepfather is stealing women from the streets. He’s involved in a huge trafficking ring. We’re trying to shut him down, but he’s fucking good, Dario, better than I could have ever expected. It’s taken me six months to get to this point, and right now, we’re no closer to finding him than we were when we started.”

“What?” I hiss. What the fuck is he talking about?

His stare is blank as he watches me. “You haven’t got a fucking notion of what I’m talking about, do you?”

I shake my head. “No, I don’t. Elaborate,” I demand.

He sighs. “I’m not going into Portia’s past, Dario, but I can tell you that Marco Scadiffi has been part of a trafficking ring for years. It has grown over the past few years and is getting bigger as each month passes. We know he’s stealing women off the streets.”

I rise to my feet and push away from my desk. “You mean to tell me,” I snarl as I move toward him, “that you sent Portia out onto the street to uncover information on her stepfather—the man who killed her father—knowing he was kidnapping women from the streets?”

He doesn’t say anything, just keeps his gaze firmly on me.

“You put her in fucking danger,” I snarl. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

He runs his hand through his hair. “I get that you’re angry, Dario. I would be too if the roles were reversed. But Portia is a grown woman and capable of making her own decisions. She wanted to be a part of what we’re doing. She wants to do this.”

I don’t pull my gaze from him. “Was this before or after you told her that Marco was involved?” I ask, wondering just how much information was held back from her when he offered the job. There’s no way Portia hasn’t got trauma from what Marco did to her father. Hell, no one knows what happened once her father died, but her mom and her were not seen again—until Portia turned up in Indiana, when Elio and I went looking for Teagan.

He slides his gaze toward the door.

“Look, you’ve got more contacts than I thought you’d get here in Missouri. I’m asking you, Dario, come on board and stop this fucking animal.”

“I’ll let you know once I’ve spoken to Portia,” I grunt. “I find out that you’ve put her in more danger than she should be, and we’re going to have a fucking problem.”

He gives me a terse nod. “Let’s get going.” He flashes me a grin. “She’s going to fucking love seeing you,” he marvels. “You’ve sure pissed her off. What did you say to her when you were in Bora Bora? She came back angrier than I could have imagined.”

I grit my teeth and reach for my cell and keys. He’s such a fucking sneaky bastard. Trying to uncover information just to rub it in.

“Why are you so fucking close to my woman?” I ask as we exit my office. The moment I descend the stairs, Beppe’s there, waiting for me.

“Your *woman*,” he says sarcastically, “is her own woman, Dario. She’s a friend, one I’ll do anything to protect. That’s all she is.”

I raise a brow. “Just a friend?”

That snarky as fuck grin on his face just angers me even more.

“Yes, she’s just a friend,” he says, but there’s a weird tone to his voice.

Is he lying?

“Beppe, you’re with me. Have Leo finish the ordering. Call him from the car,” I instruct.

He doesn’t miss a step as he nods and turns on his heel. “On it, boss.”

“I’ll meet you at the office,” I tell Kelvin. “Who else are you bringing in on this?”

“As many as we can. I have two men flying over from Ireland. The Eraser and the Cleaner are coming.”

I chuckle. “You’ve got some connections there, Kelvin.”

The Eraser and the Cleaner are from the Houlihan Gang, from Dublin, Ireland. They’re both crazy fuckers, and they’re part of the Gallagher family in some weird-ass way. The moment those two step off the plane, I wouldn’t be surprised if the Gallagher’s descend on Missouri, demanding to know what’s going on.

“I have connections from all walks of life,” he says, and I’m pretty sure there’s a threat somewhere in there.

“Good for you,” I mutter. “Now, let’s get the fuck out of here.”

I want to see Portia. I need to see with my own eyes that she’s okay. I can’t bear the thought of something happening to her.

I watch Portia’s feet pound the footpath as she runs toward the offices. She’s back in her homeless attire. I grit my teeth. Kelvin told me she was supposed to be in the offices today, not on the streets, so why the fuck is she dressed as though she’s been living on them?

I’m out of my car and following her into the office building.

“She’s gone,” I hear her cry. “Jamie was taken last night.”

“The fuck?” I hiss. I’ve done a fucking lot of research since Kelvin came to me this afternoon. Jamie has been living on the streets in shifts, which she split with Portia. Yet another fucking woman this asshole has put in danger by sending her onto the street.

Portia spins on her feet, her eyes wide, her lips parted. “Dario, what are you doing here?”

“Checking on you. Are you okay?”

She bites her lip, and I know she’s warring with herself. The last time she saw me, she told me to fuck off and check my ego. She told me she’s sick of having to listen to me bitch about Kelvin, and that I should trust her. She had seemingly pushed everything that happened away, she’d forgiven me and then I fucked it up after a night of passion. It was beyond the best night of my life. Then she got a call from Kelvin, and I lost my shit. I fucked everything up. Again.

I was an ass. I can admit that. But there’s just something about Kelvin that pushes me to the edge.

“Portia, what do you mean she’s been taken?” Kelvin questions.

She launches into telling us what the old man told her. I fucking owe that man a lot. He’s been watching out for her since she was on the streets. My men have been telling me that the moment she bunkers down for the night, the old man will swivel his bed so he’s blocking her from street view.

“Robert, take Deacon and Lewis with you. I want you to uncover what both Eli and Teddy have seen. It could help us

find out where this asshole is doing his dealings.”

The three men nod, each of them giving Portia a warm look before leaving the office building.

“Portia, today was your last day on the street. You won’t be returning. You’ve made your connections, so there’s no need to go back at night. If you do, you don’t go alone.”

Finally, he’s making some fucking sense.

“Go home,” he tells her. “Wash the grime off you and speak with Dario. Right now, we can’t do anything until the guys have some more information. I’ll call you once I have it.”

Thankfully, Portia doesn’t argue with him as she moves toward me. I don’t care if she doesn’t want my touch; I need to give her some tenderness. I pull her into my arms, and she sinks against me. “I’m smelly,” she says quietly, so only I can hear her.

“Don’t give a fuck,” I murmur back, pressing a kiss to her hair. “Let’s get you home. You’re riding with me. Beppe can bring your car back to you later.”

She nods, and I know that finding out her friend is missing has rocked her. My woman is fucking fierce, but when her friends and loved ones are in danger, it hits deep.

“Beppe, stay here and help Kelvin. If you need more help, call the men. I don’t give a fuck how many are needed; we’re putting all our resources into this. That fucker Marco should never have been alive after killing Davide. Had he been killed, this shit would have never happened. So, it’s down to us to bring that cunt down.”

Portia shudders in my arms, and I have no doubt it's because I mentioned her father.

“Come on, baby, let's get you home.”

She's quiet, and I hate not knowing what the fuck is going on in her head. She needs time, and that's something I can give her, but I'm not leaving her alone. Not anymore. This shit is serious. She could be in danger, so I'll be making sure she's never alone. I want her to have a man on her at every fucking second of every day. I'm not losing her.

I guide her to the car and put her into the passenger's seat. She's so withdrawn and quiet. It's so unlike her. I drive to her house and pull up outside.

She blinks. “How?” she breathes, but then her eyes widen. “Damn it, Dario. It's been you watching me, hasn't it?”

I nod. “I needed to know you were okay. Whenever you've been on the street, it's been me or my men watching you. I can't lose you, Portia, so I've been making sure you're safe, even if it means doing it from a distance. I'm just pissed I didn't have men on your friend.”

She gives me a soft, wary smile. “You had no idea what was going on. If you had, you would have put men on her. I just hope she's okay. The horror stories I've heard on the street about what happens to the women they take...”

“Come on, baby, let's get you inside.” I want to make sure she's inside. The building is secure. No one can get in without us knowing, and if they do, there's an alarm that'll sound and alert us that someone has breached the property.

“What are you doing here, Dario?” she asks once we’re in her apartment.

“We have all night to talk, baby. Right now, you need a shower and to change out of those clothes.”

She sighs but doesn’t argue. That’s not a good sign. Portia could argue with her damn reflection.

“Have you eaten?” I ask her. She shakes her head, her face pale as she watches me carefully. “You need to eat, Portia. I’ll order us takeout and then we’ll talk after.”

I order the takeout once I hear the shower start up. I breathe a sigh of relief. She’s okay. She’s safe.

Forty minutes later, she walks into the living room wearing a silky, short pajama set, her brunette hair tied up on her head. She’s still looking as beautiful as ever.

“Not that I’m not happy you’re here,” she says as she takes a seat beside me on the sofa, “but I’m curious as to why you are here. In Missouri, I mean.”

“I was always going to come here,” I tell her. “It’s been on the cards for about a year, maybe longer. The Famiglia is expanding. It went to Indiana, and Rocco wanted to expand further. Missouri is what he wanted, and I’ve been promoted to Underboss.”

Her eyes widen. “You have?”

I nod. “Yes. I was promoted when we met. It’s just finally happened that I’ve been able to get everything organized for my move here.”

She nibbles on her bottom lip. “I had no idea.”

I give her a grin. “I was always going to come for you, Portia. I wasn’t going to let you slip through my fingers. You’re all I’ve wanted; all I’ll ever want. I just had to get everything organized before moving here. I wanted to give you time too.”

She nods. “I appreciate that. I was so angry when Jade told me you were the mastermind behind tracking Teagan down and pushing Elio to take his revenge. I was so mad that whenever I thought about it, I wanted to hurt you.”

I chuckle. “I deserve that,” I tell her. “I fucked up. I apologized to Teagan, but it won’t change what happened.”

She shakes her head. “My girl is happier than ever, and she’s in love. I forgive you for it. I know that you couldn’t have known what would happen to Teagan.”

I pull her onto my lap, wrapping my arms around her. Fuck, it feels so good for her to be in my arms. This is where she belongs. Where she’ll always belong. I press a kiss to her head. It’s time to get everything out in the open. “Okay, baby, it’s time for you to tell me about what happened after your father died.”

She tenses in my arms. “Dario,” she says quietly. “I don’t —”

“I know, but I need to know, Portia. It’s going to help us find out what this bastard is up to. I need to know everything he’s done.”

She takes a deep breath. “Does this mean you’ll be an open book for me too?”

I clench my jaw. Fuck. I have to tell her about what I’ve done and tell her about Aldo. “Yes.”

“It’s going to be okay,” she whispers.

I shake my head. “No, baby. I think when you find out what I’ve done, you’ll be telling me to fuck off again.”

Her cheeks redden but she doesn’t say she won’t tell me to leave.. “Kelvin is a friend, and he’s my boss. There’s never been anything between us, nor will there ever be. You need to stop antagonizing him. He’s pushing your buttons, and I’m not going to be in the middle of your bullshit.”

I hold my hands up That wasn’t what I asked, but she obviously was dying to get it out.. “Okay, I’ll leave the asshole alone.”

She shakes her head. “Calling him an asshole is exactly what I mean.”

I grin at her. “Babe, that’s me being as nice as I can be about him.”

She sighs. “Fine, I’ll take it.”

I press a kiss to her cheek. “Now, tell me about what happened.”

She’s put it off as long as she can. It’s time.

TWENTY-THREE

PORTIA

Having him hold me, it feels as though I'm safe. I hate how easily I can be led back to him, and how much I want him. He annoys me like no other, especially when he tries to dictate what I should do. Kelvin is not, nor will he ever be, anything but a man I respect and my boss, but for some reason Dario is jealous and it's not a cute look on him. I'm a big girl and I can make my own damn decisions.

"What do you want to know?" I ask, my skin covered in goosebumps. I don't talk about my father and his death. The memories are too painful. But I know we're going to have to get this out and in the open.

"Everything," he answers without missing a beat.

I get to my feet. As much as I love him holding me, I can't handle it right now. "I had spent the day with Papa. It was fun," I begin.

He smiles. "I remember how you loved spending time with him. When given the chance, you'd always be at his side."

I nod. "He was the best man I knew," I say. "We returned home, and I was laughing and joking with him. I showed him how I made my way in and out of the house undetected." I

smile at the memory. God, that was a better time. It was peaceful, even if my mama drove me crazy. “We were in his office when the alarm sounded. He told me to hide. He wanted me to be safe. He knew Marco was coming.”

“He wanted to protect you,” Dario says softly. “You’d have done the same. You *have* done the same.”

I cross my arms over my stomach and give him a nod. He’s right, I’ll always protect those I care about. “He had this passageway behind his bookcase. He opened it and made me hide.” The tears come to my eyes as I take a steadying breath, trying to calm myself. I don’t want to let the tears spill over. “He wanted me to run, to follow the passageway out of the house and get to safety. But I couldn’t. I was rooted to the spot.”

“You heard your father die,” he says, already knowing that I did. “How did Marco know where the passageway was?”

I shake my head, my brows knitting in confusion. I don’t understand why he’s asking that. “I don’t know. Mama maybe?”

Dario doesn’t seem convinced by my answer. Then again, would my mama give me up? I don’t think so. Maybe... someone sold my papa out? Maybe they had it all planned out. If that’s the case, then who? Who would have done this?

“What happened after Marco took you and your mom to his house?” Dario questions, pulling me from my thoughts.

I blink, surprised by his change of questioning. “Um, Marco forced Mama to marry him. No one was there to help

us. No one wanted to give us the protection we needed. I heard him,” I whisper, my hands shaking. “I heard him rape her every night. The first two weeks, she’d beg and scream, pleading with him to stop. I laid in my bed, hating that he was hurting her, but I couldn’t do anything. The next morning, she’d have bruises everywhere. Soon, the screaming and begging stopped, but the beatings didn’t.”

Dario’s eyes blaze with anger, his lips pursed, jaw clenched.

“I tried to stay out of his way, but sometimes it wasn’t enough. He’d use me as a punching bag,” I say, my hands balled into fists. “I guess it’s better than the alternative.”

Dario shoots to his feet. “He shouldn’t have fucking touched you,” he snarls. “Fucking bastard. What else did he do to you, Portia? What did he do to make you run away? To make you leave your mom?”

He gets it. I stayed because of Mama. As much as I hated that she allowed him to hurt me, I understood that she had no choice. She was beaten and raped into submission. There was no way out for her. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen her, and I miss her. I chose to save my life, to keep myself alive. It was the only way I could do it, and it meant cutting her off. I have no idea if she’s even alive.

“Tell me, Portia,” he says as he steps toward me. “What did he do?”

“He was planning on selling me,” I whisper, the words sounding so cold and callous coming from my lips. “I was

going to be trafficked, Dario. Had I been, maybe this shit wouldn't have happened."

I'm hauled into his arms, crashing against his chest. "Fuck that," he snarls. "You would have been raped, hurt, and no doubt drugged to be compliant. You saved yourself, Portia. I'm so fucking in awe of you."

My cheeks flush with heat. "Dario—"

He shakes his head. "No, don't Dario me anything. You ran and protected yourself. You got to the streets and then you turned into everyone else's protector. You're amazing, Portia, and I'm so fucking lucky that I'm the one you've chosen."

I roll my eyes. "Cornny," I quip, wanting to change the subject. "God, Dario, that was so cheesy."

He gives me a lopsided grin, and the look in his eyes makes my heart skip a beat. Is that love I see shining in them?

"I get why you're working so hard for this case. I'm not leaving your side, baby. You want to walk the streets and find out everything you can, then you'll be doing it with at least two men on you at all times."

I pull in a sharp breath. I thought he'd try to dictate that I can't continue, but listening to him say that he's behind me, it means everything.

"When I'm not with you, Beppe will be. He's my best friend and the man I trust above all else. I need you to be smart and vigilant. If something doesn't feel right, tell Beppe or I. Understand?"

I grin at him. "Understood," I breathe. "Thank you."

“Baby, I would do anything for you. I just need you to trust that I’m here to protect you.”

I press a kiss to his lips, so fucking thankful that he’s here and not pushing me to do what he wants.

“Now that you’ve told me everything, it’s time for me to do the same,” he says, and that happiness I felt mere seconds ago vanishes, and in its place is dread. Especially when I look into his eyes and see pain and anger.

“Dario, what’s going on?”

He takes a step back, and it’s almost as though a coldness has settled over the room. Gone is the man who looked at me with love and happiness. It’s like he’s a different person.

“The first time my father hit me with the belt, that I can remember, I was seven. He fucked up and hit me across my face. He split my lip open, and I needed stitches.” His chest is heaving as he clenches his hands. “No matter what I did, it was never good enough for Aldo. I wasn’t my brothers—Rocco was his favorite, the one he would mold into the boss, and Elio was the one who could kill people the best. I was just the runt.”

I shake my head, tears falling down my face. The pain in his eyes hurts me. It actually fucking hurts. I can’t breathe right now. I can’t even speak.

“Over the years, he’d do whatever the hell he wanted. He learned to stay away from my face—too many people would notice an injury there. They’d start talking, and Aldo Gallo couldn’t have that,” he sneers. “I finally got fucking free of his

bullshit at nineteen, but by then, it was too late. I had fucked up. I'd become a monster.”

I shake my head. “No,” I say vehemently. “No, you’re not a monster.” He’s never that.

His laughter is manic, and I stare at him. God, what did that asshole of a father do to him? What did he do to make him think so little of himself? “You can tell me,” I assure him.

“Once I do,” he begins, his words low and drawn out, “you’re going to want me to leave.”

“I won’t,” I vow. There’s no way in hell I’m letting him leave, not like this. Never like this. “Tell me, Dario. I won’t judge you.”

He glances away. “I was eighteen when my father made me torture someone for the first time. I had killed plenty of men before that. Traitors, enemies, assholes, I’d killed them all. But not once had I killed someone by torturing them. Gio,” he says, and I flinch. I know Gio—well, I knew *of* him. He was friends with my papa. He and his wife, Angela, came to our house a lot for dinners. Angela and Mama were the best of friends. When they died, it hurt my parents.

“Gio stole over six million from the Famiglia account,” he says, and I pull in a sharp breath. Fuck. That’s not good. “I was the one who had to deal with it.”

You don’t ever steal from the Famiglia. You do and it’s an instant death sentence.

“The thing was, the money that was taken, it ended up in Angela’s account.”

Fuck.

“She was ten days away from giving birth,” he says. “I had been given the task to kill both Gio and Angela.”

“You killed the baby too,” I whisper. It’s a statement. I remember what was said when my parents found out about their deaths. They had assumed that Gio had cut the baby from Angela as she went into labor, and when both his wife and daughter died, he killed himself, unable to handle the guilt.

He nods. “By the time I finished torturing Angela, the baby was already dead.”

I watch the man I have fallen for. There’s just pain in his eyes. No remorse, no regret, just pain.

“You don’t regret what you did?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “I feel guilty for the way I lost control. It was like I wasn’t there. Something came over me and I just unleashed all the anger I had pent up over the years. Knowing that Aldo was standing in the doorway watching, it was too much. I wanted him to be the one I was killing, not them. But they fucked up, Portia. They stole from the Famiglia. What was I supposed to do?”

I sigh. “Would you do it again?”

He nods. “Probably. Although I wouldn’t take the baby from the womb,” he says quietly.

I blanch at his words. He’s right, he would do it over again. He doesn’t care. This is who he is. I have to accept that.

“Why did you take it from her?” I ask, needing to know.

“They both pleaded with me to save the baby. I didn’t know it was dead until I cut it from her.” His words are so clinical, so unemotional. I don’t know how he manages to do it, but it’s as though he doesn’t have it in him to care.

“How do you switch off your emotions?”

He lifts his shoulders and shrugs. “Sometimes, it’s hard to. The only times I haven’t been able to is when my father is concerned. Back then, I was a kid. I was stupid, reckless, and fucking ruthless. But that day taught me a lesson. I would never let my emotions get the best of me.” He looks at me. “I kept that promise, until I saw Elio lying on that hospital bed, unconscious, his chest burned. At that moment, I would have done anything to get revenge for him.”

“You led with your emotions,” I tell him as I take a tentative step toward him. “I get that. I understand it. But you’re right when you say you’re ruthless. You don’t discriminate against who you hurt. I admire you for protecting those you love, but what you did to Angela...” I shake my head. “God, it sounds awful.”

He nods. “It was beyond horrific. Those who had to clean it up have let me know just how traumatized they were. I don’t know what they expected. They stole from the Famiglia. Just because she’s a woman, she doesn’t get a pass.”

