

Moretti
CRIME FAMILY



ruthless
UNION

IVY DAVIS

Ruthless Union

AN ARRANGED MARRIAGE MAFIA ROMANCE

THE MORETTI MAFIA
BOOK ONE

IVY DAVIS

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CHAPTER 1

Emilia

I stare down at my father's face.

With his ruddy cheeks, he looks so alive, even tucked into his casket. Must be my mom's doing. I know she wanted him to look good. It's open casket, and so many people are going to see him today. My mom looked at him first. I followed second.

I have to be strong and not cry because my mom is already breaking down into tears. My younger siblings, standing behind me, are not holding up well either.

Riccardo Moretti, Mafia boss for the Italian mob in New York City. My parents never hid his job. In fact, they made it so well known that I know exactly what's going to happen after today.

My younger brother, Antonio, will be expected to take over, even though he's only twelve. My family will mourn. And I will be married to some other Mafia man I've never met.

I know this because it's my duty as a Mafia daughter, and I'm finally of age. For years, I've known my one purpose is to marry well.

Now that my father is dead and I'm eighteen, I know what's coming. My family line needs to continue, and it's my responsibility to make it happen.

My throat closes up as I look down at my dad. He filled up a room with his boisterous laughter. It's strange to see him so quiet. Death will do that to you. Change you completely.

It's not only my dad who's changed though. My entire family has. His death will always be a struggle for us. Not just emotionally but physically. My brother Antonio is the only son. The rest of my siblings are girls. I can already tell my father's men will pounce on us like vultures.

Glancing away from my father, I look around the room. It's full of men I barely know, all in black suits. All decades older. And all already looking at my younger sisters like they're pieces of meat to devour. I need to marry well. It will be the only thing to protect us at this scary time.

As my mom, Giulia, stumbles as she makes her way back to the pew, I catch her arm. "Mom?"

She gives me a shaky smile before her face crumbles. "I can't do this, Emilia. I can't do this." She speaks in a low voice that only I can hear. "Your father was my rock. I can't do this without him."

"You'll have to." I hate to say it, but it's true.

"I know. Thank goodness I have you." She pats my hand before taking her seat.

I look behind me at my sister, Gemma. She sixteen and the second oldest. We look so alike with our blonde hair and fair skin, but we're very different people. Gemma is rebellious; she likes to push boundaries. I guess my dutifulness has allowed her to be like that. I've always been there to pick up the pieces. She's looking down at Dad now, her face scrunched up. She's trying not to cry, too. I lean in close to her. "It's ok. You can cry."

A gasp escapes her before tears begin to stream down her face. The minute she cries, the rest of my siblings follow suit. Francesca, who's fourteen, cries silently, hiding behind her brown hair.

Antonio, next in line, tries to stand tall. Other than myself, he has the most pressure being put on him with our dad dying. He's not ready to be a boss at twelve years old. I'm not sure how he's going to handle it. What I do know is that I'll have to be the one to help him through it.

Cecilia holds onto the cross around her neck as she prays for our dad. I can see her speaking to it, searching for strength. At only ten, she's already the most religious in my family, despite us all being catholic. With her platinum blonde hair, she stands out in a crowd, and I can already see the men in the room looking at her. It's disgusting. She's just a child and so innocent. She truly believes Dad is up in heaven somewhere.

I might not know everything Dad did, but I'm old enough to know you don't become a Mafia boss without doing some bad things. I wonder if Dad is really in heaven or if he's already rotting in hell. I wonder if that's the price we'll all pay someday.

Last in line is my youngest sister, Mia, who's only eight. The fact that she's going to live most of her life without knowing our dad is the thought

that almost breaks me.

She looks the most like Francesca, even though she's much more outgoing. She's not shackled by puberty-driven insecurity, which Francesca is going through at the moment. Losing my dad at eighteen is hard enough. I can't imagine what it's like for my younger siblings.

I have to stop myself from stumbling like my mother. She's crying too hard right now to be of much help. I have to be there for my siblings. They won't make it through this day without me.

Gemma brushes past me as she sits down in the pew, putting distance between herself and our mom.

"Don't be so brusque, Gemma," Mom scolds through her tears. Gemma bristles at the comment but doesn't respond.

Francesca keeps her head down as she takes her seat, while Antonio keeps his head held high as he does the same.

Cecilia grips my hand. "Dad will be all right. He's in heaven." The fact that she can have hope even while crying warms my heart.

"Of course, he is," I reassure her. She takes her seat next to Antonio.

Mia crumbles before our dad's casket. Her wails pierce the air in the echoing church.

I rush to her side and wrap my arms around her. "Mia, sweetie. You're ok. I'm here."

"Emilia," she sobs into my chest. "Dad ..." She can't even finish her sentence. I just soothe her as we kneel next to his casket, in view of everyone. Looking around at my father's men and their wives, I feel disgust. The wives look at Mia with condescending pity while the men have salacious smirks on their face, like the cries of an eight-year-old are humorous to them.

I hate Mafia men, and yet, one of them is my future. I just don't know who yet.

"Come on," I murmur to Mia. "Let's go sit down." I help her to her seat, but she grabs my hand before I can leave.

"Sit with me," she says.

"You know I can't, Mia. Mom wants me to sit next to her. I'm the oldest. It's my duty."

"I got her," Cecilia says, grabbing Mia's hand. I nod at Cecilia before taking my seat next to Mom. With six of us kids, we're used to taking care of each other. Mom can only handle so much at a time. It's usually up to me to handle the rest, and when I can't, it means my siblings, who are still children,

have to do it. It's not right, but it's our reality.

Mom leans into me as the priest takes his spot at the podium and begins the ceremony. My mother's cries are so loud I can barely hear the priest speak. He talks about how my father was a strong and impactful member of the community. How he will be sorely missed. I wonder if that's true.

I'm sure he has enemies as a mob boss. There are probably people celebrating his death. In fact, some of those people might be in this room. I look around and catch the eye of my uncle, Franco Moretti. He's about a decade younger than my father, but despite being young and handsome, there's a hardness to him that my father never had.

His eyes flick to mine, and he nods, his face a mask I can't make out. I look away without giving anything back.

Once the priest finishes his speech, he invites anyone to come up and say something about my father.

Everyone looks at my mother, but she can't go up there. She won't stop crying. It's up to me, then.

But the moment I stand up, so does my uncle Franco. He motions for me to sit down as he strides toward the podium. I sit down with a flush. Franco has a right to speak. Riccardo was his brother, after all. But Riccardo was my father. It should be my mom or me up there, not Franco. He should have waited his turn, but instead, he took my turn from me.

"My brother was a good man," Franco starts, his voice clear and even as he speaks. He doesn't even sound like he's been affected by my dad's death at all. "I admired him. I looked up to him. He ruled this city with a gentle touch, which was a miracle given his profession." A few chuckles fill the room. I personally don't think my dad's death