He’s so matter of fact about it all. “So where does this leave us?” I ask.

It’s been months, and he’s all I have thought about. He’s all I’ve wanted. I fell head over heels for him, but the betrayal I felt when I found out he went after Teagan made me want to

run. All I could think was: how could someone I love do that to my friend? But I get it. He leads with his emotions, and he does what he thinks is best. I can't fault him for that, no matter how much I'd like to. His actions were wrong, and he knows that.

“What do you mean?” he asks, his brows knitting together.

“What if I do something you deem unacceptable?”

His lips twitch. “Ah,” he says as he steps closer. “Don't you get it?” he whispers, his breath caressing my face. “I'd take down the world for you,” he tells me as he pushes into my space. “I'd go against my family for you, Portia.”

My lips part at his admission. “Dario,” I breathe.

“Make no mistake, Portia, you're the only person in this world who I'd go to Hell and back for. You're mine. I told you that from the get-go.”

I glance away, not wanting him to see the tears shining in my eyes. “Careful, Dario, you'll get me to fall deeper for you.”

His fingers reach for my chin, and he pulls me back to look at him. “That's alright, baby. I'll be here to catch you.” He slams his lips against mine, and it's just as it always is whenever we kiss. I'm putty in his hands.

“I'm going to fuck you, Portia. It's been too long since I've had you. Then, when I'm done, I'm going to make love to you.”

I blink, my breathing getting deeper as I realize what he just said.

“Take me,” I whisper.

TWENTY-FOUR

DARIO

I stare at the woman who means everything to me, and I fucking smile. Even after she's found out everything about me and knows all my faults, she still wants me. She's stuck with me now. I'm not leaving her.

I slide my hand into her hair and tug slightly. I live for that little hitch she has in her breath as I run my tongue along her lips. I fucking love this woman. I'm not afraid to admit it either. The moment I met her, I knew she was something special, and whenever I'm with her, I get to know her a bit more. I was closed off, and there was a part of me that I held back, but tonight, I gave it to her, and she accepted it. She's accepted what and who I am.

Her hands twine around my neck and she presses her breasts against my body, her silky pajama top doing nothing to hide her erect nipples. "Mine," I snarl.

She laughs. "Yours," she says. "But don't dictate to me, Dario, and we'll have a happy life."

I shake my head. This woman is deluded if she thinks I'm going to allow that asshole Kelvin to flirt with her.

I press my lips against hers. It's hard, dominating, and filled with hunger. Her fingernails claw against the skin on my neck as she arches backward, giving me what I need: access to her mouth. My tongue slides in as I move my hand down to her ass. Her barely-there shorts give me the perfect access to what I need. Her pussy.

My finger caresses her inner thigh, and her moans are captured by my mouth. Fuck, I'm rock hard. I could cut fucking stone with how hard my cock is right now. This is the reaction I have whenever I touch her. She's fucking perfect for me.

"Dario," she breathes, her eyes fluttering shut as I run my finger along her pussy folds. "Please," she begs.

"Miss me, baby?" I smirk as she grinds her pussy against my finger. "So fucking eager, so fucking perfect."

"Hmmm," she whimpers as I sink my digit into her tight, wet channel. Fuck. She feels so fucking good.

As I begin to finger-fuck her, I release her hair and pull down the thin strap of her pajama top. It falls to her elbow, exposing her breast, and I capture it with my mouth, swirling my tongue around the hardened nub. She arches back, grinding her pussy against my finger as she pushes her breast further into my mouth.

"God," she cries, her fingers clenching around the short hair I have on my head. "Dario, please," she begs.

"What do you want, baby?" I ask, as I take her nipple between my teeth, gently nipping at it.

“You. I want you to eat me,” she cries.

Oh, she loves when I go down on her.

I release her nipple with a pop and bring her lips back to mine. All the while, I’m fucking her with my finger like a man possessed. My girl loves when I feast on her pussy. She fucking loves the way I eat her out.

“Get on the sofa and strip,” I growl, before pulling my hand from her shorts and bringing my finger to my mouth and sucking on it.

This minx knew exactly what she was doing when she went for a shower. She’s not wearing any panties. Hmm... I guess she wanted me just as much as I wanted her.

She shimmies out of her shorts and steps out of them, then climbs onto the sofa. She pushes her ass into the air, giving me the perfect glimpse of that pink, puffy pussy of hers. It’s fucking glistening, and I know once I’m on my knees, my mouth is going to be drenched with her juices.

She reaches for the hem of her top as she sits down and opens her legs, her feet pressed against the cushions of the sofa. She’s not shy. She’s letting me see exactly what she has to offer, and I’m fucking addicted. Nothing tastes better than her pussy. I’m fucking lucky that my woman loves the way I fuck her.

I sink to my knees, unsnapping my pants. My cock is aching as it presses against my zipper. I free my cock and reach for her ass, pulling her to the edge of the sofa and burying my head between her legs. The first swipe of my

tongue against her soaked folds has me groaning. Fuck, she tastes phenomenal.

I swipe my tongue against her folds again, and she arches off the sofa.

“Ooooh,” she moans softly. “Please, Dario,” she pleads with me. I know she wants me to tongue-fuck her, to make her come harder than she ever thought possible.

I begin feasting on her, loving the mewls that leave her mouth. I fucking love the way she grinds her pussy against my face as I slide my tongue along her pussy. She throws her legs over my shoulders, and I grin. I fucking love that she takes what she wants, and right now, she wants me closer. She wants me to bring her to the brink.

I push a finger inside her warm, tight, wet channel.

“Yes,” she cries out as I thrust deeper into her.

“More, please, Dario,” she whimpers as I withdraw my finger and replace it with my tongue. I spear her pussy with it and tongue-fuck her. “Yes,” she moans, her legs tightening around my shoulders. Her hands fly to my hair, and she tugs, pulling my tongue deeper into her.

I continue to fuck her with my tongue and bring my finger to her clit, and it's as though an electrical current goes through her. She throws her head backward, her body arches, and she tightens her grip on my hair. I don't relent on my pressure on her clit or on my tongue fucking her, spearing deep into her pussy. Within seconds, she's panting, her body tight. I press

down on her clit, and she detonates. Utterly comes a-fucking-part.

I lap up her juices, not letting any go to waste. I fucking love the taste of her. She's a quivering mess, her body shaking as her moans reverberate around the room.

I pull back, licking my lips, and find her watching me with hooded eyes. I sit on the sofa beside her, my cock thick and ready to burst. I want to feel her pussy fit snugly around it. There's nothing better than her riding me. "Sink down on my cock, baby," I instruct.

Her breathing is hard, but she doesn't hesitate in throwing her leg over mine and straddling me. "You're very talented with that mouth." She grins.

I laugh, which turns into a strangled groan as she positions my cock at her entrance. The feel of her soft, warm hand around my cock is almost more than I can bear. Christ.... The look of happiness in her eyes as she watches me, it's fucking beautiful.

"Mmmm," she moans as she sinks down onto my length. I bottom out deep inside of her. Fuck, this is where I live to be. Nothing feels better than being buried deep inside of her.

She begins to move, and my hands roam over her body. Her skin is soft and silky, and it smells like lilacs.

"Ride me, baby," I urge, needing her to go a little harder. If she carries on this slow and steady pace, I'm going to have to flip her.

She lifts off my cock before bouncing back down, slamming me deep. She does it over and over again.

“Dario,” she whimpers, her hands tightening on my shoulders as I continue to run my hands along her body. “Please,” she cries.

“Ride me wild, baby,” I tell her, knowing she needs a little direction.

Her lips part, her eyes widen, and she nods. I groan when she grinds down on my cock after burying my length inside of her. Her body moves over my cock like a sensual siren. Her lips part as she moans low in her throat.

“Fuck, baby, do that again,” I urge, loving the way she’s taking every fucking inch of me and still wanting more.

Her hands tighten on my shoulders, and with flushed cheeks, she throws her head back, gives in to the pleasure, and rides me, doing whatever feels right for her. Fuck, it feels amazing.

“Fuck, beautiful,” I grunt as she slams down on my cock. I need her to up the pace a little more. If she doesn’t, I’m going to explode inside of her, and I need her to come first.

“Yes,” she hisses as she continues to move. “Oh, Dario,” she whimpers. “I’m so close.”

I slide my hands down to her hips, my fingers sinking into her flesh as I thrust up into her, knowing that with a few deep, brutal thrusts, she’s going to be crying out her release.

“Yes,” she cries out, not once stopping as she fucks me as hard as I’m fucking her. She’s got her rhythm going. Every

time I bottom out inside her, she grinds down even harder, her pubic bone bumping against my own. “So close,” she murmurs. “Dario, I’m so, so close.”

She’s pleading with me. She needs help getting there. I’m not the type of man to leave her wanting for anything.

I grit my teeth and hammer into her, my strokes heavy and painful, my cock about ready to burst, but not before her. Fuck no. I dig my fingers deeper into the flesh at her hips and hammer into her like a madman. She’s taking every brutal stroke that I give her.

“Yes—” she cries as her body tightens. Her eyes close, and she detonates, her pussy walls contracting around my thick cock. She releases a strangled cry as she comes.

I thrust into her again, and again, and again. My spine tingles, and my balls tighten. There’s no holding back. I thrust deep inside of her and spill my cum into her pussy.

“Christ,” I grunt. “Fuck, baby,” I growl as I hold her to me, needing to keep her close. Her head lolls forward and she rests it on my shoulder. “Nothing better than you, Portia.”

“God, Dario, do not make me cry,” she hisses.

I chuckle lightly. “You’ve got to know, Portia, you’re not the only one who’s falling.”

She raises her head, her eyes brimming with tears. “Yeah?”

I give her my sexy grin. “Yeah,” I say, knowing that if I told her I was already gone, I’d run the risk of scaring her off, and that’s not going to happen.

I hold her in my arms, my semi-hard cock still inside of her warm pussy. I'm in no rush to let her go, not after finally having her right where I've wanted her for the past six months.

"Tomorrow," I say a while later, "I'm going to call my brothers."

She releases a sigh. "What you mean to tell me is that I'm going to have both of your brothers and their wives descend on my apartment, right?" she says with a raised brow. "Not that I don't love, Teagan, because I do, but she's going to flip out when she finds out what's going on," she adds quickly.

I run my hand along her spine, loving the way she shivers at my touch. "First of all, I have my own home here in Missouri—our home. Not only do I have that, but I own more apartment complexes than I know what to do with. They can stay there."

Her eyes are wide. "You bought us a house?" she asks, her words barely above a whisper.

"The fuck do you think we're doing here, baby? I always knew you were mine, and I'm not losing you, so yes, I purchased a home with the knowledge I was going to do everything in my power to win you back and hopefully have you move in with me."

She gives me a blinding smile. "Smooth, Dario. Real smooth."

I wink at her. "Yep. You can see it tomorrow. Right now, the food should be here any minute. Once it arrives, we're going to shower."

Her face lights up and she breathes in a ragged breath. “By shower, you mean...?”

“Get clean, baby. You’ve got my cum leaking out of your pussy,” I tell her, and watch disappointment shift through her eyes. “Although, that’s not to say we won’t be getting even dirtier,” I say with a smirk.

“Now that’s a plan I can get on board with.” She laughs as she presses a quick kiss on my lips.

I’m a lucky motherfucker. I’m so fucking relieved we’re here, together. I couldn’t imagine my life without her. The past six months have been hellish, and it’s my own fault for letting my jealousy get the best of me. Not anymore. She’s mine, and I’m content knowing no one else will have her, no matter how much they flirt.

TWENTY-FIVE

PORTIA

I'm a bundle of nerves. I didn't think I would be, especially as Dario has been assuring me that everything will be fine, but I have a feeling the shit could hit the fan.

"You've got to chill the fuck out," he tells me as he pulls me into his arms. "Portia, it's going to be fine. They're here to help. That fucker, Marco, should have been killed years ago. Had my father done his fucking job, he would have been, and this shit wouldn't be going on."

He's so adamant that his father had something to do with my papa's death that I'm starting to believe it too. I never thought the Famiglia would betray my father. He gave so much of his life to them. He didn't deserve their betrayal.

"Are you going to tell them about who I am?" I ask. It's weird to think they'll know who I am. I haven't been known as a Leone in a fucking long time, but it's all going to come out now, and I'm not sure how everyone will react.

He runs his hands along my back. "They're going to find out," he says softly. "But that just means you'll have the protection you should have had when your father died."

I nod. “What’s going to happen if you find out your father did authorize the hit on mine?”

He brings his hand to my chin and tilts it so I look at him. “Then we’ll uncover who else was part of this and ensure they pay for betraying one of our men. I don’t give a fuck if they were under orders from my father. That shit doesn’t happen. They know that. It’s why it’s been swept under the rug and hasn’t been spoken about since. In our world, no one keeps their kills secret unless there’s a reason.”

He’s talking from experience. When he killed Gio and Angela, he did so under his father’s orders. He acts as though he would have done it anyway, and I believe him. But being a made man is ingrained in him. It’s who he is. He takes orders and does what’s to be expected. If he weren’t part of the Famiglia, he would never have killed them.

“Have you spoken to Beppe?” I ask, changing the subject. Finding out that he killed them was heartbreaking, but I know who Dario is, and I know he would never hurt me. His past is just that, his past. We’ve all done things others would deem unforgivable. I left my mama behind with her rapist and haven’t been back to check on her once.

He nods. “Yes. They spent the night on the streets, talking with everyone. Having the Famiglia asking the questions is helping them get a lot of answers. Our reputation precedes us. We’re going to ensure that those fucking animals who are stealing the women are found, and when they are, we’re going to kill them.”

“I want to be there when you kill Marco,” I tell him, my voice loud and clear. His brows rise, and he opens his mouth to no doubt tell me no, but I shake my head and continue speaking. “That man killed my dad. He raped my mom, and he beat us both. I’m not a little girl who doesn’t know what she’s asking for, Dario. I’ve seen firsthand what that bastard can do, and I want to see with my own eyes that he’s gone.”

He watches me for a beat, his gaze assessing. I’m not sure what he sees in my eyes, but he nods. “Okay,” he says, and my shoulders slump forward as I rest my head against him.

“Thank you,” I whisper. “You have no idea how long I have been wanting to watch that asshole die.”

His hands run along my spine, and I shiver in delight. “Trust me, baby, I get it. The flame for vengeance is always one that burns the brightest.”

He, more than anyone, gets it.

“How was Teagan when you called her?” he asks, and I’m pretty sure there’s laughter in his voice.

“Ass,” I grumble. “She was pissed that I didn’t tell her what was going on. She’s angry that Kelvin had me on the streets—”

“She’s not the only one,” he growls, and I know that no matter what I say, he and Kelvin aren’t ever going to get along. “He knew your past, Portia,” he says. “He knew why you ran away. That fucker knows everything there is to know about everyone, and he fucking uses it to his advantage. He put two women in harm’s way.”

I shake my head. “Dario, no—”

He frames my face. “He did, baby. He knew women were being taken from the streets, and what did he do? He put two women working them. That’s beyond fucked up. He’s got more than enough men on his team. Why weren’t any of them watching over you? Hmm? Not to mention the men he has for his other business. Why weren’t they watching?”

“This is something we’re going to have to agree to disagree on,” I say. “Because I understand your thought process, I really do. But that’s not what happened. Jamie and I have lived on the streets. We know what it feels like to be there. We can assimilate into that world without someone mistrusting us because it’s ingrained in us from our time on the streets how to act and what not to do.”

He sighs heavily. “Right,” he mutters, his voice tight. “Kelvin is someone we’re not going to argue about. Ever.”

I roll my eyes. “You say that now, but the moment he starts talking to me, the green-eyed monster will rear its ugly head.”

He looks affronted. “I’m not jealous of him. I’m pissed because he watches you like he wants you, but then acts as though I’m the crazy fucking one.”

I shake my head. God, I knew he would think that. “He doesn’t.”

He raises a brow. “Are you a man? Do you know what men do when they want a woman?”

I purse my lips. He’s so damn infuriating. I settle my hands on my hips and glare at him. “What the hell is wrong with

you?” I snap. “God, Dario, you just can’t stop, can you?”

His lips twitch and it just angers me further. Why is he such an ass? “Thought we weren’t going to argue about the dick anymore?”

My lips part, and I stare at him in shock. “You can’t just let it go, can you?”

He grins at me, and I know he’s just doing it to annoy me. “At least you’re not stressing your cute ass off anymore.”

I narrow my eyes. “You’re skating on thin ice,” I hiss.

His chuckle is deep and hearty. “Baby, I thought you were about to sock me,” he says through his laughter. “You wanted to, didn’t you?”

I purse my lips. “Yes, and you’re lucky I restrained myself.”

He chuckles again. “You’re itty-bitty,” he teases me. “So fucking sexy, but tiny.”

I’m not tiny. I’m five-foot-nine and weigh around one hundred and thirty-five pounds. There’s nothing itty-bitty about me. “You’re an ass.”

He gives me that sexy as sin grin of his, the one that makes my knees go weak and my heart race. “They’re here,” he tells me, but before I’m able to reply, he presses his lips against mine and kisses me. It’s hard, brief, and filled with promise for what’s going to happen later.

I’m left panting and wanting more when he releases me and moves toward the door. Damn that man and the way he

can reduce me to mush.

The second Dario opens the door, Teagan barrels past him and runs toward me. She crashes into me and wraps her hands around me and holds me tight. “God, Portia, I’m so glad you’re okay.”

“I’m fine,” I assure her. “How are you?”

We still talk almost every day when I’m not on the streets, and we’re still closer than ever. I just didn’t want her to worry about me when she found out I’m working this case.

She waves me away. “I’m fine. Honest to God, Portia, I’m fine, but I’m so worried about you. What the hell? You’re working for Kelvin to find out who’s stealing the women and he put you on the street?” she fumes. “God, what on earth was he thinking?”

“That’s what I would like to know,” Jade says as she walks over to me, also pulling me into a hug.

Over the past few months, she’s checked in on me, making sure I’m okay. Since Teagan and Elio’s wedding in Bora Bora, everything just seemed to be better. I was so angry and upset when I found out everything that happened to Teagan and how the Gallo’s were at fault. I also understand that there was a lot of miscommunication, but now Teagan and Elio are happy, and my girl has forgiven all of them, so it’s time for me to do the same.

“When I get my hands on Kelvin—” she hisses. “God, what the hell was he thinking?”

“That Jamie and I have the experience of living on the streets, so we’d be able to get closer to those on the streets and get information,” I say, my voice clear and concise. “No one owes anyone an explanation. He did what he thought was best and it was something we all agreed on.”

Jade doesn’t look happy. She crosses her arms over her chest and purses her lips. “Is there any word on where Jamie is or who took her?”

I glance at Dario, who’s now standing beside me. He runs his hand along my waist and holds me close to him. “Marco Scaffidi is one of the biggest players in the trafficking ring,” Dario tells everyone.

“What the fuck?” Rocco snarls. “How the fuck did that bastard get those connections?”

“Someone want to explain who that is?” Teagan asks, her brows furrowing as she stares at me.

“Marco Scaffidi is the boss of the Outfit,” Elio begins. “He’s a bastard, and his son was even worse. That bastard Scaffidi allowed his son to do whatever the fuck he wanted, including raping young girls.”

Teagan’s eyes are brimming with tears. She knows my story. She knows the man who killed my father is the man stealing the women and running the trafficking ring.

“Our father sent his best enforcer to take out Marco’s kid. Davide Leone was one of the best men the Famiglia had to offer,” Rocco tells her.

Pride fills my chest. The way that Rocco and Dario speak about my father is filled with respect. Since the very beginning, Dario has always shown my father respect. Whenever he talks about him, he does so with pride and warmth.

“Marco wanted revenge,” Rocco continues. “He went to Davide’s house and killed him. That night was the last night anyone saw his wife and child again. Since then, nothing. No one knows what happened to them.”

Teagan swipes her tongue along her bottom lip. “What were their names?” she asks, and I’m surprised by her question. She knows it’s me.

“Their names were Marianna and Portia,” Elio says.

The air in the room goes static as Jade and Rocco’s eyes come to me. “Fuck,” Rocco growls. “How the fuck did we not know?”

“I’ve done a great job of hiding who I am,” I tell him honestly. I learned to never speak about my past and always made sure that if anyone got close to uncovering who I was, I swiftly made them double guess what they were thinking, and then they’d forget about it. Until Dario. That man is like a dog with a bone, and he knew instantly. I guess it makes sense as he was around me a lot when I was younger.

“She has her father’s eyes,” Dario says with a smirk.

“Just how fucking long have you known?” Rocco asks, a dark tone to his voice.

“Since the moment I saw her,” Dario replies with a grin. He’s standing there looking like the cat that got the cream. I’m not sure what the hell is wrong with him. Does he just love to annoy people?

“And you didn’t think to tell us?” Rocco sighs, his anger still there, but he’s used to Dario by now.

“You said she looked familiar,” Elio laughs. “I didn’t realize you were being serious.”

“Portia didn’t want anyone to know, and for her safety, I accepted that. If, and only if, she was in danger, then I would have said something,” Dario tells them.

My heart races wildly. Oh my god. I hadn’t realized just how amazing he was, and how much I truly appreciated him keeping my secret. He did it to protect me. Everything he’s done so far has been to do that and I’m finally seeing it.

“Okay,” Jade says, stepping forward. “Portia, if you don’t mind, can you tell us what happened after your da died? I’m really sorry for your loss. I didn’t know the man, but I’m still sorry for your loss.”

I give her a genuine smile. “Thank you,” I say softly, and then I recount the night my papa died. Talking about it never gets easier, and I don’t think it ever will, but I know they’re going to help me get revenge for my father. Finally, after almost five years, my father will get his justice.

“Fuck, I’m sorry,” Jade whispers. “How long did you stay with that cunt, Marco?” she asks.

“About three months or so,” I reply, taking a steadying breath. “I could have left before that, but I didn’t want to leave Mama.”

Jade nods in understanding, and seeing the genuine look on her face makes me believe that staying was the right thing to do back then.

“One night, I went to get a drink and Marco was having a meeting with his men. The office door was ajar, and I overheard part of their conversation.”

Dario’s hand tightens on my hip, and I lean my head against his body. He makes me feel safe and having him hold me makes me feel loved. “She overheard Marco telling his men that he was selling Portia. She was going to be trafficked, so she fled that night.”

“Fuck,” Rocco hisses. “Did he say anything else?”

“He had someone willing to pay two million for me,” I tell them. “He also knew that I overheard their conversation.”

“What did he do to you, Portia?” Jade asks, fury blazing in her blue eyes.

“He was an asshole,” I say, trying to brush it off. I really don’t want to get into what happened that night.

“Tell them, Portia,” Teagan urges me. “Please.”

“He came into my room and put a gun to my head.” I close my eyes as my blood runs cold. It still terrifies me to this day what happened that night. I have never felt such paralyzing fear as I did when he held that gun to my temple. “He played Russian Roulette with me.”

Dario's hand tightens on my hip, and I press my lips together to stop the cry from escaping me.

"He did fucking what?" Dario snarls, and I know he's going to be upset that I never told him, but it's something I really don't like talking about.

"How many times did he pull that trigger?" Jade asks.

"Six times," I reply, wringing my hands together to stop anyone noticing that they're trembling.

"He never had a bullet in the barrel, did he?" Rocco asks, and I shake my head.

"Sick bastard," Elio snarls. "Don't worry, Portia, we're going to make sure that bastard won't touch you again."

I nod. I really hope so, because I'm not sure it's going to be as easy as they think to catch Marco. The man has managed to fly under the radar for the past five years. There's no easy way of finding him, and he'll have men guarding him.

"I think we need to speak with Umberto and Amadeo," Dario says through clenched teeth. I slide my hand around his back and press my palm flat against his spine, offering him silent support. The moment I rest my hand against him, the tension seems to ease away. "They were Davide's closest men, and yet the night he died they weren't anywhere in sight. Also, I would like to know which of those assholes told Marco how to get into Davide's secret tunnel."

My eyes widen as pain slices through my chest. He never told me he suspected one of them of being involved. He only

mentioned that his father could be involved. Not my papa's best friends.

“Baby,” he murmurs as he looks down at me, “we don't know for sure.”

I swallow hard, trying to get rid of the tears that are threatening to fall. “But you suspect, though, right?”

He nods. “Yeah, I have suspected them.”

I take a moment to compose myself. “Then go find out,” I say. “If they're part of it, make them bleed.”

He gives me a blinding smile. “There she is,” he says. “So fucking bloodthirsty.”

Damn right. Don't mess with those that I love, and you'll be fine, but the moment you do, all bets are off.

TWENTY-SIX

DARIO

“**W**hy the fuck didn’t you tell me?” Rocco asks as we drive toward my bar. One of my newer men, Santo, is driving us, and we’re all sitting in the back. We need to get organized for what’s about to happen. “Didn’t you think Davide’s daughter being on the streets was something I should know?”

I shake my head. “Not in the slightest,” I reply. “She had her reasons for wanting to remain anonymous and I respected that. Just as you respected Jade’s need to have privacy about what she went through.”

“Jade is my wife,” he growls.

It’s always a good day when I annoy the ever-loving shit out of Rocco. The man really needs to lighten up.

“And Portia will be mine,” I say easily. Fuck, I never thought I’d ever find someone I’d consider making my wife, but Portia is the only woman I want.

“I’m happy for you, brother,” Elio says with a grin. “She’s good for you, and I have a feeling she’ll keep you on your toes. If you fuck around, she’ll hurt you.”

“Of that, I have no doubt. But right now, we need to have a word with Umberto and Amadeo.”

Rocco has flown them from Chicago to be here. It takes less than two hours. The moment I spoke my suspicions out loud, Rocco made the call, and then we sat down, ordered breakfast, and got caught up on the case Portia has been working on. Right now, Teagan and Jade are at Portia’s apartment, along with Lorenzo and Renato, one of my men here in Missouri. They’re watching over the apartment and will keep the women safe—although, I won’t mention that to Jade. She’ll flip the fuck out. She’s more than capable of doing that herself.

“Tell me why you suspect these two,” Rocco asks, and I understand him asking it. He’s making sure we have the right men before we accuse them. If they’re innocent, you risk losing some good men.

“There’s no way Marianna would ever give up her daughter’s location, Roc. There’s just no way.”

Elio nods in agreement. “No mother would ever give up their daughter. No fucking way. So, who else knew about the secret passageway?”

“Davide’s two closest men,” I say. “He trusted them above all else.”

Rocco nods slowly. “What were they doing the night he died?”

“They weren’t at his house, which is strange, wouldn’t you say?” Everyone knows those two were always there. They’d

have dinner with the family, as they were single, and Marianna would feed them. They were part of the Leone family. So it begs the question: why weren't they there that night?

"I guess we'll find out," he says as he pulls out his cell and reads a message. "They're waiting for us at the bar."

I rub my hands together in glee. Good, because I want to know what the fuck these two fuckers have to say.

"So you and Portia are finally together?" Elio asks. "Took you fucking long enough."

I ignore him, but Rocco, the asshole, chuckles.

Thankfully, Santo pulls into the parking lot of my new bar, and I get out of the car. "We won't be long," I assure Santo, letting him know to stay.

We walk through the back door of the bar, and I can already hear the fuckers talking. Just hearing their voices pisses me the fuck off. God, I truly hope they expose themselves as being traitors. Then I can kill them. I have no doubt in my mind that one, if not both of them are involved in the death of Davide.

"Boss," they say in unison as Rocco steps into the bar area first. They stand up taller and watch as we enter behind Rocco. "What's going on?" Umberto questions as he looks between Elio and me.

"We have a situation here that needs our attention and I'm hoping you both can shed some light on some things that happened while my father was boss," Rocco says diplomatically. This is why he's the boss. I'm more of a shoot

first ask questions later kind of guy. I hate waiting for answers, and if they lie to me, it infuriates me even more.

“Of course,” Amadeo says as he squares his shoulders. “What can I do to help?”

Rocco inclines his head. “The night Davide Leone died, do you remember where you were?”

Pain slashes through Amadeo’s eyes. “Yes, boss. It’s something I’ll never forget. Your father requested that I join Niccolò and Andrea to visit with De Mattani. He wanted information and Niccolò was to extract it, but he needed me there with them. I regret going every day of my life. Davide wasn’t just my boss; he was my friend and my brother. I should have been there.” He shakes his head, guilt shining in his eyes. “I should have been there.”

“What about you, Umberto?” Rocco questions.

Unlike Amadeo, Umberto doesn’t look fazed by the death of his friend. Instead, he looks as though he couldn’t care less. He carelessly lifts his shoulders and shrugs. “I do not remember,” he says.

“You were to be there,” Amadeo hisses. “We’ve had this talk many times, Umberto. Many, many times, and each time you tell me you had to be with the boss.”

I shake my head. “No, he wasn’t.”

I should fucking know; I was with my father that night. That was the night my father got into business with the Buchanan’s. Since then, they’ve been a fucking pain in my ass.

Umberto’s eyes widen. “I-I-I was,” he stammers.

“No, you were not,” I say. “The night Davide Leone was shot and killed, and his wife and daughter vanished, I was at La Fiore,” I hiss. “My father received a call informing him of Davide’s death. You, Umberto, were not present at the restaurant for that meeting.”

Umberto’s eyes widen. The fucker never thought to even question who was with my father that night.

“So tell me, Umberto, what were you offered in exchange for not protecting the man who viewed you as his brother? Hmm? What did my father reward you with?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he fires back, crossing his arms over his chest. “I do not like these accusations.”

“Either answer the fucking question, Umberto, or I’m calling Niccolò, and he’ll make sure I get the answers I need.”

A slow smirk forms on my lips. “And we all know how Nico feels about having traitors among us, don’t we.”

Elio chuckles. “He’s no doubt chomping at the bit to have a go at you, Umberto. He’s always hated you.”

“You have a choice and you have precisely thirty seconds to make it. Tell me what my father offered you in turn for you not to be there, or I call Niccolò.”

Umberto clenches his jaw, and his eyes darken with rage. “Do you know that Marianna was mine?” he snarls. “That she was promised to me from the time we were five?”

“So you what, conspired with our father to have him killed?” Rocco asks, his voice vibrating with anger.

“No,” he growls, running his hand through his slick, greasy hair. “I worked for him. He was my friend. But he took her from me.”

“Tell us what happened,” I demand. I’m not standing here and listening to this sob story. It’s not fucking working.

“I spotted your father having a meeting with Scaffidi,” he says. “I saw them together. They were laughing and joking. Do you know what would have happened had the rest of the men found out that our boss was sitting down having dinner with our rival?”

We do know. The men would have turned against our father. He would have been killed for his treachery. Something that would have done the world a favor.

“So you concealed it? Hid it from us? For what reason?” Elio asks, his lips curled into a snarl as he glares at the man we once happily stood alongside.

“He assured me that we could work something out. He promised me Marianna’s hand in marriage, just as it should have been all those years before. All I had to do was not be at the Leone house on one particular evening.”

I shake my head in disgust. God, he betrayed his friend, and for fucking what? Nothing.

Rocco tuts, staring at him with such disdain that Umberto casts his eyes down to the floor. “Your father and our father made a deal a long time ago. It was never promised that Marianna would marry you. It was suggested, but your father

wasn't happy that Marianna's father wasn't a high-ranking made man. He wouldn't allow it."

Umberto shakes his head, his eyes wild as he glances at Rocco. "That's not true."

"It is," Rocco assures him. "I was privy to many conversations between our fathers, Umberto. Your name was thrown around to marry many of our men's daughters. Including Niccolò's deceased wife, Maria. You were not promised to Marianna, Umberto. You were never promised to any woman."

The man still remains unmarried. He's a fucking bastard. No one would want their daughter to be married to him. We're not deaf; we've heard the rumors. He frequents the whorehouses around the city of Chicago and he pays well, but the shit he does to the women is borderline psychotic.

"What?" he says, his voice a little shaky. "Why would you say that?"

"Because it is true. The moment my father made it clear that Davide would become an enforcer, Marianna's father wanted the union between his daughter and Davide. The same happened when Niccolò was earmarked for becoming captain. Maria's father wanted the union between his daughter and Niccolò. You know this world, Umberto. You know how it works. If you have a daughter, you know the higher in the ranks, the more respect you'll gain. Tell me, why did you believe you were promised to these women?"

"Fuck that," I snarl. "What made you turn your back on your brother, the man who looked after you? You watched

over his daughter. You were their guard. Why did you do it?"

"He had everything I wanted, everything that was supposed to be mine," he yells.

Fuck, he's truly deluded if he believes Davide took what was his.

God, our father was a fucking bastard. He was playing all sides. He was friends with all the enemies. It's no wonder why we were never at war. That fucker always passed the buck to someone else. Anytime we were close, one of our men would die. My father was never good enough to be the boss. He should have been killed like the traitor he was.

Rocco laughs. He's had enough of this shit. "You were never going to ascend the ranks, Umberto. You would have never got higher than Davide's right-hand man. You betrayed your brother, your friend, and for what? Nothing. Marianna and Portia are gone and you're alone, just as you've always been."

"Fuck you," Umberto hisses. "I never thought he'd betray me. He promised Marianna to me."

"Where is she now? Hmm? Where the hell is Davide's wife and daughter?" I ask, wanting to know what he's going to say about that. "For a man who was so eager to have her, where is she?"

He shakes his head. "I don't know. The moment we found out Davide was dead, we went to the house, but they were gone."

“Who called in the death?” I ask, wondering how everyone found out it went down. “If you both got the call, who called it in?”

“He was already at the house when I arrived,” Amadeo snarls as he turns to his friend. “You were there, Umbo. You were there. I made the call to the boss, but you were already in the house.”

This fucker is lying through his teeth. The bastard is going to die. I’d rather he be honest about what went down.

“Think about Portia,” I say, hoping that him moving away from Davide and Marianna will help him see that we can help her. “She’s with that asshole now. We need to get to him and you’re our only shot.”

“She was so young,” he says. “So very pretty. She looked like her mama, except for her eyes. They were his,” he snarls. “She didn’t deserve to be taken by Marco. She was so scared when they took her from the house. So terrified. Marianna tried to shield her with her body, but it wouldn’t do any good. What Marco wants, he gets.”

“You were there,” I snarl, my feet taking a step forward, but Roc’s hand on my shoulder stops me from going for Umberto’s throat. “You were there that night. You were in that office.”

His eyes widen. He knows he’s been found out. “How?”

“You’re working with Scaffidi?” Amadeo asks in disgust. “You’ve been working with him all this time?”

Umberto flashes a blinding smile. “I have. He’s giving me a lot of work. It pays a ton of money and I’m able to fuck my way through as many whores as I want.”

Christ, he’s part of it. Fuck. What a sick bastard.

“Where is he running his operation from?” Rocco demands. “Tell me, when’s the next shipment?”

“Why should I tell you anything?” he asks with a wicked smile. This fucker knows he’s got the information we need, but he’s keeping it from us, and I’m not sure if he’s going to give it up. Fuck.

“If you want to know how Portia is, Umberto, how Marianna is, then you’ll tell us.”

He swallowed hard. “They’re alive?”

Rocco nods. “Yes, they’re alive, but they need your help to escape. Scaffidi has them locked up. Once we find Scaffidi, we can free them. So help us help them.”

The fucker swallows. “He’s got a shipment coming next week. He’s bringing women from all over the States here to Missouri. He has no idea that Dario is the underboss here. He thought it was safe.”

“Who else is working with him?”

“Turgenov,” he snaps. “He’s working with Sergei Turgenov.”

I grit my teeth. That asshole has been dead for at least a month. That cunt abused Niccolò’s wife and beat her until she lost the baby she was carrying. I wonder if Scaffidi knows that

Sergei is dead? I sure as fuck hope not. I don't want to spoil the surprise.

“What's going to happen when the shipment comes in?” Rocco questions.

“They'll take the women to a hotel here in the city, Cooney Hotel, where they'll auction them off. Those that don't fetch a good price will be put into the whorehouses around the country,” he tells us, but there's no emotion to his words. He's done this so many fucking times that it doesn't faze him any longer.

“How many women?” Elio asks. “How many do they have?”

“Around a hundred and twenty. This will be the biggest shipment they have. There are a lot of clientele who ask for something specific, and Sergei and Marco find the women these clients need.”

“Trafficking women,” Rocco snarls as he steps forward, his gun steady as he aims it at Umberto's head, “isn't a fucking game. We do not do that shit. The Famiglia is not part of that. You are a traitor, Umberto, and you'll die as one. When our men find out what you have done, they'll all piss on your grave.”

“I hope you rot in Hell, you fucking bastard,” Amadeo snarls, punching his fist into Umberto's face. “I'm going to find Marianna and Portia, and when I do, I'll let them know what a fucking coward you were.”

Umberto snarls, but before he can lunge at Amadeo, Rocco pulls the trigger. His bullet sinks into the cunt's head, and I watch with glee as the life slowly leaves his eyes. His knees give out, and he falls to the floor with a loud thud.

Good fucking riddance.

“Amadeo, have the cleaners clean this up. The bar is opening in a few weeks, and we need this place spotless,” Rocco instructs.

Amadeo nods. “Yes, Boss. I want you to know, had I known what Umberto was doing, I would have told you. I didn't realize he was so good at keeping secrets.”

Rocco gives him a sympathetic look. “None of us did. Right now, we need to ensure that we stop this shipment. When the cleaners are finished, call me.” He gives me a pointed look, and I know he's asking if it's okay for Amadeo to see Portia. I give him a slight nod. I think Portia would appreciate it. Plus, the more men I have on my woman, the safer she'll be.

Right now, we have a where and a who. All we need is a when, and then we can finally end this shit. One of the major contributors is dead, which will leave Marco scrambling when he finds out.

I can feel this coming to a head, and I'm going to do whatever it takes to ensure that Portia stays the fuck out of the way when it does.

TWENTY-SEVEN

PORTIA

“Tell me,” I urge Dario. He’s holding things back from me and it’s pissing me off. I’m not a wilting flower. I’m not breakable. I need to know what the hell happened. What could be worse than finding out the man you considered an uncle, one your papa saw as a brother, betrayed your father, and for what? Nothing. He allowed Marco to kill my father and take my mama. I’m so glad he’s dead, although I wish he suffered more than a bullet to his brain.

“We found out when the shipment is happening. Well, not the exact date,” he says.

Dread fills my stomach. “When?”

He glances at Kelvin, who arrived at my apartment ten minutes before Dario and his brothers returned and chose to sit directly beside me to piss Dario off.

“Next week,” Dario says. “There’ll be an auction held at the Cooney Hotel.”

This could finally be over. God, I hope so. I hope that Jamie’s doing okay. No one’s been able to locate the vehicle that took her. She’s alone and no one knows where. I’m not sure if she’ll last a week.

“I’ll have my men look into it,” Kelvin says. “The Cooney Hotel has been around for decades. I know they cater to the wealthy.”

“Of course they do,” Elio mutters in disgust. “What other fucking bastards are going to pay for women? Only the rich and powerful. Remember, Kelvin, this shit isn’t going to be easily found out. You go asking questions to the wrong person and they’ll get spooked.”

I run my hands over my face. This is a lot more complicated than I thought. “Okay, so why don’t we start making a list of known associates of Marco and then find their known associates? I mean, it’s going to be a tight circle of assholes. They’re not going to brag about it to an unknown. It’s all going to be hush hush and spoken among friends. This must be an invite only event, so find the associates and then work from there.”

Dario smiles proudly at me, his eyes filled with love and warmth. “We’ll need to look into Sergei Turgenov’s associates as well.”

“Fuck, of course,” Kelvin snarls. “That bastard is involved in everything.”

The Gallo brothers share a wicked smile. “Not any longer. Turgenov has been dead for the past month. We’ve dismantled the Bratva as you know it. We have a friend who is now Pakhan.”

Kelvin blinks, and I laugh. “Finally, something you don’t know.”

“I do not know everything, Portia,” he says, his British accent heavier than usual. “Now, what’s going to happen when Marco Scaffidi discovers his business partner is no longer alive?”

“That’s something we’ll have to find out. But I’ll have Nico make the call to his friend and see if we can find out more information about what Turgenov was doing.”

I nod. “Hopefully, we’ll have more answers. But it’s good that we’re getting closer.”

“Baby, you get your laptop and start making a list of Marco’s associates. You have worked on his background more than anyone. Once you have that done, you and Jade can work on their associates.”

I beam at him, happy he’s not making me sit out of this. I’m not. I need to see it through. We’re so close, I can feel it.

“Jade, your cousin’s friends are here too,” Kelvin informs her.

“Who?” she asks with a furrowed brow.

“Stephen Maguire and Maverick O’Hara,” Kelvin says. “They also have information on some of the high-profile clients of Marco’s.”

“We’ll go to the office,” Jade offers. “That way, we can all work together and get this shit done. It also means there’ll be enough men guarding us, so our husbands won’t lose their minds when they have to leave.”

“That sounds good. I’ve got the majority of my notes there,” I say as I rise to my feet.

I see the wariness enter Dario's eyes. "I'm not sure that's the best idea," he says, a pained expression etched on his face. "At least here, I know you're safe."

Rocco nods in agreement. "This apartment complex has the best security, and our men are here. We know you and Teagan are safe."

I press my lips together. He's purposely keeping Jade's name out of that. She'd rebel against the need to have someone protect her. As the underboss, she'd want to face everything head on.

"My office is also secure. You can have a man or two guarding it if it would make you feel at ease," Kelvin says, his tone hard. No doubt hating the implication that it's otherwise. He rises to his feet and fixes the buttons on his suit jacket. He always looks smart. I think it's the British in him. I don't think I've ever seen him not wearing a suit.

Dario and Elio share a look, one I can't decipher. It annoys the hell out of me that I can't, but after a moment, Dario turns to Kelvin and gives him a tight nod. "If anything happens to her, Kelvin, I'm holding you personally responsible."

"I assure you, Dario, that Portia will be safe at the offices," Kelvin says. "I've got to go. I'll be meeting with my men and getting them to work on the Cooney Hotel aspect, and to see if we can uncover any frequent stayers."

"We'll go to the offices now," I say. "No doubt the Gallo's have things they need to do." Not to mention, I can't stand the tension between both Dario and Kelvin. I just wish they'd get along. It would make my life a whole lot easier.

Dario keeps my hand in his as we exit my apartment. I know he's worried, and I even understand that the closer we get to uncovering what's going on with the trafficking ring, the more danger we'll be in, but he needs to understand that I can look after myself. I have been doing it for a long time. It's hard to let someone else in to protect me, but I trust Dario and know that he'll do whatever it takes to keep me safe.

When we get in the car, I run my hand along his knuckles as he stares out of the window, his jaw clenched. "I'm going to be okay," I whisper so only he can hear me.

"I know. I just hate that we're so close and I'm leaving your safety in the hands of people I don't know or trust," he tells me, and I can hear the anguish in every syllable.

"What do you have planned?" I ask, hoping to get him talking about something other than me being alone.

"We'll be speaking with the Pakhan of the Bratva. Turgenov must have something he left behind. Maybe someone else within the Bratva that he trusted. We're going to find out. I promise you, Portia, we're going to fucking find out when these bastards are going to have the auction. We're going to uncover who every player involved is, and we're going to make them pay."

I lean my head against his shoulder. "I know," I whisper. "I just hope the women are going to be okay." I dread to think what they're going through. I can only imagine the pain and suffering they'll be dealt, especially as I know what kind of man Marco Scaffidi is. He's a monster, and he treats everyone

he deems less than him—i.e., women—as a slave and as someone who is to do his bidding, just as he did to my mama.

“I know, baby, but some of these women were taken months ago. They’ll have been subjected to brutality.”

I swallow the bile that rises through my throat. “I’m worried about Jamie.” I can’t stop thinking about what she could be going through.

“Don’t borrow trouble, Portia,” he says, sliding his arm around my waist and pulling me closer to him. “We’ve just got to work hard at finding out the little details so we can put a stop to it. The last thing we want to do is spook anyone because then we’ll lose what power we’ve gained. They’ll change the location of the auction, and we’ll never know where they’ll be. They’ll tighten their reins and close ranks.”

Fuck. Why are these assholes such bastards?

“But we’re going to make sure that doesn’t happen,” he tries to assure me. But I have a sickening feeling in my stomach. I don’t know if we’ll make it in time. I really don’t.

I’ve been running the software that Robert invented—or more likely stole from some high-tech intelligence agency. We’re able to type in a name and it brings up everything about them. Pictures, cell numbers, and even their calendars. It’s going to take some time to work through it all to uncover the exact information we need, but with the pictures we’re finding, we’re running the facial recognition software that he also has

—again, something I have no doubt he stole—and running their information too.

“Portia?” I hear a surprised, deep voice call out as I’m deep in working through the list of names and pictures I have uncovered. “Portia Leone?”

That shocked voice sounds so familiar that it makes my heart hurt. I raise my head, my gaze colliding with the deepest brown eyes I’ve ever seen, eyes that remind me of home. “Amadeo,” I whisper.

His eyes fill with tears as he nods, pressing his hand to his chest. “Yes. God, Portia, you look so much like your mother,” he says softly. “How is she?”

I shake my head, swallowing back the tears. “I don’t know. I haven’t seen her in over five years.”

His eyes widen, and his lips part. “You h-haven’t?” he stammers. “W-why?”

I sigh, not wanting to get into this. “That’s for another day,” I tell him.

“The boss wants me here, watching you,” he tells me as he straightens his shoulders and gives me a blinding smile, his words filled with pride.

I return his smile. “Like old times,” I say wistfully.

He inclines his head. “Yes, I’ll be standing outside your office door. I have also asked Mrs. Gallo to sit with you. Mrs. Gallagher-Gallo didn’t take too kindly to my direction.”

I press my lips together. “Yeah, it’s best you don’t try to dictate to Jade. She’ll carve a smile in your throat.”

“Noted, ma’am.”

I shake my head. “Amadeo, please, call me Portia?”

“Certainly. Mrs. Gallo is getting you both coffee. She has assured me she’ll be in your office as soon as she’s done.”

“Thank you,” I tell him, and I feel a little relieved that he’s my guard. I know him. I know that he loved my parents, and he’ll do whatever it takes to ensure that not only do I stay safe, but so do Jade and Teagan.

But still, that niggling in my gut continues. Something bad is going to happen. I can feel it, and it chills me to the bone with fear.

TWENTY-EIGHT

DARIO

“**Y**ou know much about Stephen or Maverick?” I ask Rocco as we exit the office building. I fucking hate leaving Portia behind. Something in my gut is telling me to turn back and keep her with me, but I know if I did, she’d probably try to kill me. She needs space. And I get it; she’s not used to having anyone protect her and she’s trying to let me in, but it’s going to take time.

“I’ve heard of them, yes,” he says. “When Chloe went missing, it was Stephen and Maverick who got the information on the asshole who was pulling the strings. Both men are well known on the other side of the Atlantic. They’re feared in Europe. They’re also highly sought after thanks to their particular skill sets.”

“Oh, and what are those, exactly?” I ask, wondering what fuckery those two men do.

“Stephen Maguire is known as the Eraser because he can erase anyone from this world. He’ll kill someone and you’ll never find their bodies. No one knows how, only those close to him, but he’s fucking good at his job.”

I grin. No wonder he's sought after. Having someone like him as part of your organization would be huge.

"As for Maverick, what he does is also not known, but much like Stephen, he has a way of getting rid of people. He's known as the Cleaner." Rocco chuckles. "From what I've gathered, he works with acid."

I shake my head. "Fucking nicknames," I mutter. But I have no doubt that the men are good at what they do.

"They also know a lot of the players within Europe and have managed to uncover some of the high players in the trafficking ring," Rocco explains. "So, we're going to meet with them and see what they've got for us."

I nod. "Sounds good. Here's hoping that this shit ends today." It fucking needs to. I want Portia out of trouble, and having Marco so fucking close to her puts me on edge. We don't know who he has on his books, which men he has working for him. Right now, I'm not trusting anyone.

The rest of the drive toward the hotel in which the Irish men are staying is quiet. Everyone is reflective, and I have no doubt my brothers are worried for their wives, just as I am for Portia.

"Glad you could make it," Stephen says with a nod as we arrive, his thick Irish accent a little heavier than I'm used to hearing from Jade's family. His dark hair is short and cut in a buzz cut, but those green eyes of his are cold and calculating

as he assesses us. “Heard a lot about the three of you. I also know that I owe you for protecting my niece, so thank you.”

Maverick nods. He reminds me a lot of his sister, Callie. When Chloe was taken, she and Denis flew to Chicago to find her. Callie was devastated that her daughter was missing. With Maverick being her twin, it’s crazy to see how similar they are while knowing they’re completely different. Like dark versus light. Callie has all the light. She’s bright and happy. Whereas her brother is the complete opposite, darkness and destruction.

“Chloe’s family,” Rocco says. “We’ll do whatever it takes to protect our family.”

“Agreed,” Maverick says, and again, his accent is thicker than I expected. “Which is why we’re here. Your woman, Dario, means that she’s family.”

Gratitude hits me. “Appreciate it.”

“Now, when we got the call from Kelvin, we immediately got to work, calling in friends we have. You should know that this trafficking ring spans across two continents. Sergei Turgenov had the Russian side of things handled while Marco Scaffidi had the US side,” Maverick begins. “But since the Famiglia so kindly took care of Turgenov for everyone, the Russian side of the ring has crumbled, and word is, Marco has no idea.”

I grin. That’s exactly what we want: for Marco to be in the dark and to not realize he’s heading for a trap.

“Let me get this straight,” I say. “Those bastards have been trafficking women in and out of the States and smuggling

them to Russia and vice versa?”

Stephen gives me a grim nod. “Yes, but not only Russia. You see, the Turgenev Bratva have their hands in a lot of places. They’re spread throughout the entire European continent. They settle into bustling cities and try to profit off the tourists. They’re notorious for their brutality, and now that Turgenov is dead, there’s currently a fight among those who were closest to Sergei in Russia as to who’s going to take over.”

My brows knit together. “I thought that would have been Kirill?” Kirill is the informant we had within the ranks of the Bratva. He was close to Turgenov. But Kirill chose to turn his back on his Pakhan when the fucker went after his wife.

Maverick shakes his head. “They do not think Kirill has what it takes to be a good Pakhan.”

My lips twist into a smirk. “Guess that’s what happens when you betray your boss.”

Maverick chuckles. “Yeah, although they have no idea that he did. That’s something only the Famiglia knows. But Vlad and Rodion want the power, and they’re trying to emulate what Sergei did. So we need to neutralize this trafficking ring as quickly as possible.”

“Which is where you come in,” Rocco says. “We have the details that it’s taking place next week and it will be in The Cooney Hotel here in Jefferson City. It’s an auction where they’ll be selling the women and girls off to the highest bidder,” my brother snarls, his voice filled with anger.

“As I was saying,” Maverick grins. “We got to work. We found out that Judge Lachan is a frequent flier with this shit. He’s one of the highest paying clients Marco Scaffidi has. The man has a fucking shopping list when these auctions come around.” Maverick’s eyes are filled with darkness. “We have no idea about his houses or anything. So far, we’ve only been able to uncover his wife, and even then, there’s the bare minimum.”

I shake my head. “That bastard,” I snarl. “He’s big on reform and making sure that those who are sent to prison get let out and never go back. Bastard is a fraud. Who the fuck buys women?”

Elio watches me with a weird look on his face. “Didn’t know you were well educated on the judicial system, Dario.”

I flip him off. “Needed to know who everyone was when I arrived, asshole,” I snap. I pull out my cell and hit dial on Beppe’s number.

“Boss,” he says as he answers.

“The information we have on Judge Lachan, bring it to me,” I instruct, giving him my location. “Fuck, bring me the information we have on all the rich bastards in Jefferson City.”

My brothers raise their brows. The look of pride in their eyes makes me smirk. “I do my shit right,” I tell them. “I needed to know everything about everyone when I moved here. I needed to know what made people tick. I also wanted to ensure that I had enough dirt on people if I needed it. Which is why Judge Lachan will give us the information we need.”

Maverick chuckles. “I like you. So, what did you find out about good old Judge Lachan?”

“Not only does he have his wife, Suzette, he also has two mistresses that he keeps hidden in his secret houses scattered around the city. Both mistresses are over thirty years younger than him, and both women have kids by him. Something he and Suzette haven’t been able to have.”

Stephen rubs his hands together with glee. “Then we know what we’re doing. The moment we have the file on the bastard, we’re going to his home. Fuck, we’ll go to all the homes. I want to make sure he gives us the information we need. That means all his bitches are coming along for the ride. Let’s see how he’ll react when they’re threatened.”

Now that is a good plan. A man who has kids with a woman and has kept them secret for years must do so out of more than just loyalty. I wonder which woman he’ll choose to save?

“Ready?” I ask Elio as we pause at the door.

He gives me a sharp nod. I turn to Beppe and Santo, and both men do the same.

I lift my foot and kick hard, and the door to the judge’s front door splinters. The guards are already disarmed and are dead on the ground. We’re hitting all three homes hard and at once. Rocco and Kelvin, along with some men, are at one of the mistresses’ houses, while Stephen, Maverick and some of

Kelvin's men are at the other's. We're doing a sweep, getting them all at once so there's no alarm raised. Get in and get them out. Simple and easy.

"What the fuck are you doing?" the judge hisses as he moves toward us, his face red and flustered. "I asked you a damn question. Now answer me!"

We ignore him. Both Beppe and Santo move around me and push toward the living room, where a terrified Suzette is standing, her eyes wide, her lips parted. She looks as though she's been petrified to the spot.

"Do you know who I am?" he snarls.

I laugh. I can't help it. The man thinks he's fucking God or something. No fucking way. "We know. We don't give a fuck." Both Elio and I reach for him. The judge is a big fucker, weighing at least three hundred and fifty pounds. A quick pistol whip to his head and he crumples to the floor.

"Ahhhh," Suzette cries as she watches her husband's prone body. "You killed him. You've killed him!"

Beppe shakes his head. "Dramatic," he mutters. "He's not dead. He's just out cold. Now, if you want the same treatment, carry on with the screaming," he tells her.

Elio carries the judge to the trunk of the car while I move toward Suzette. "Are you going to be quiet?" I ask her.

She whimpers as she glances around. There are three men watching her, ready to knock her out if need be. "I am," she cries. "Please don't hurt me."

The woman's in her late sixties and she's thin and frail. One blow to her head could have her dead. "Let's go, lady. We've got questions for your husband, and we need answers."

She nods solemnly and walks toward me. "What did he do?" she asks softly. "Is he in trouble?"

"Yes, ma'am," I reply. "He's in a lot of trouble, and we need answers."

She nods. "Could I have my jacket?"

Beppe doesn't wait for me to give him the go ahead; he reaches for it, checking the pockets to make sure there are no weapons or anything before he hands it to her.

"Is it that woman again? Is he back with her?"

"I'm not sure which woman you're referring to," I say, wondering just how much this old lady knows about her husband's extracurricular activities.

"Nadia," she hisses. "The woman he had an affair with years ago. Is she back?"

Now that's not the name of one of his mistresses, but it's good to know there were more. I wonder if they're actually mistresses or if they're women he's purchased. They're a fuck of a lot younger than he is.

"Come on, Suzette, into the car," Beppe says softly as he takes her hand and helps her into the vehicle he and Santo are driving.

"You good?" Elio asks as I slide into the passenger's side of our vehicle. "Rocco's checked in. They have the woman,

but there's no sign of the kid. The same for Stephen and Maverick."

My brows knit together. "Where the fuck are the kids?" It makes no fucking sense. It's late at night. We hit the judge's house when darkness had settled, making it harder for us to be seen. So where the fuck are the kids?

"Kelvin wants us to bring them to the warehouse he has. He says it's set up for tonight," Elio says as he starts the engine. "From what Rocco says, it's like Kelvin's kill house."

I shrug. I don't give a fuck what it is, as long as we're able to question the fucking judge and find out when this shit is going down. I also want to know where the women are being held. Once we have that information, we can free them and kill the bastards that are guarding them.

It takes us less than forty minutes to arrive at the warehouse. They weren't fucking joking when they said it's his kill house. The floors are covered with clear plastic, and there are four chairs set up, two of which have been taken by the judge's mistresses.

Elio carries the judge to his seat and Beppe helps Suzette to hers. Once they're there, Kelvin and Maverick bind their hands and ankles to the wooden chair.

I chuckle as Stephen sits on his haunches and slaps the judge's face, trying to get him to wake the fuck up. It doesn't take long, just a few minutes. The judge blinks a few times, his eyes narrowing when he sees Stephen in front of him, but then they widen when he sees his wife, and then even more so when he sees his mistresses.

“Welcome,” Kelvin says, his British accent thick, anger lacing his words. “I take it there’s no need for me to introduce the women we have here. You know Monica and Sarah, right, Judge?”

“Dell?” Suzette asks, her words etched in pain. “What have you done, Dell?”

“I’m sorry, Suzette. I truly am,” the bastard says. “I never wanted you to find out.”

“Both of them?” his wife hisses. “How could you do this to me?”

I step forward. This isn’t about their marriage. “Now, Judge, we have some questions for you and you’re going to answer. If you don’t, well, then these ladies are going to feel the pain.”

His lips pull into a snarl, and his eyes narrow into slits. “Fucking monsters,” he snarls.

I shake my head. “Wrong,” I hiss as I whip my knife out of its sheath. “Tell me, Judge. How did you meet Monica and Sarah? Was it from the auction?”

The women glance down at their knees, and that’s answer enough for us to know that yes, this bastard bought them.

“You bastard,” Suzette cries. “What did you do to those women?”

“Good question,” Rocco says as he moves behind Suzette. I walk behind Monica, and Stephen stands behind Sarah. “What did you do to them?”

He shakes his head. “Nothing,” he snarls. “They love me.”

Bullshit. They’ve been trained to do and say what the asshole wants. He’s a predator.

“How old are you?” I ask Monica. “Do not lie to me, Monica. I want the truth.”

“Twenty, sir. It was my birthday yesterday,” she replies, keeping her head down.

“How long have you been kept by the judge?”

She shakes her head. “I don’t know,” she whimpers, not once lifting her head.

“That’s okay,” I tell her. “I know that your son is four, the son you have with the judge. Isn’t that correct?”

She nods, not speaking verbally this time, which means she was at the very least fifteen when he fucked her. Sick bastard. God, I can’t wait to kill the cunt.

“What about you?” Stephen asks Sarah. “How old are you and when did you come to him?”

“I’m eighteen, sir. I’ve been with him for almost seven years.”

Acid churns in my stomach as I stare at the bastard. He’s glaring right back at me, keeping his head held high.

Suzette is weeping softly, her entire body shaking with her sobs. She won’t look at her husband. I guess finding out your husband’s a pedophile will make you want to throw up.

“Now that we have that out of the way,” Maverick snaps, “how about we get on to the questions at hand,” he says,

crouching in front of the judge. “The auction, when is it happening?” he asks.

Silence. The judge says nothing, just stares at Maverick.

“That’s okay,” Mav says with a grin. “Let’s see how talkative you get when Monica here loses a finger.”

I don’t hesitate. This is my job. Right now, there are hundreds of women who are locked up, ready to become just like Monica and Sarah. I push my knife into her finger, breaking the bone and cartilage, tendons and nerves, until she’s screaming in pain.

“No,” the judge yells. “Leave her alone.”

“We will—once you tell us when the auction is taking place.”

“Monday,” he hisses, pulling against his bindings. He’s got tears streaming down his face. “Don’t hurt her, please.”

I pull my knife from her finger, and her blood flows onto the plastic like a fucking river. She’s lucky I didn’t sever it completely. She still has some hope of keeping it.

“Now, where are the women being held?” Stephen asks. “I want the location and I want it now.”

The judge shakes his head. “I can’t,” he breathes, the tears still streaming down his face.

Stephen’s smirk is beyond sadistic as he runs his knife along Sarah’s throat, slicing through the flesh. Blood pours from the wound, but he’s not gone deep enough to kill her. Yet.

“No,” the judge cries. “Leave my girls alone. They’re mine. You do not touch them.”

I shake my head in disgust. Fucking sick bastard.

“Tell us where the women and girls are being held,” Maverick snaps.

“No,” he snarls. “Step away from my girls, then I’ll tell you.”

Stephen shakes his head. “That’s not how this works, cunt.” He doesn’t hold back. This time when he slices along Sarah’s throat, he does it deep enough to kill her. It takes less than a minute until she’s dead, her body lifeless in the chair, her throat slit open from ear to ear.

“No!” the judge roars in horror. “You can’t do that,” he cries. “She’s mine. She’s mine.”

Stephen chuckles. “Not anymore. She’s free of your shit.”

“Now, answer the question, because it’s Suzette’s turn next,” Maverick says, and I’m pretty sure there’s laughter in his voice. “Where are the women being held?”

He gives us a location, and it’s about an hour’s drive from here. Lucky for us, we have men all over this city and enough men to be at the location within minutes. Elio makes the call, getting the men ready to find the women, while Kelvin does the same. No doubt they’ll have a team of about thirty men arriving within the next ten minutes.

“While we wait,” Maverick says as he rises to his feet. “We’ll try another question. And have no doubt, Dell, that if

that location comes back and there's no one there, your wife will die."

"They'll be there. I was only there this morning. The auction is in four days. They have no time to move them. He's frantically trying to get his partner on his cell, but there's no answer."

I grin. That's because Sergei is dead. Which means Marco is going to lose his ever-loving shit as soon as he realizes his friend is gone too.

"Who else is involved in this?" Maverick questions. "I want as many as you can name."

The judge doesn't hesitate. He names off high profile celebrities, politicians, police officers, and clergymen. Fucking animals. Beppe and Santo make note of all the people the judge has named, and we'll be ensuring they're dealt with later.

"Now," Stephen says as he moves toward the judge. "Where the fuck is Marco Scaffidi?"

The judge pales. "You know who's running this?" he asks, his voice trembling. "Then you'll know that he's untouchable."

I laugh. "No one is untouchable. Not even you."

"Marco will kill me," he cries. "I can't."

Stephen nods to me, and I reach for Monica's hair. "You either tell us where we can find that bastard, or Monica will end up the same way as Sarah. Then you'll have no one."

It doesn't matter. The fucker is going to die, and I know that whatever Stephen has planned, it's going to be fucking painful.

"I-I-I c-c-can't," he stammers. "P-p-please," he begs.

I end Monica's suffering with my blade sliding along her throat. Killing someone this way is easy. It takes less than two minutes to do the deed and for the victim to die.

The judge starts to sob, his body trembling as the girls that he groomed are gone.

"Your wife is next," Stephen hisses. "So we'll ask you again. Where is Marco?"

Elio and Kelvin's cells start to ring, and the air goes static as we wait for confirmation on whether or not they've found the women. They answer their cells and both men nod. Relief hits every fucking one of us. The women are found, they're safe. Now it's time to find that cunt Marco and end this shit once and for all.

"Marco," Stephen snarls. "Where is he?"

The judge shakes his head. "I don't know. I only met him at the hotel. I do not know where he lives."

Rocco steps up. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Lachan," he says to the sweet lady.

"It's okay. I'd rather be dead than have to look at his face anymore. He's an animal. A monster. I hate you, Dell. I hope these men hurt you," she cries. "What you did to those poor girls—" She shakes her head. "I hate you," she hisses at him.

Rocco makes her death quick. There was no way she would have been able to carry on after finding out what type of man her husband was. She was a wreck. Completely broken from the revelations. She just sat there and wept.

“No,” the judge weeps. “No, not my Suzette.”

God, he’s a bastard. He deserves everything he’s got coming to him.

“I say we leave him here,” I announce. “Let him look at the bodies of the women he fucked over. When we find Marco, we’ll come back and finish the job.”

Stephen grins at me. “I heard you were crazy. I like that idea. This fucker caused these women pain. He’d have taken another young girl too. He deserves everything he gets.”

The judge’s screams of pain and heartache can be heard as we leave the warehouse.

We’re almost there. Now we just have to find Marco.

TWENTY-NINE

PORTIA

“Are you sure you won’t come with us?” Teagan asks for the third time. “You need sleep, Portia. There’s no point working your ass off if you’re not fully rested.”

“Once I’ve done all of this, I’ll sleep. I promise,” I assure her. I’m too focused on the task at hand. There’s no way I could leave, not now, not yet. I need to find all the people who could be part of this trafficking ring. If we can do that, then maybe we can find out where they’re hiding them.

There are over a hundred women, so wherever it is, it must be big enough to house them. But what could be that big?

“I don’t like leaving you alone,” Teagan whispers.

I give her a smile. “I’m not alone. I have a knife, a gun, and I have both Amadeo and Robert here. So go, get some sleep, and I’ll see you in the morning.” I turn to Jade. “I know you’ve been in her ear,” I say, not happy about that in the slightest. “I’m capable of taking care of myself, as are you, Jade, so don’t make her fret when there’s no need.”

Jade crosses her arms over her chest and glares at me. “We’re worried about you. You’re burning yourself out. When was the last time you had a proper night’s sleep?”

“Last night,” I answer honestly. “I’m well rested and I’m waiting for Dario.” He’s busy with his brothers, and I know he would want me to stay where his men are and not leave. Until I hear otherwise, I’m staying here.

“Okay,” she says softly. “And just so you know, I did not make her fret. I’ve been listening to her talk all night about how worried she is.”

Teagan laughs. “She threatened me a few times if I didn’t stop. She said you can take care of yourself, and if you needed help, you’d ask.”

I sigh. “Sorry,” I apologize to Jade. “I’m on edge.”

She nods. “It’s expected. This shit is beyond crazy. I’m just glad you’re here and okay, rather than...” she trails off, but I know what she means.

“Go.” I wave them off. “Go, get some food and sleep. You need it.”

“I’ll be checking in,” Jade says, and I have no doubt she will. “If you don’t respond within two minutes, I’ll know you’re in trouble and I’ll have this place swarming with men. Okay?”

I give her a smile. We got off on the wrong foot when I met her, but she’s grown on me, and she’s taken Teagan under her wing. She’s protecting her since I’m no longer as close to her anymore, distance wise, so I’m thankful to her, and I appreciate that she’s also trying to extend that wing to me too. “I’ll answer,” I promise. “Now go.”

We say our goodbyes and I get back to work. I've printed out over one hundred documents, half of which will probably not be needed. But I want to ensure we have everything. I need to ensure that we have whatever it takes to bring Jamie back home.

The system Robert has is great, but there's something that has my spine tingling about it all. I don't understand how he managed to get his hands on this type of system. This is something the CIA, MI6, or FBI would use, so how does Robert have it? Then again, I don't know him, nor do I know what Kelvin's other line of work is.

I've always been distrustful and it's starting to come out again. I don't know who to trust or when to do so. I've lived my life always going with my instincts, but right now, those instincts are screwed a little.

Senator Michaels pops up for the fifth time. He's got connections to the judge, the Chief of Police, the District Attorney, and to two other people who I didn't see any relevance to, but now I'm second guessing myself. If these people are connected in more than just their job capacity, then it could be a good shout that they're involved in the trafficking ring.

I move out of my office and head toward the conference room where I've gathered all the files. I need to find those two people I put into the no pile and take them out. I hurry down the deserted corridor, and the hairs on the back of my neck stand up when I realize I'm alone.

Where the hell is Amadeo and Robert?

I get to the conference room and close the door. My cell is in my pocket, and I contemplate calling Dario. I take a deep breath and scold myself. Amadeo and Robert could be anywhere—the bathroom, on a call, anywhere. Why am I getting spooked? This isn't like me. I need to calm the hell down and refocus on the job at hand.

I look through the files, steadying myself once again and getting back into the zone. My brows knit together as I notice there are a few files missing. Frustration eats away at me as I try to remember if I left them in my office or not. I sigh and start looking through the piles of files that I have. There are over a hundred here, so it's going to take me a while, but I need those two files. I need to read through them and see if there's something I missed.

I sink to the floor with piles of files around me and sift through them. This is going to take forever. But I know that the two files I'm after are in this room. I put them here.

“Portia,” Amadeo says as he pushes open the conference room door. “Is everything okay? I've just had a call with the boss,” he tells me.

I get to my feet. “Is everything okay?” I ask, my heart racing.

He nods. “They have spoken with the judge and have some information. He said he'll be a little longer and asked me to ensure that you go home and sleep.”

I give him a soft smile. “Thank you, Amadeo, but right now, I need to find some files that I have misplaced.”

He nods, stepping further into the room. “Which ones?” he asks. “I can help you look. It will take half the time if I do.”

“That would be great,” I tell him. “The names on the files are Henrick Velleni and Joseph Kline.”

He nods and takes a pile off the table and starts to look through them.

“I’m sorry, Portia, but they’re not here,” he tells me a while later.

He’s right, they’re not. Together, we’ve searched through this entire room and the files aren’t here.

“Ugh,” I moan. “Where the hell can they be?” I ask. “I’m going to look in my office and see if I’ve somehow left them there.”

He dutifully follows behind me. Each step of the way, I feel a deep sense of dread, like something is going to happen, only I’m not sure what.

“What the hell?” I gasp as I enter my office and see the two files I’ve been searching for are sitting on my desk. I know for certain that they weren’t there when I left. “Damn it,” I hiss. “What the fuck is going on?”

“Miss Portia, maybe you need some rest,” Amadeo says softly. “You’ve been working hard for a long time. You may be tired.”

I shake my head. “No,” I say adamantly. “These files weren’t here when I left this office. Someone is fucking with me.”

He looks at me with confusion. “Why would someone do that?”

“I don’t—” My words are broken off by an alarm sounding. “What’s that?”

Amadeo straightens. “Stay in here and do not fucking leave. Someone’s breached the offices. Send an alert to the boss. Let him know what’s going on.”

I nod, my hands shaking as I reach for my cell.

“I mean it, Portia. Do not fucking leave your office. Lock the door and do not come out unless I tell you or Dario does.”

I take a deep breath, my feet moving toward the door. “I promise,” I tell him. He gives me a sharp nod and starts to move away, reaching for his gun. I close the door and flip the lock.

I fucking knew something wasn’t right, that there was something going on. I could feel it in my gut. With shaky hands, I type out a text message to Dario, letting him know that someone’s in the office and the alarm is sounding.

Once I’ve sent that, I pocket my phone and reach for my gun. My knife is safely tucked in my boot if I need it.

I sit with my gun trained on the door, taking deep breaths as I wait for someone to arrive. My gaze moves from the door to the clock that’s hanging on my wall. It’s almost three in the fucking morning. Whoever the fuck is here sure is a bastard for sneaking in late at night.

The time ticks by, the minutes moving slowly. Fifteen minutes pass before I hear a knock at the door. “Portia, it’s

me.”

Robert. Where the fuck has he been? He was supposed to be here. He was one of the guards, but I haven't seen him since Teagan and Jade left with Lorenzo.

“Where's Amadeo?” I ask.

“I don't know. I was in my office.” He sounds out of breath. “I fell asleep, and the next thing I know, the alarm is going off. I came to you immediately. Open the door. We need to get the hell out of here,” he says, his fists pounding on the door.

“Where's Amadeo?” I ask once again.

The handle of the door is pressed down, but he's unable to open it. I have the lock engaged.

“Portia, you have to listen to me,” he says, and the urgency of his voice makes me listen. “This man only just shows up, and the next thing, our offices are under attack. How much do we actually know about him?”

“I've known him since I was a child,” I say, slightly defensive.

“Fuck, Portia, come on. We know he was supposed to guard your house, but he wasn't there when your father died. We know that his friend was part of this ring. Could he be better at hiding who he is?”

I swallow hard. He's right, Amadeo could be great at hiding what he's done, but I can't say that I don't trust him, because I do. I don't know what that says about me. I'm

probably stupid. But right now, I trust Amadeo. “Robert, where is he?”

“Portia,” I hear Amadeo call. He’s close.

“Stay the fuck away from her,” Robert snarls. “How do I know you’re not setting up a trap? Luring her away to sell her just like the others?”

“Move the fuck away from the door,” Amadeo snaps. “You’re not getting in. So back the fuck away, now.” I hear movement, and I breathe a sigh of relief. “Okay, Portia,” Amadeo says. “Let’s get the fuck out of here and get you to the boss’ house.”

I nod even though he can’t see me, but fuck, that sounds like a fucking good plan. I walk toward the door.

“I don’t trust you with her,” Robert hisses. “I won’t let her leave with you.”

“I don’t give a fuck if you do or don’t. My priority is Miss Portia and getting her away from here. There’s no one outside, there are no other cars in the lot, and the alarm is still sounding. So tell me, asshole, where the fuck is the intruder?” Amadeo asks, his voice tight with anger.

“Portia, come out. We have to go,” he tells me. “Let’s get the fuck out of here. I need to get you to safety.”

I unlock the door and open it. Both men are standing off against one another, their weapons drawn. “Let’s go,” I say, looking at Amadeo. I’m going with my gut. It’s all I have right now.

“You’re making a mistake, Portia,” Robert says. “He’s the one who’s working with Marco.”

Amadeo spits on the floor. “Never,” he snarls. “Never would I work for that man. You’re eager to get her alone, Robert. Why is that?” Amadeo takes my hand and closes his fingers around it tightly. He starts to pull me along the corridor, away from Robert.

“What the hell is going on?” I ask as we run down the stairs.

“There’s no one here other than the three of us, Portia. You said it yourself, someone is fucking with you. Someone tripped the alarm, but who? I’ve searched this building and there’s no one but us here.”

I swallow my fear as I hear footsteps sound behind us. I push my legs harder as I follow Amadeo down the stairs. I have no fucking idea what’s going on. It’s all confusing. I have no idea who to trust. Both men are coming across as though they care about me and want to protect me, but if what Amadeo is saying is true, one of them is lying, and I can’t decipher which one.

Amadeo pushes the exit door open, and I follow him out.

“Portia, no,” Robert shouts, and I hear his feet pounding on the stairs as he chases after us.

“We’ve got to go,” Amadeo urges, pushing the keys to his car in my hand as he pulls me toward him.

I release his hand and start to run, my legs pounding against the ground as I run toward the car.

A gunshot sounds out, the noise so loud my ears feel as though they've popped. I wince as it's followed by a loud thud and a groan of pain.

I come to a halt and see Robert standing over Amadeo, who's lying on the ground, a bullet in his leg.

"Run, Portia," Amadeo shouts, but I can't. Robert has his gun trained on me and I'm fucking paralyzed. The thought of having that gun shoot me has me rooted to the spot. "Fucking run," he says through gritted teeth.

I come unstuck and turn on my heel. I start to sprint toward the car, but the sound of the gun going off follows me, and this time, searing heat and pain hit my arm. I fall to the floor as the pain becomes too much for me to continue.

I hear Robert's manic laughter. "You should have listened to him, Portia. He was right, you should have run and not stopped. You'd have escaped. But now, you're all mine." He gives me a sadistic grin, his eyes filled with hatred and pain. "Well, Marco's," he sneers. "It's going to be one big fucking family reunion."

I shake my head, swallowing the painful cry that's ready to escape me. "No," I cry. "Please don't do this. You're supposed to be the good guy."

His laughter makes my blood run cold. "Look at who your man is, Portia. Is there such a thing as a good man? Is there such a thing as being good? No. We're all filled with darkness. We all have our limits, and you, bitch, have reached mine." He holds the gun to my head, the heat of the barrel hot against my

skin. I flinch as memories of what Marco did to me the night I escaped come back, and my fear takes over.

He pulls me up by my arm, a painful tearing sound fills the air and it feels as though my arm is being ripped in two. I cry out, the pain too much for me to bear, and the darkness swallows me whole. The last thing I think of is Dario and if he'll find me in time.

THIRTY
DARIO

“The hotel has been empty for almost a decade,” Kelvin tells us as we climb into the seven-seater SUV he has. “It seems as though Marco has had it revamped and made livable. From what my men have gathered, it’s being run as a whorehouse until they sell the women.”

“Christ, how the fuck has this gone undetected?” Rocco questions. “Surely having a whorehouse on the edge of a major city would spark some questions?”

“You’d think,” Stephen grunts. “But with the number of cops and judges on their books as clients, they’ve had the perfect set up. Anyone who had questions has probably been paid off or has disappeared.”

Fucking bastards. “Have you thought about how this is going to work?” I ask. “The women aren’t going to want to be near men. They’ve been abused, raped, and beaten into submission. They’re not going to trust easily.”

Stephen grits his teeth, his eyes going hard with rage. “No, they won’t. But right now, we’re going to keep them at the hotel and give them some treatment. Some are bleeding and need medical attention, others are higher than a fucking kite.”

So, they've been drugging them as well as beating them into submission. Fuck.

"If we keep them at the hotel, then we'll be able to deal with all those who are part of this on Monday night at the hotel," Kelvin says grimly.

I nod. "Any ideas on how to take out all those bastards at once?"

Stephen grins. "An explosion," he says easily. "We can blame it on a gas pipe or something. It's easy enough to make it look as though there was a gas leak. That way, every fucking bastard that has been buying girls and women will be under one roof and they'll all die together."

Sounds like a fucking plan in my eyes. Take everyone out without a chance of them escaping.

"I have doctors on their way. These are people that I trust. I know they'll look after the women and make sure they're taken care of in the way they need to be cared for," Kelvin assures us.

"Let's get this done," I say, wanting to get back to Portia as soon as fucking possible. The longer I'm away from her, the louder my gut is screaming at me, and with all the shit that's going down, I can't be sure what it's screaming about.

We arrive at the hotel, and I see what Kelvin's men were talking about. The outward appearance of this hotel is fucking shit. The bricks are crumbling, the paintwork is in dire need of redoing, the grass is overgrown, and the door looks as though it's been boarded up. It's dirty, derelict, and anyone driving

past wouldn't give it a second look. It's inconspicuous, which means it's the perfect place for those bastards to use as a brothel.

Stepping into the hotel, I'm shocked at how clean and presentable it is. The walls are a bright white, and the carpet is light gray. Everything is clean and new. It's as though I've stepped into a different place.

"Boss," Beppe says as he comes to stand beside me. "We've checked every room. Portia's friend, Jamie, isn't here."

"The fuck?" Kelvin growls. "Are you sure?"

Beppe nods. "We've triple-checked. She's not here. The homeless girl, Pia, she didn't make it. She's upstairs in one of the rooms," he shakes his head. "Looks as though she died of an overdose. "But you should know there are girls as young as seven here."

Fucking bastards. God, what cunts. I hate pedophiles. They need to be killed instantly. Bastards.

My cell buzzes with a text message, but I leave it be, focusing on the task at hand. If it's urgent, they'll call me.

We go through each room. Some of the women are protective of the young girls here, and I know that when they're free, they'll be trauma bonded over this for life. I just hope the young girls are able to go home.

We take note of their names, asking them who we should call and explaining what our plans are. The older women are happy to wait for our plan to play out and then to seek the

medical attention they need, and to help the younger girls get the medical attention also.

We're halfway through the first floor when my cell rings. It's Amadeo. "Yeah?"

"Boss," he groans, and my blood runs cold. "I'm sorry, boss. I should have known."

"Amadeo, where is Portia?"

"He's taken her," he tells me. "He's taken her."

"Who has?" I hiss, my gaze moving to Rocco. He's already on his cell, no doubt calling Jade.

"Robert. He took Portia. He shot her."

"Where are you?" I ask him, needing to know where my woman is. "Amadeo, where are you?"

The line goes silent but not dead. He's not answering me. I grit my teeth. Fuck. Was he shot too?

"Let's go," Stephen says as he slaps my back. "We're going to the office. We're going to watch the fucking security footage and find out where your girl is."

"Beppe," Rocco says. "My wife and Elio's are at home. Go to them, join our men, and make sure they're secure."

Beppe glances at me. He wants to be with me. "Santo, you go instead. Beppe, you're with me."

Rocco clenches his jaw. He's pissed, and I get it. I overruled his order. But Beppe is my man, my right-hand man. He goes where I go.

“Roc, if you want to be with your wife, go,” I tell him. “I get it. With this shit, we don’t know where they’re going to hit next.”

He shakes his head. “I’m not going anywhere,” he says like I’m fucking crazy. “Let’s go find out where that fucker has taken her.” He turns to Kelvin. “Gather everything you know about Robert. I want everything you have on him and more by the time we’re at the office. You let that bastard near Portia. You promised us she’d be safe with him. Now look at her.”

I don’t look at the asshole as I exit the hotel. Right now, I need to focus on getting all the information we can on who the fuck Robert is and where he’d have taken Portia. That fucker has gone too far. No one takes my woman.

The ride to the office is intense. Everyone’s anger is bubbling, ready to be unleashed. Stephen and Maverick have been on their cells the entire journey, trying to uncover who Robert truly is.

Pulling into the parking lot, I spot Amadeo lying on the ground by the door. Fuck, he looks in bad shape. He’s not moving, not even as the vehicle gets closer to him.

“Amadeo?” I say as I crouch down to him. He’s been shot in the leg, and he’s bleeding profusely.

“I’m sorry,” he says, his words low, but I hear them. “I tried to save her.”

I nod. “You did good. Thank you.”

“He shot her. She was running toward my car, and he shot her.”

“We’re going to save her,” I promise him, because there is no other choice. She’s coming back to me.

“S-s-save h-h-er,” he breathes.

I close his eyes as he takes his last breath. He died trying to protect her, and I know Davide would be proud of him for doing that. When we find them, I’m going to enjoy killing whoever the fuck Robert is.

Stephen hits play, and I see Portia in her office, her gaze on her computer intense as she looks at something. My attention moves to Robert as he walks to the conference room and takes some of the files that are there. He then heads back to his own office.

Stephen fast forwards the footage as Portia goes to the conference room and sorts through the files. It’s as though she’s looking for something. While she’s in there, Amadeo joins her and tries to help her. Robert sneaks out of his office and into Portia’s, where he drops the files onto her desk.

“Fuck, what is he up to?” Maverick asks. “The fucker took those files. Is that what she’s looking for?”

“Is there any volume?” Elio asks as we watch Portia and Amadeo walk back to her office. Portia looks on edge. She seems to be fighting back tears. Stephen switches the volume up, and we hear Portia entering the room.

“What the hell?” she gasps. “Damn it. What the fuck is going on?”

“Fuck,” Maverick says as we listen to Portia tell Amadeo that someone’s fucking with her. She’s right, Robert was doing exactly that.

“Beppe, go see if those files are still in her office,” I instruct him. He nods and heads out of the room. “Play the rest,” I say through clenched teeth.

I watch as Amadeo tells her to stay behind the door and lock it. He does everything correctly. Everything I would have done. Robert is good. He’s trying to get her to doubt Amadeo. He put on a good fucking show and would have made a lot of people second guess what was going on. Hell, had she not known Amadeo since she was a child, she probably would have believed Robert.

Amadeo keeps her with him as he leads her down the stairs and out of the office building. Christ, the man did everything he could have.

I clench my jaw as I watch Robert shoot Amadeo and then turn the gun to Portia. That fucker knew too much. The way he held the gun to her head, I could see the fear in her eyes. How did he know to do that? Was it a lucky guess? I don’t think so. No fucking way. He’s connected to Marco in some way.

The screams she releases when he pulls on her arm has my stomach in knots. Christ, I’m going to fucking kill him. God... What a bastard. The screams stop abruptly, and she passes out. I clench my fists as he picks her up like a fucking ragdoll and throws her into the car.

“Shit,” Elio snarls. “Fucking bastard.”

“Kelvin,” Rocco says, his voice vibrating with anger. “Can you trace a GPS signal here?”

Kelvin nods. He’s been quiet the entire time we’ve been here. “We can. What do you need?”

“That bastard took Amadeo’s car. We have ours fitted with GPS.”

Finally, fucking finally, hope blooms in my chest. We’re going to find her. I’m not going to stop until we do.

“Found the files,” Beppe says as he enters the room again. “There are two. I had a look and these two are the only ones without pictures. Portia worked her ass off to get information on everyone, but she missed the pictures from these two.”

I turn to Stephen. He’s already reaching for the files. “I’m on it,” he says.

I feel useless. Right now, there’s nothing I can fucking do. Not a thing. I’m waiting on information, but the moment I have it, I’m going to find her and kill anyone who’s touched her, starting with Robert.

“Got it,” Stephen says. “Fuck,” he growls.

“Ah, bollocks,” Maverick hisses. “Kelvin, how the fuck did you miss this?”

I look at the screen. The two names that belong to the files are Henrick Velleni and Joseph Kline, but both pictures are of Robert. Which one is his real alias, or are neither of them real?

Kelvin runs a hand through his hair. “Cunt,” he snaps. “How the fuck did he get through our background checks?”

“He’s good at what he does,” Beppe says. “Didn’t you say all this software was his?” At Kelvin’s nod, he continues. “It makes sense. He keeps you close while making sure you don’t get anywhere near his real identity or the shit he’s up to.”

“We have the GPS located,” Kelvin says. “He’s stationary, at a house on the outskirts of Hartsburg.”

“That’s a twenty-minute drive,” I say as I get to my feet. It took us almost forty to get here from the hotel and we’ve been sitting here watching the security camera footage for God knows how long. What have they been doing to her while we’ve been here?

“Then let’s go,” Rocco says.

“Yes,” Stephen hisses. “Guess who the house belongs to?” he asks as he follows us out of the room.

A wicked smile forms on my face. “Marco Scaffidi,” I answer.

Good. It’s time to end this shit and get my woman back. I promised her she could be present when Marco is killed, and I plan on keeping it. She’s coming home to me.

THIRTY-ONE
PORTIA

A moan escapes my lips as pain radiates from my arm. Opening my eyes, I'm surprised to see I'm not in the parking lot like I remember, but instead, in a darkened room. Where the hell am I? I wiggle my fingers and whimper as the pain hits me. God, Robert... What a dick. He pulled my arm from its socket. The pain is a constant sharpness. Every time I move, even just the slightest bit, a sharp, shooting pain makes its way up my arm. I wiggle my hand and feel the bindings eating against my flesh. Fuck, I'm tied up.

"Ah, you're awake," I hear a voice say. It's very monotone, dreary even, but it's familiar.

My back straightens, and I blink in the darkness, trying to see where the voice came from. "I see you're still hiding, Marco. You always were a coward."

A light flicks on, and I pull in a ragged breath when I see my mama sitting opposite me, tied to a chair, her mouth covered with tape. She's lost so much weight since the last time I saw her. Her once luscious brown hair is dull and turning gray. It's hard to recognize her as she's got bruising on her face, heavy bruising, but I know those soft, powder blue

eyes. I know they're hers. I'm so relieved that she's alive. I just hate that she's here and still being hurt by that animal.

"Coward?" Marco sneers as he steps closer to me, a gun in his hand. "I'm not the one who pissed the bed, am I, Portia?"

He's an asshole. That's never changed and it never will.

"You're the man who has beaten and raped a woman. You are a coward, Marco. What's wrong with you? Hmm? No woman wants you, so you have to beat Mama and make her compliant? Is that the only way a woman will allow you to touch her? By beating her into submission?"

His lips twist into a snarl, and he pulls his hand back and viciously backhands me. My head flies to the left from the force, but I don't cry. I don't allow him to see just how much he hurt me. No, I'll be damned if I show this animal any fear.

"Good to see you haven't changed, Marco," I sneer.

"You always were a stuck-up bitch, Portia. You never did know when to mind your damn business."

I grin at him. "Like father, like son, eh? I mean, your son was killed because he was a rapist. I guess the apple doesn't fall far from the tree."

"You fucking bitch," he snarls. "You're a fucking bitch."

I widen my smile. "Yeah, I guess I am. But you aren't a man. No man would hurt a woman the way you do."

His eyes are wide, and the anger etched on his face would have made sixteen-year-old me shiver in fear, but not today. No. I'm not the same girl I was five years ago. I'm no longer

going to allow this man to dictate my life, nor my mama's life. I want us to be free of him, to be able to live our lives without fear.

I just hope that Dario realizes I'm gone and finds me. I also pray that Amadeo is okay. The thought of him dying makes my heart hurt.

Marco takes a step toward me, the gun in his hand aimed at my head. He digs the barrel against my skin and laughs. "This brings back memories, eh?"

I don't say a word. I sit tall and hold my head high. I won't crumble or whimper. If he pulls the trigger, I won't show fear.

"Look at you," he says, his words filled with praise. "You've grown a backbone, Portia. I like it."

I raise a brow. "One of us had to, didn't we?"

His chuckle grates on my skin. He's a slimeball. "What about your mom? Hmm? She's still a whimpering mess. The woman doesn't know the word strength."

I look at my mama, and the fear in her eyes is clear to see. She's scared he's going to kill me. She's worried what he'll do. But I'm not. Marco enjoys fear. He's going to hurt me, but he won't kill me. No, he's going to do what he wanted all those years ago. He's going to sell me.

"My mama is one of the strongest women I know," I say, looking directly at her. "She survived your brutality. She's still here, and she'll continue to be here. She's stronger than you'll ever know. You think she's weak." I shake my head. "You are the weak one. Not her. She's amazing."

He pulls his finger back and the gun clicks, the sound so loud against my ears, but I don't flinch. I despise that he's trying to send me back to one of the darkest memories I have. He's crazy if he truly believes I'll go there. I've seen the worst he can do. He's all about power and all about breaking people in order to get that power. Killing me won't satisfy his needs. He wants me to be a shell of the woman I am. Good luck to him. He's never going to do it.

"Excellent," he says, and I'm sure there is a level of admiration there. "But don't worry, Portia, you're going to end up begging me, just as your mom does." He flips the gun in his hand and brings it down against my temple. Pain bursts inside my head and colors fill my vision, but I don't make a sound. "You've grown in strength. I'm impressed. It's a shame you didn't show this resilience when you were younger. It could have been you in your mom's place."

Sick fucking bastard. I was a child. Fuck him and his bullshit.

"How did you get Robert to work with you?"

His chuckle sets me on edge. I hate that he has a one-up on me.

"Oh yes, Robert," he says with a laugh. "Or as you'd know him better, Marianna, as Henrick."

Fuck. Henrick Velleni. The file I had, it's him. How did I miss this? Now it makes sense. It was him who took the files and tried to fuck with my head. He must have thought I was close to finding out who he was. But how the hell did I miss it?

“Henrick has been one of my soldiers since he was a teen. His father, Enzo, married a French woman—a whore. She couldn’t handle what Enzo did for a living and ended up leaving without their son, Henrick. The boy has been indebted to me, since I took care of him after his father died. He’s been as close to me as my own son.”

“Why—is he a rapist too?” I ask, glaring at Robert/Henrick, or whoever the fuck he is. He’s watching on with a weird expression on his face. Is he only now realizing just how fucked up Marco is? No, there’s no way anyone couldn’t know. Marco has always been depraved, so what’s with the weird, horrified look?

Once again, Marco brings the gun down against my temple. This time, the pain that erupts is almost paralyzing. I bite down against my lip to stop the cry from spilling out.

“You never learn,” Marco snarls. “Keep your mouth shut, bitch, then you’ll live.”

“You’re not going to kill me,” I taunt him. “You’d rather sell me, right?”

His eyes narrow as he brings his hand to my face, his fingers and thumb digging into my cheeks. “You never know what’s good for you. I will sell you, bitch. I’m going to make a lot of money off you. You’ll be the one they all fight over, wanting to be the bastard to break you. Little will they know that I was the first. I made you a whimpering mess. I made you piss your pants.”

I hear the snick of a lock opening. Having lived on the streets, I learned how to listen for the slightest of noises. Yes,

that's a door opening. I glance around and see no one else has noticed. My heart pounds wildly, my mind instantly going to Dario. I hope it's him. I'm not sure how long I can hold out before I tell this bastard that all his hard work is gone. Ruined. He's got no one and has nothing left.

"That's better. I do prefer when a bitch knows how to keep her fucking mouth closed."

"Oh, bite me, asshole," I snap at him. "You wouldn't know what to do with anyone who would go against you. You'd be the one who would be a whimpering mess. You'd lose your shit and rock in a corner."

The door to this room opens a little, not by much, but enough for me to notice. I see those gorgeous brown eyes that I love so much, and my heart settles. He's here. I was right. It is him. God, he's here.

"Try me, whore. Try it and see how quickly I sell you off to someone."

I roll my eyes. This man, he's fucking deluded. Does he think I'm going to go willingly? Even if I knew there was no auction, I'd fight tooth and nail to get away. I would never stick around and take this shit. Not from him, not from anyone.

"If that's what you think," I say, and watch as his eyes narrow. "The question is, Marco: how are you going to earn money when you have no women, no business partner, and no auction?"

Shock enters his eyes. “What?” he hisses, his fingers tightening around my face. “Tell me what you meant.”

I grin at him, pulling my face from his grip. “Ask your boy there,” I say, nodding in Robert’s direction. “I’m surprised he didn’t tell you that we had the judge, and he gave it all up. How it’s happening on Monday night at the Cooney Hotel. He even told us who’ll be there and where the women are currently staying.” My smile is bright as I glare at him. “I’m sorry to inform you, Marco, but this business you’ve built, it’s over. Sergei Turgenov is dead, has been for weeks, and the women are safe. There’s no one for you to sell.”

“What do you mean, *we*?” he snarls. “Who the fuck have you been working with? That Kelvin Acaster isn’t as clever as he thinks. We got Henrick the job easier than we thought. His private investigator was easy to pay off. He was in a lot of debt. Having him tell Kelvin that Robert was clean was the easiest part of the job.”

“You’re an asshole,” I hiss at him. “But if you must know, the Gallo’s aren’t happy with you. They’re even less happy that you killed my papa.”

“Well, where are they? Hmm?” Marco taunts. “If they care that much, where the fuck are they?”

“Right here, fucker,” Dario hisses as he steps into the room. Elio and Rocco subdue Robert while Dario moves toward me and Marco. “You should never have touched her,” he growls, the anger in his voice palpable.

“Oh, this is funny,” Marco laughs. “The whore has found someone who actually cares about her.” The bastard raises his

hand once again and presses the gun to my temple.

Dario moves lightning quick, reaching for his arm and pulling it backward. The gun drops from his hand, but Dario doesn't let him go. No, he wrenches his arm backward and does so hard. The sound of Marco's bone breaking makes me wince. Damn, that's got to hurt.

Marco drops to his knees and cries out in pain.

"You shouldn't have touched her," Dario snarls. "I'm going to enjoy killing you. I'm going to make it fucking hurt."

I smile at him when he drops the asshole to the floor. Kelvin and two other men move to him and drag him out of the room.

"Hey, baby," Dario whispers as he reaches behind me and unties my bindings. "Your head is bleeding," he tells me, his words laced with anger.

My brows knit together. "Is it?" I ask. I hadn't realized.

"How is your arm, baby?" His words are so gentle, such a stark contrast to how angry his face is, though I know none of it is directed at me. "It looks as though he's dislocated your shoulder."

I nod. "Right now, I'm okay," I reply softly. "But I sure as hell would like to get the hell out of here. Can someone untie my mama?"

He frames my face. "Beppe's on it," he whispers. "I was so fucking scared, Portia. I couldn't stop thinking about what he was doing to you. I'm glad you're okay, but fuck..."

I rest my head against his. “I love you,” I tell him, my heart full with how much love I have for this man.

“That’s good, baby, because I love you too. Now let’s get you and your mom checked out, then we can get the answers we need from those two bastards before we end their miserable lives.”

I beam at him. “That sounds like a good plan. I just want to make sure Mama’s okay.”

He helps me to my feet, and I see that both Beppe and Elio are helping Mama to hers. “*Mia bella, figlia coraggiosa,*” Mama whispers as I move toward her.

I gently wrap my arm around her. “*Ti voglio bene, Mama,*” I whisper. “I’m so glad you’re alive. I’m sorry I left you alone with him.”

She takes my face into her hands, and they’re icy cold, but it’s the look of strength and determination in her eyes that has my heart stuttering and my breath catching. “Do not ever say that,” she says with a bite. “You are amazing, *mia bella, figlia coraggiosa*. Never doubt how proud I am of you.”

Dario’s hand slides around my waist. “She’s right, baby. You are so fucking brave. I’m proud of you too.”

I rest my head against him as he holds me close. “*Ti amo,*” I whisper to Dario.

“*Ti voglio bene, mia bella ragazza,*” he says as he presses a kiss against my head. “Let’s get you both to the hospital.”

I nod, relieved and glad that this is all over and I have not only Dario, but my mama in my life. Hopefully, this is where

our lives start again.

THIRTY-TWO

DARIO

I keep Portia close as Rocco drives toward the warehouse.

I'm not letting her out of my sight. Not for at least six months. Fuck. Seeing that cunt hurt her was more than I could bear. She's got butterfly stitches on her head wound, and they've had to reset her shoulder. I held her hand through her screams as they popped it back into place for her. Nothing can gut me quicker than her tears and pain-filled screams.

"You doing okay, Portia?" Elio asks her, and I have a feeling it's more so for his wife than him. But either way, I'm glad he's interested.

"Yeah. I just want this over with," she replies.

Neither of my brothers think she should be with us for this. They don't think she'll be able to face what's going to happen, and that I shouldn't push her. I'm not pushing her. If she changes her mind, then she changes her mind and I'll have Santo bring her to Jade and Teagan, who are currently sitting with her mom at the hospital. Portia didn't want to leave her alone, but she also didn't want to miss out on coming with us. So this was the compromise. Jade assured her that no one would get to her mom, that she would protect her.

“Are you sure you’re okay to be here?” Rocco asks, and I bite back a wince. “I mean, what’s going to happen isn’t going to be easy to witness.”

“Trust me, I’m more than ready for whatever is going to come. I lived on the streets. I’ve killed people. I’ve witnessed people getting killed for looking at someone the wrong way. I’ve seen dogs eating the remains of their owners because they’re hungry. Nothing is going to make me not watch that bastard get what he deserves.”

Rocco nods. “Okay. If you want to take a shot at killing him, I’m sure Dario will let you.”

She raises her head from my shoulder and smiles. “Any suggestions on what to do?”

Elio lifts his shoulders. “What have you done before?”

“The usual,” she says flippantly. “Throat slashing and stabbing.”

Elio clicks his tongue. “You should do whatever feels right for you. I know that if it were Jade, she’d probably cut his cock off. Hell, if it was me, I’d take his heart, the bastard.”

Portia’s silent for the rest of the car ride, and I leave her be. She’s thinking about what she’s going to do, and I don’t blame her. That bastard abused her mom for years. When I saw Marianna today, I almost didn’t recognize her. She didn’t look like the happy, vibrant woman who sat content at Davide’s side five years ago. She looked like a shell of a woman. I know Portia has a lot of guilt for leaving her mom behind, but she shouldn’t. She did what she needed to do to survive, and

no one, not even Marianna, is angry that she did. We're all proud that she took the opportunity to escape. What could have happened to her would have been truly awful, and no one would have ever seen her again.

"We're here, baby," I say to her when Rocco pulls up outside the warehouse. From what Kelvin told me at the hospital, Stephen and Maverick have already removed the women from here and are currently disposing of their bodies in a vat of acid. I didn't ask for more details; I just thanked the man for the update.

"Let's get this done," she says, holding her head high.

I bite back a snarl when I see pain slash through her eyes as she climbs out of the car. She told me she's got a headache, but she's not willing to take any pain medication. She will when she's home but not right now. She wants a clear head. She wants to be able to think clearly as we do this. I just hope the pain goes away soon.

I keep her hand in mine as we enter the warehouse. Everyone is here waiting. Kelvin, Stephen, Maverick, Beppe, Santo, and Lorenzo. These men are wanting to see the pain these assholes are about to feel.

"Portia, meet Judge Lachan. He's one of the assholes who have been buying young girls from Marco for years."

She shakes her head. "Why is it always the slimeballs that have to resort to abusing women? I mean, look at you," she says, pointing at me. "Then look at those three asses. There's no way they can get a woman without resorting to violence."

Chuckles sound behind us, and I know she's making the prisoners angry. But she's not going to get hurt. None of these fuckers can get free of their bindings.

"You've always been such a bitch," Marco snarls.

"So have you," she replies sweetly. "Are you excited?" she asks as she moves toward him. At the confusion in his eyes, she elaborates. "To see your son. It's been almost six years since that animal was killed, but now, you can finally see him. There's a special place in Hell for rapists, and all three of you will be going."

"I'm not a rapist," the judge splutters. "I'm not."

"Yeah, because fucking an eleven-year-old isn't rape," Stephen hisses.

"I didn't force her," he shouts, whimpering when Stephen takes a step closer to him. "I didn't do anything she didn't want."

I glare at him, completely sickened. What a fucking bastard. He's the lowest of lows.

Stephen doesn't speak as he jabs his knife into the judge's side. The brutal force he uses must cause some severe damage to the judge, especially as he roars with pain. "Don't fucking sit there and tell me you didn't force her," Stephen hisses in his face. "You did and you know it. No eleven-year-old wants a fucking sixty-year-old man."

He doesn't say anything, no doubt scared of what Stephen will do if he opens his mouth and argues with him.

Portia turns to Robert. “Where’s Jamie?” she asks him. We haven’t been able to find out where she is. None of the women or girls in the hotel have seen her, and when we showed them a picture, they had no idea who she was. I have a feeling that Jamie never made it through the night she was taken.

Marco laughs. “That bitch,” he sneers. “She was just like you. She couldn’t keep her fucking nose out of what didn’t affect her. She had to pay the price.”

Portia glares at Robert. “It was you, wasn’t it?” she asks him, her voice low but filled with anger. “You’re the one who took her that night, weren’t you?”

Robert nods. “Yes. I was under orders. Jamie was getting too close. She needed to be stopped.”

“What did you do?” I ask, ready to snap his neck at any moment, especially when he’s giving Portia big, sad eyes, as though he’s remorseful for all that he’s done. He’s full of shit. Men like us, we don’t regret what we do when we’re given orders. It’s who we are. It’s what’s ingrained in us. We’ll never be remorseful.

“I shot her,” he says, turning his head away. “I had no choice.”

“Where’s her body?” Kelvin snarls. “Where did you leave her?”

“Frogs Hollow Forest,” he replies. “She’s not far off the path.”

Portia sucks in a sharp breath and Kelvin turns on his heels and leaves the warehouse, his cell at his ear. He’s going to

have his men find her body.

“What did she ever do to you?” Portia asks.

“It wasn’t personal,” he says. “It was business.”

“Fuck you,” she hisses. “It was fucking personal when you were sleeping with her.”

His eyes widen. “You knew?” he says. “How?”

“Surely you know that women tell each other everything,” Maverick says thickly. “How long did you sleep with the woman for?”

“Over six months. I caught them going at it in his office on my first day. Jamie asked me not to tell anyone. She didn’t want to get in trouble.” Portia shakes her head. “It was personal, you bastard. I hope you die a painful death.”

The grin he has is mocking. “Shame we didn’t get to see you used up. We’ve been waiting since you were sixteen.”

Portia doesn’t rise to the bait. Instead, she’s had enough. She holds out her hand. “Knife please,” she says softly.

I reach for mine and lay it in the palm of her hand. She reaches up on her tiptoes and presses a quick kiss to my lips. “Thank you.”

I watch with a smile as she saunters over to Marco, turning the blade in her hand as she does. “Marco,” she says, and her disdain is clear for everyone to hear, “you are a piece of shit. A little man who has to rape women in order to feel like a man. What is it, can’t get hard unless you’re dominant?” She taunts as she runs the tip of the blade along his face, down his

cheek, and toward his lips. “You are worthless,” she says loudly, digging the blade into the corner of his mouth and pulling it outwards. She carves his smile bigger into his face. Blood trickles from the cut and falls onto his crisp white shirt.

“Fuck you,” he snaps, pulling against the bindings, trying to get to her.

Portia doesn’t flinch. She doesn’t even blink. She stares blankly at him as he struggles. “See,” she laughs. “Utterly worthless. I wonder what would happen if I did this,” she says, and holds the hilt of the knife in both hands before plunging the blade into his groin.

The howls of pain that erupt from Marco are something you’d hear in the wild. It’s animalistic and horrifying. Then again, when someone pushes a blade through your cock, it’s got to be painful.

“Do you still feel like a man now, Marco? Hmm? Now that your tiny, fun-sized cock is no longer in action, do you still feel like a man?”

Marco breathes heavily through his nose as his chest rises and falls rapidly.

“Fucking A, bro,” Elio praises from beside me. “She’s ruthless. I fucking love it.”

“If she ever needs a job, tell her to call me,” Stephen says with a laugh.

I turn and pin the asshole with a glare. “Not happening,” I snap. “Where the fuck is Kelvin?” I ask. He’s missing all the fun.

“I’m here,” he says, coming to join us. “I see that Portia has let out her anger.”

I turn my attention back to my woman and see she’s smiling sweetly at her prey. “You still haven’t answered me, Marco. Do you still feel like a man?”

“Fuck you,” he hisses.

She tuts. “Sorry, dude, but that’s never going to happen. Not with that useless appendage. Besides, you don’t know how to satisfy a woman.” She pulls the blade from his groin and wipes the blood on his white shirt. “Now, I’m getting bored, but the men did promise me that I could be the one to kill you. Oh, and you should thank Elio for the suggestion of taking your cock away from you.”

Elio chuckles. “Didn’t realize there wasn’t much there. What did you call it? Fun-sized?”

Chuckles sound around the warehouse. Even Robert is laughing at the bastard. I turn to the judge and see he’s almost dead, his face pale and clammy. He’s got to be in a fucking lot of pain. He’s not made a sound, but blood is leaking from him like a fucking tap.

“I don’t think there’s a name for anything smaller than fun-sized. If there was, that would be accurate.” She releases a yawn, and I know it’s all part of the show. “I’ve always wondered how to make a grown man cry, and I’m so close. So fucking close to making you do so.” She runs the blade along his face again. “So I was thinking: what makes you feel as though you’re better than everyone else? And it hit me. Your power. I’ve taken away what you deem to be your manliness,

so the next thing is to take away your power, and for you, that's seeing everything."

She grips the hilt of the knife in her fist and shoves the blade into his right eye. She's fucking brutal, but I love every second of it. Marco howls in pain and Portia laughs. "Knew that would be your breaking point," she taunts. "My work here is done." She pulls my knife from his eye, earning another howl from Marco.

"Who would like to take over now?" she asks.

I glance over at Kelvin and nod. He can, because I'm taking out Robert. Kelvin pushes his sleeves up to his elbows and grins as he stalks over to Marco. "I've killed plenty of people," he says, his words thicker and darker than ever before. "But this is going to be the greatest one, what with knowing that we've halted your business and made it crumble to nothing without doing much. We're going to ensure that all those who'll be attending on Monday die in a gas explosion. This shit isn't happening again. I can fucking promise you that," he snarls as he steps behind him. He grips his neck in his hands and twists it so hard, it snaps. That's all it takes for the bastard to die.

The man lost everything: his business, his life, his dignity, and his power. The last being the one that broke him the most.

Kelvin stands beside Portia, and I'm not even jealous as she leans against him. What happened today has shown me that he cares for her as a friend. I also need to speak with him once this shit is done. He's not to blame for what happened.

He trusted the wrong person. Today, we got lucky. He'll use this as a lesson to never trust anyone unless they're family.

"Two down," Stephen taunts.

"Fuck you," Robert hisses. "It's ten against one."

Portia laughs. "You wish. We don't need to gang up on you. You're just as weak as Marco, Robert, or whatever the fuck your name is. You're nobody, and no one is ever going to know who you are. You're going to die, and you'll do it alone."

He grits his teeth, pulling against his bindings. "Come say that here," he snarls at her.

"You do not talk to her," I snap at him as I edge closer. "You do not fucking look at her." He hurt her. He betrayed her. He was supposed to be a friend, a work colleague, someone she could turn to if she needed help. Instead, he tried to lead her to a life of brutality. No, he does not get to talk to or look at her.

"What are you going to do? Hmm? You think we don't know what you did? The horror of what you did to that woman and baby?"

I don't know how he found out. I don't even care that he knows. Portia knows the truth, and she's with me.

"That all you got?" I hiss as I unbutton my cufflinks. "That the only thing you can do? Resort to bringing up the past? Go ahead. No one gives a fuck what you have to say."

He glares at me. "What's this?" he asks as he watches me fold my sleeves up. "You're going to kill me now, Dario?"

I grin at him. “Without a fucking doubt,” I hiss as I take my knife and drive it into his chest, making sure I stay away from his heart. I don’t want him to die just yet. It would be too fucking easy. He glares at me. Unlike Marco, he’s not giving me anything. He won’t cry out in pain. That’s okay, I’ve only just started.

I slide my knife into his side, pushing it hard and piercing his lung. His eyes widen as his breathing deepens. Oh, that’s got to hurt, especially when I twist the knife deeper, making his lung collapse in the process. Now that’s got to hurt like a motherfucker.

“You should never have touched her,” I grunt as I bring my blade down and thrust it into his knee, shattering his kneecap in the process. “You should have realized what would happen when you did. You knew she was mine, asshole. You fucking knew she was Famiglia.”

He still hasn’t made a sound. Then again, a collapsed lung is going to take a lot out of him and cause his other lung to work overtime. He glares at me, his hatred clear. I don’t give a fuck. He’s part of the Outfit. He knows what happens when you go after a woman that doesn’t belong to you. He knew the repercussions.

“Now, the question is, fucker: should I end you now or make you suffer some more?” I snarl as I bring the knife to his left side. He’s in pain, and a fucking lot of it. His eyes are burning brightly, tears shining in their depths. Oh, he’s fucking in pain. It’s time to end this.

I thrust my knife into his side, popping his left lung, and his eyes widen. The sound of him struggling to breathe is fucking music to my ears. He's dying. It's slow, it's painful, and it's fucking amazing. This is what happens when you fuck with what's mine. I don't let that shit slide. Now, he's going to live with the regret flickering in his mind as the thoughts of what he should have done differently hit him, all while the sound of him gasping for breath gets worse.

"Fuck," Maverick says, and it's filled with amusement. "We should come and join the fun with the Famiglia more often. You could give the Gallagher's a run for their money. How about we get this shit done with and then you can head home to your families? I certainly would like to."

I could like him if he weren't so fucking animated. He's got the fun, loving side Callie has that he mixes with the darkness of his family. He's got the ability to be unassuming, no one will see that darkness unless he unleashes it. It's what makes for a great killer.

"What's he going to do?" Portia asks once I return to her side. "What's with the saw and the barrels?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," I say, not wanting to explain to her that they're about to cut the bodies up and then put them into the barrels, which are filled with acid.

"It's a fucking shame that Kelvin couldn't get his hands on a woodchipper," Stephen comments. "It would save us a fucking load of time."

"I can get one," Beppe says. "I know a guy who's selling one, and it's not far from here."

Rocco nods. “Go get it,” he instructs.

“I’m afraid to ask what the woodchipper is for.” Portia grins. “Why do I have a feeling it’s going to be awesome?”

I chuckle. “Because it is. These men are known for making bodies disappear, and we’re about to witness it firsthand.”

She grins at me. “Thank you,” she says softly. “For coming for me. I love you.”

I press a kiss to her lips. “*Ti amo, mia bella ragazza.*” She beams up at me and snuggles into me as we wait for Beppe to come back with the woodchipper. It’s morning, and every single one of us is feeling the lack of sleep. The day isn’t over yet, and I have a feeling it’s going to be a long fucking day.

THIRTY-THREE
PORTIA
SIX MONTHS LATER

I sigh as I slide my hands down my dress. My bump is showing, but only if you know it's there, and it's only Dario and I who know I'm pregnant. The past six months have been crazy but in a good way. I've never been happier than I am right now.

"Baby, you look beautiful," Dario says thickly as he enters the bedroom. "If we weren't already late, I'd strip that dress from your body and take you again."

Heat rises through my cheeks at his words. He's not wrong. He had me less than an hour ago, hence why we're running late. "Stop it," I hiss at him. "We're meeting with your family today," I remind him.

We're back in Chicago for the annual gala the Gallo's all attend, and tonight, I finally get to meet Inessa, the wife of Niccolò. I've heard amazing things about the woman, and I'm excited to finally speak with her. I also get to see Teagan and Jade again. It's been a while since I have seen them in person, although I've spoken to them almost every day.

"I know what we're doing, but I don't care. I'd rather be holed up in this bedroom with you than at a fucking fancy

party,” he says. The heat in his eyes has my body shivering with delight.

I walk over to him and reach for my necklace. He takes it from my hands and clasps it behind my neck. “I meant what I said. You look breathtaking, baby.”

I lean back against him, loving the way his arms slide around my stomach and hold me tight. “I love you,” I whisper. I’m so fucking happy. Nothing could ever compare to what’s happened between us over the past six months.

Watching Stephen and Maverick dispose of the bodies by running them through a woodchipper made me realize that I may need to up my game. I’ve never seen something so bloody and messy. Yet I couldn’t take my eyes off it. The bodies were crushed into nothing, and the bones and teeth that managed to make it through were, according to Stephen, eaten by the wildlife.

We went home and slept for sixteen hours straight. I was tired, beyond tired. Then we went to the hospital, where I checked in with Mama, who was severely malnourished and had multiple broken bones. She’s still not fully healed from what Marco did to her, but she’s better. She’s living in Jefferson City, in my apartment, as I’ve moved in with Dario. I wasn’t sure if that was the right idea, but Dario offered her the option of living with us or in the apartment, and she chose to live alone. It’s given her independence, something she never truly had before, and I think she’s finally getting to a stage where she’s able to grow into herself once again. I’m proud of her, so proud of her. She survived something horrific and has

come out of it swinging, ready to live again, and that's all I could have asked from her.

I reach for the ring and pause. "I'm wearing mine," he tells me, his breath whispering against my ear. I smile as I pick up my engagement and wedding ring. It's something we haven't told anyone except Mama and Beppe. They were our witnesses as we got married. It was by far the happiest day of my life. I have a feeling it could have been the night we conceived, because I'm twelve weeks pregnant and the timeline matches up to our wedding night. I slide my rings onto my finger, unable to keep the smile off my face.

"*Ti amo, mia bella ragazza,*" he says, and it never fails to send heat pooling between my thighs. I adore when he speaks Italian to me. I love that he shares his soft side with me and me alone.

"*Ti amo, mio marito,*" I reply, and watch his eyes darken with lust. "But we've got to go."

He takes a step backward and nods. "Let's go, and don't tell anyone about the wedding. I want to see if they notice your rings."

I look down at the beautiful princess cut diamond ring and laugh. "It's huge. It could blind them. I'm not sure how they'd miss it."

He merely shrugs. I know he's been dying for people to know we're married. He loves that he gets to call me his wife and loves even more that I call him my husband. He wanted to tell his brothers in person and hasn't seen them since we got hitched. But tonight is the night. I'm slightly nervous but also

extremely excited. I can't wait to see my girls and see their faces when they find out we're married.

"You must be the gorgeous Inessa," I say as a gorgeous blonde walks toward me with Teagan at her side. "I've heard so much about you. How are you?" She's been through hell and back, but thankfully, she's come out of it the other side. She was brutalized by Sergei Turgenev. But seeing her now, I can see how much she's overcome and how happy she looks.

She nods. "I'm doing a lot better, thanks," she replies, her voice husky and soft.

I feel the heat of someone's gaze. Following it, I see a dark-haired, muscular man staring at her like he wants to whisk her away and fuck her until she's breathless. Niccolò Caruso looks a lot less broken than he did the last time I saw him. He lost his daughter tragically a few years ago. Chiara was sweet and wonderful.

"Your husband can't take his eyes off you." I grin at her. "He doesn't look as haunted anymore."

She turns to her husband, and the look that passes between them is so hot, it makes me want to find Dario, take him to an empty room, and let him do what he wants to me. "Holy shit, now that is hot."

"Like you can talk," she says with a wide smile. "You and Dario?"

I raise a brow and smile. I'm not one to really talk about our private life, especially when we've just met. "Yes?"

"Is it serious?" she asks.

Oh, more serious than anyone knows. Dario is my everything, and I love him with everything I am. But sometimes he annoys me like no other. "Sometimes it's fine, other times it's a little crazy." I semi-lie.

Teagan and Inessa share a look, and it's one that says they don't believe me. I would laugh, but I know that if Dario hears me saying we're just fine, he'll kiss me and I'll be breathless, and then I'll have to kill him. I like to keep things between us private. I think it's better that way, for us both, especially when there are so many women who'd love to try to come between us and I can't deal with their pettiness.

"I'm in town for the next week. We need to have a girl's night," I say to the girls. "That includes you, Inessa. It'll be nice for us all to get to know you better."

"Who's we?" Inessa asks as she looks between Teagan and me.

Teagan steps forward a little more. "It's us girls. Me, Portia, Jade, Ade, Anna-Marie, and you."

"Sounds good. I'll be there, but don't be surprised if Niccolò wants men on me. He's a little protective."

I wave my hand in the air. Hell, she has no idea what Dario's been like since I was taken. He won't let me out of his sight for more than an hour. "Don't worry about that. We

usually pick a house and stay in for the night. If Niccolò would prefer to have it at your house, that's fine."

"Thank you," she says with a sigh of relief, and I have no doubt we'll be spending the night at her house.

"Portia, Teagan," I hear Kelvin say, and I groan. I forgot he was going to be here. "Lovely to see you again, and you've brought me a friend."

Teagan laughs. She finds him funny. "Kelvin, this is Inessa. Inessa, meet Kelvin. He's a friend and Portia's boss."

I shake my head. The man continues to piss Dario off. He does everything he can to get on his bad side and then the two of them argue and I can't deal with it. I wish they'd get along and make my life a whole lot better. But both men are a pain in my ass.

"I like her," he says to me, nodding in Inessa's direction.

"She's married, and if you don't want to go to war with the Gallo's, I'd stay clear."

Kelvin throws his head back and laughs. "Oh, Portia, you already know I'm head-to-head with the Gallo's. It's only a matter of time before that fucker loses his mind and we go into a full-blown war."

Anger whips through me. God, will he ever grow the fuck up? "Why do you have to be such an ass, Kelvin? Seriously, you're always pushing him. Why?"

"It's easy to do and it's fun watching you try to rein him in," he laughs. "Besides, you're hot and you're a good flirt."

Teagan shakes her head. “Seriously, you guys need to get a room. You’ve been tiptoeing around this attraction for a while now.”

“Never going to happen,” I hiss, bile rising up my throat and making my stomach churn. “I’d rather be dead than be with him.” Kelvin is like my brother. I don’t think of him any other way than my boss and a friend.

“That can be arranged,” he replies with a smirk.

“I’ll put you six feet under before you even touch a hair on her head,” Dario snarls, his tone making my heart skitter and my breath quicken. He’s angry. He’s still not over what happened with Marco and Robert, so Kelvin joking about killing me was never going to go down well.

“Why am I not surprised you’re here? You’re always fucking around Portia,” Kelvin sneers. He’s antagonizing him, and it’s pushing on my last nerve.

“That’s ‘cause she’s mine. Something you need to get through your thick skull,” Dario snaps, and I know that he’s done. He won’t tolerate any more from Kelvin. I need this shit to stop. Now.

“Enough,” I hiss. “God, why do you two always push me too far? You’re both assholes.”

“He shouldn’t be so jealous,” Kelvin says with a laugh. “We were just talking. Just as I was with Teagan and Inessa. You don’t see their husbands being arseholes.”

Oh my god, what is wrong with him? Why is he pushing me and Dario too far? Does he have a death wish?

I turn to Dario just in time to see him pull his arm back. He lets it fly, smashing his fist into Kelvin's nose. The crunch is loud enough to make people close by wince. Blood pours from Kelvin's nostrils, and he curses as he tries to stop the bleeding.

"Christ," I cry. "What the fuck, Dario?"

"Exactly," he snaps. "What the fuck is this fucker's problem? Why is he always flirting? He knows you're mine."

"Seriously?" I shout, wanting to run my hands through my hair and cry in frustration. "This is what you do? Break his nose?"

"Better than killing him, right? I don't think you'd forgive me for that," he says with a smirk.

My anger rises to breaking point. Why do they not understand the untenable position they're putting me in? I snap my fist in Dario's face, thankfully not breaking anything, and his head whips to the side. He stares at me, confusion in his eyes.

I hear Kelvin's muffled laughter, and I spin around and turn on him. "And you," I hiss. "I told you to stop the shit. Why are you always shit-stirring?"

He grins, blood still dripping from his nose. "It's too fucking easy."

"What?" I snap. "You think this is funny?"

He pulls his hand away from his face and holds his hands up in the air. "It is. He's always around you."

Once again, I snap my fist, this time punching Kelvin in the nose. “That’s because he’s my husband, you asshole,” I shout.

My chest is rising, and I feel as though I’m about to break down. I need to get the hell out of here. I turn to the girls. “I’ll be in touch about our girl’s night,” I say, giving them a tight smile before leaving the main ballroom.

“Baby,” Dario calls out, and I come to a stop. His hands slide around my waist, and he pulls me into him. “What’s going on?”

I collapse into his chest, and I’m unable to stop the tears from falling. “I’m so sick of the shit. You both can’t get along and it’s too much for me.”

“I’ll stop,” he promises me, pressing a kiss to my head. “I’ll leave him alone.”

I look up at my husband, the man I love more than words can say. “Really?”

He brushes the hair from my eyes. “Really. You’re more important than pissing him off. I’m sorry.”

I reach for his face. “I’m the one who’s sorry. I shouldn’t have hit you.” I feel terrible. I’m usually better at keeping my emotions in check than I did today.

“It’s fine, baby, honest. Nothing is broken.” He presses a kiss to my lips. “Shall we go home?”

I nod. “Please.”

“Portia, Dario,” we hear Kelvin call out, and I groan. No, I don’t want any more arguing. I can’t deal with it.

Dario looks over his shoulder. He keeps his arms around me, not letting me go. “Now’s not a good time, man,” he says, and the hostility in his voice isn’t there like it usually is.

“I know, but I owe you both an apology. I didn’t realize how much my teasing affected Portia. I was just trying to annoy you.”

I shake my head. “You are both as bad as each other,” I grumble, though there’s no heat in my words. I feel more embarrassed than anything. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have hit you.”

He shakes his head. “No, you should have. You were sticking up for your husband. Congratulations, by the way. I’m truly happy for you both. I know how much he loves you, Portia. It’s clear every time he looks at you. Knowing you’re married, it makes me happy.”

I smile at him. “Thank you.”

“And I swear, no more giving him shit,” he says, holding up his hands in surrender. “We’re all good now.”

I nod. “Thank you, and again, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t even sweat it, honestly. I’m not. I’ll see you both later.” He turns on his heel and walks away, but before Dario and I can make an escape, his brothers make their way toward us, Teagan and Jade hot on their heels.

“You sure kept that quiet,” Elio says with a raised brow. “When did you get married?”

“About four months ago,” I tell them as I sink into Dario’s side. “We didn’t want a fuss, just the two of us.”

Rocco nods. “I understand. I’d have preferred it that way too,” he says with a grin as he looks down at Jade. “I’m pleased for you both.” He walks toward us and pulls me into his arms, pressing a kiss to my cheeks. “Welcome to the family, Portia.”

I smile. God, it feels really good to hear that. “Thank you,” I say softly.

Both Dario and I are congratulated by Elio, Teagan, and Jade. When I get back to his side, I give him a look, letting him know it’s okay to share our news. His hand slides around my waist, resting against my stomach, and the pride on his face makes me smile.

Teagan watches us, her gaze assessing. When she notices the placement of his hand, her eyes widen and tears spring to them.

“Portia’s pregnant,” Dario tells them. “She’s twelve weeks.”

Everyone starts to congratulate us. I’m pulled into a hug by both Jade and Teagan, the girls holding me tightly as Dario is congratulated by his brothers.

“I’m so happy for you, Portia,” Teagan whispers, tears falling down her face. “So very happy. You and Dario have always had a pull, and it’s so good to see you so blissfully happy.”

I tighten my arms around her. “I love you,” I cry, tears brimming in my eyes. “So much. Thank you.”

She shakes her head. “Don’t thank me. You’re the one who saved me. You’re my sister.”

I close my eyes as the love that I feel from everyone hits me. “And you’re mine.”

“Okay, can I have my wife back?” Dario asks, and I laugh. He’s been dying to say that out loud. “We’re going home,” he says, his gaze darkening as he looks at me.

Oh, I’m in for a treat tonight, and I can’t wait.

THIRTY-FOUR

PORTIA

He's driving me insane. His hand has been running along my inner thigh the entire way home. He damn well knows what he's doing. He's pushing me to the edge, dying for me to beg him to fuck me. Not tonight. No, tonight, I'm going to be in charge.

I love having sex with Dario. He's given me pleasure I couldn't even dream of. He's given me everything I could have ever thought possible, and then so much more. Dario has given me a family and love. He's given me support and protection. He may not be perfect, but for me, he's my perfect.

When we enter the house, I'm practically panting. I'm so needy, and my panties are soaked. Dario's smirking at me. He's waiting, ready to pounce the moment I beg him to take me to bed and fuck me.

Instead, I move close to him, my lips pressing against his as I reach for his zipper and undo his pants. I free his cock from his pants and palm it, my hand wrapping around and squeezing it gently. His hand slides into my hair, wanting to make the kiss deeper, but I pull back. No. Not now. I have other plans.

I sink to my knees while I jerk at his cock. There's nothing better than taking him into my mouth and driving him wild. It's not often I get to do it, but I know that when I do, he fucking loves it. I take his cock in deep, hitting the back of my throat, before pulling back and doing it again.

"That's it, *mia bella ragazza*," he growls. "Take it all in." He slides his hands into my hair, and I look up at him. His cock is soaked from me taking it deep into my mouth.

I relax my jaw as his fingers glide into my hair. He thrusts into my mouth, going further than before. I gag a little, and I hear Dario groan low in his throat. But I manage to breathe through my nose and take him all in.

"Christ," he snarls as his fingers clench in my hair. "Fuck."

I giggle around his cock, the sound muffled, and Dario releases a string of curses. Oh, he's going to make me pay when he gets me into bed. I hollow my cheeks and take him deeper again. My gag reflex kicks in, and I gag around his length before pulling back.

I notice how dark his eyes have gotten, and I know he's barely holding on. He's dying to take over. I need him to lose control. I want to feel that thread break and have him take me like I'm the only woman to ever do this to him. There's nothing sexier than having your husband want you more than anything.

I take a deep breath through my nose, relax my jaw, and take him deep once again. This time, my nose is pressed against his groin as I take every inch of him into my mouth. I gag once again, and this time, his hands tighten harder than

ever as he takes over. That thread has gone. He holds me still, until I'm gagging hard. Tears spring to my eyes, and he pulls back.

His teeth bared, he starts to fuck my face. He thrusts deep, fast, and hard. Over and over again. I'm fucking soaked. I've never been so turned on in my life as I am right now. "That's it, *mia bella ragazza*, take my cock."

I shiver at the sexy tone of his voice. He's watching me with hooded eyes, darkness swirling in them, but it doesn't frighten me. No, it only turns me on. He pushes deep into my mouth, and I can't help but grind against the floor. I'm too horny. I can't control it. "Ggg," I moan around his cock.

One of his hands moves from my hair and slides down to my dress. He pushes the tiny strap down and frees my breast. His fingers pull at my nipple, and it sets me off. I practically swallow his length and moan long and hard as he plays with my erect nipple.

"Fuck," he snarls as I swallow around his length again. "I'm going to come," he says, his voice thick and husky. "Baby, pull back," he says.

I shake my head. I want to taste him. I'm not pulling back.

He releases a growl and thrusts deep into my mouth once more. His cock swells, and he explodes. Rope after rope of his cum splashes the back of my throat. I swallow every last drop of his cum, all the while never taking my eyes off him. God, I love it when he looks at me with that sexy as sin look.

I release his cock with a pop. I've cleaned it completely, not wasting a drop.

He reaches for me, lifting me into his arms. I wrap my legs around his waist, my arms sliding around his neck. His eyes darken moments before his lips cover mine, his tongue sweeping into my mouth, taking my breath away. I cling to him as he walks us toward the bedroom, his cock thickening with every step he takes. My dress is riding up at my hips, and I can feel his cock pressing against my soaked panties.

Our mouths are fused together. There's nothing better than him kissing me. Nothing feels better than him touching me. I will never get enough of him. He's my everything.

He lies me on the bed and pulls my panties off my body. "God, Portia, you're fucking drenched." His usually brown eyes are almost black as he leans over me. He positions himself between my legs, his cock thick against my wet pussy.

Tilting my hips, he plunges his cock into me. I gasp at the fullness of him; the way his thick cock stretches me. I release a low moan. God, he feels so thick, so fucking big.

He withdraws slightly and then pushes into me, feeding himself inch by inch. He's going to make me come. I'm so crazy with need, it's not going to take much to set me off.

"Never doubt how much I love you, Portia. Never ever doubt that."

The sincerity in his voice has my breath hitching. "With every beat of my heart," I whimper as he delivers a punishing thrust.

“Damn fucking straight,” he snarls as he rotates his hips, thrusting harder and harder into me. I’m spiraling. God, he’s so fucking good at this. He makes me insane with need. His fingers tighten on my hips, biting into the flesh.

“Come for me, *mia bella ragazza*,” he says through clenched teeth. His thrusts become brutal, each one deliberate and precise, hitting deep inside me.

My pleasure is rising, and my body trembles with anticipation.

“Come, *mia bella ragazza*,” he growls, his fingers biting into my skin at my hips. I gasp as his thrusts get harder and faster. My pleasure is skyrocketing, taking my breath away from me. My orgasm hits me like a tornado, ripping through me and sweeping me up in its path.

“Dario,” I scream, his name a plea from my lips.

He pistons his cock in and out of me. His lips slam down against mine as he kisses me again. His tongue sweeps into my mouth as he thrusts harder. I know he’s close to the edge, so I rake my nails along his neck and shiver at the pure, unfiltered love that shines in his eyes. His cock swells, and he thrusts deep into me. My pussy contracts around his cock, and he groans low and long. “Fuck, Portia, I’m coming,” he grunts as he spurts his cum inside of me.

He collapses on the bed beside me, both our breathing ragged and my head spinning. How does he always manage to make me soar when we’re together?

I turn on my side and reach for him. He twines his fingers with mine, and we rest our hands on his stomach.

“*Ti amo, mio marito,*” I say, a little breathless.

He flashes me that grin I love. “*Ti amo, mia bella ragazza.*” He presses a kiss against my lips. “You do know that when Nonna finds out we’re married, she’s going to want to come home, and she’ll force us to marry again, right?” he says with a chuckle.

His nonna has been in Italy for the past nine months. She split her time between Dario and Rocco’s house when Dario lived in Chicago, but she couldn’t get past the hurt she felt, along with the guilt, for not realizing that her son was hurting her grandchildren. From what Jade has told me, she’s been enjoying her time in Italy and seems to be finally releasing the guilt and heartache.

“Is that something you would want?” I ask.

“We’re already married. We wouldn’t have a ceremony, we’d have a blessing, but as I said, we’re already married, and the only person who matters to me is you.”

Tears spring to my eyes. Gah, he’s turning me to mush once again. He’s going to have me a blubbering mess if he continues.

“I love you,” I say with a smile.

His hand slides along my body. “I need to get you out of this dress,” he says huskily.

I smile widely at him. “No one is stopping you,” I purr.

He looms over me, and I press a kiss to his lips.

Fuck, I got lucky. I got so damn lucky.

Dario Gallo is my everything.

Our passion still burns strong, and I hope it will forever do
so.

EPILOGUE

DARIO

Eighteen Months Later

Entering the house, my nostrils flare as I smell homecooked marinara sauce. It reminds me of when I was a boy and my nonna would cook dinner.

“Portia?” I call out, knowing we’re not alone. I love my wife, but she can’t cook for shit. She would burn water if left to her own devices.

My beautiful wife steps into the hall wearing a purple sundress, her hair tied up into some stylish up-do. She’s barefoot, and her bump noticeable. She’s pregnant with our second child. Our first is a boy, a terror who reminds me a lot of Elio but also has the sweetness of Portia.

“Hey, honey,” she greets as she walks over to me. I pull her into my arms and kiss her. Since she was taken by that bastard, Robert, things between us grew strength by strength. We no longer were toying around. I knew she was all that I wanted, and I was done playing. Since then, my life has never been happier. She’s fucking perfect. “So, Nonna came home

today, and she's been cooking up a storm," she tells me, her eyes bright and filled with happiness.

"Has she made enough to freeze?" I ask, but I already know the answer. Nonna never makes just enough. She always goes overboard. I have a feeling she'll have our freezer stocked with food for the next six months.

Her laughter is soft and willowy. "Of course. Not only that, but she and Mama have been having a great time cooking together."

I grin. Marianna is still not comfortable around men, but I have her trust, as does Beppe and Santo. When Marianna comes here, I ensure that it's one of those men who are here also. I make sure it's the same when Portia and our son, Davide, go visit with Marianna.

Portia loves having her mom around. The two have grown even closer since our marriage, and Marianna dotes on Davide.

"That's good, baby. Did you speak to your mom about taking Davide tomorrow?"

Her eyes darken as she gives me a heated look. "Of course. She told me she's taking him for three nights because she wants us to have some time alone." She shakes her head. "I love you, honey, but I can't be away from him for that many nights."

I get it. With everything that's happened in her past, we're apprehensive about letting him out of our sight. Asking Marianna to take him for a night has never happened before,

and while I appreciate her wanting to help us have alone time, she won't be having him for that long.

"I'll speak with her," I assure her. "Now, will you tell me why you've been grinning so widely since I arrived?"

She wrinkles her nose at me. "It's family dinner. Nonna said so."

I take off my jacket and hang it on the rack in the hallway, then take Portia's hand and lead her into the dining room. Nonna always insists that dinner happens at the dining table, and what Nonna says, happens.

"Well, it's about damn time you got your ass here," Rocco says.

I stare down at my wife, who beams up at me. This is what she's so happy about. Over the past eighteen months, we've only managed to have two family dinners. We're busy, and our schedules never seem to match up. And whenever they do, something comes up.

I glance around the table and see that it is indeed a family dinner. Rocco and Jade are here, along with their adoptive son, Santino. Elio and Teagan too, who's six months pregnant. Adelina and Hayden, with their two kids, Vivi-Anna and Connor. What shocks me the most is that Niccolò Caruso and his wife, Inessa, are here with their two daughters, Alya and Giana.

"Surprise," Ade says with a laugh. "We know how weird you are about birthdays, and we've not been able to celebrate

anything for you, so Dario, we're celebrating your birthday a week early."

I narrow my eyes at my sister, who doesn't blink as she smiles sweetly at me. "You let her set this up?" I ask Portia.

She nods. "Of course I did, then Nonna overheard and, well, you know what Nonna's like when she puts her mind to it."

I've never wanted to celebrate my birthday. Doing so in our house was never a good time. Oh, for sure, everyone had the best day and there was food, cake, and celebrations, but once everyone was gone and it was just Aldo and I left, he'd beat me for some slight that I made that day. Something I couldn't even remember doing. So my birthday became a day I didn't want to celebrate. Until now.

"Thank you," I say to Ade as she walks over to me. I pull her into my arms.

"You're welcome. It's time to start making new memories," she whispers. "You're so loved, Dario, so, so loved, and it's time to embrace that."

This is why Ade is my favorite sibling. She's so pure and sweet. But she's right, it is time to start making new memories.

"Come," Nonna says as she shuffles into the room with her hands filled with trays of food. "*Buon compleanno, mio ragazzo, ti amo, Dario.*"

I grin at her. My nonna is the fucking shit. "*Grazie, Nonna, sei fantastica e ti voglio bene.*"

She beams at me, her eyes no longer holding the pain and shame of finding out what her son did to those she loved. She's at peace, and we're all fucking happy that she is. She's nothing like our parents.

"Papa," Davide says, sitting next to Niccolò and Rocco. My son is in awe of them, and he loves being around them whenever he can. "Happy birthday."

I walk over to him and ruffle his hair. "*Grazie, figlio.*"

The dinner goes smoothly. Everyone is talking and getting along. It's been a long time since this happened, and it's something I know our wives would like to happen more often.

All the women get along. Teagan and Portia are still thick as thieves, but they've taken Inessa under their wing, and Jade's their biggest protector. Add in Anna-Marie and Ade, and you've got six women who love to gossip and have girl's nights.

"How does it feel to be closer to another year older?" Elio says with a grin.

"I still won't be as old or as ugly as you," I say.

The kids are in bed, Marianna has returned home, Nonna's also gone to bed, and the adults are in the backyard having drinks and shooting the shit. The women are huddled together, no doubt conspiring something.

My cell rings, and I see it's an international number. 00353... Where the fuck is that?

"Hello?" I answer.

“Dario,” I hear the deep Irish accent of Maverick. “We need help,” he says, and I get to my feet. “It’s Stephen. His woman is in trouble.”

“Where am I headed?” I ask, and I notice everyone has gone quiet. I feel Portia’s gaze on me.

“Dublin, lad. You can bring your wife and son. Stephen’s wife has been taken by her own father. This isn’t going to be a fucking war.”

“I’ll be on the first flight out,” I tell him. “But you’ve got to know, Mav, that I won’t be alone.” I have a feeling Rocco will be coming too.

His chuckle is deep and loud. “I get that. I just know that once this comes to a head and it gets out, shit’s going to hit the fan. I have a feeling my sister may actually try to kill Stephen.”

It’s my turn to laugh this time. “Sounds like a normal family to me,” I mutter. We all try our best not to kill our family when they annoy the ever-loving shit out of us.

“That it does. I’ll see you soon, Dario,” Maverick says and ends the call.

I turn and see everyone waiting and watching me. I quickly fill them in on what Maverick told me, and Jade frowns deeply. “I wonder why he thinks Callie will kill him?”

I shrug. “Dunno, and don’t care. I’ll organize a flight leaving tomorrow.”

“If you need us, we’ll come too,” Rocco says, and I’m shocked. I thought he’d insist on coming.

I nod. “Let me see what’s going down, and then we’ll make that call.”

“Sounds good,” he says and brings his whiskey glass to his lips.

Portia walks over to us, and I pull her onto my lap. “You good coming to Dublin?” I ask.

“Yep. I messaged Kelvin and have told him I’m working remotely. He says it’s no problem.”

I grin, my hand splaying along her back. The shit with Kelvin came to a head the night at the Gala. He’s no longer pushing me, and he doesn’t flirt with her anymore. Which is lucky for him, because I’d have killed him if he continued that shit.

She snuggles into me, and I hold her tight against me. “Love you,” she whispers so only I can hear her.

I have no fucking idea how I got so damn lucky, but fuck... I’m the luckiest son of a bitch in this world. I have my family and la Famiglia. There’s nothing I could want more.

“With everything I am,” I tell her, giving her a heated look, one that has her shivering. It’s a look that promises her all the good things for later.

I look around at the family I have and feel so fucking blessed. I’ve grown a lot since becoming Underboss, and even more so since I became a husband. I finally understand why Rocco and Jade are so close, and why she’s so involved in the business. It just makes sense. The love they have, it’s what I have with Portia.

“How long do we have to wait before we can go to bed?”
Portia asks with mischief in her eyes.

Laughter erupts, and I’m unable to keep it at bay. Fuck,
she’s fucking amazing.

Blessed. Utterly fucking blessed.

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ABOUT BROOKE SUMMERS:

USA Today Bestselling Author Brooke Summers is a Mafia Romance author and is best known for her Made Series.

Brooke Summers was born and raised in South London. She lives with her daughter and hubby.

Brooke has been an avid reader for many years. She's a huge fan of Colleen Hoover and Kristen Ashley.

Brooke has been dreaming of writing for such a long time. When she was little, she would make up stories just for fun. Seems as though she was destined to become an author.

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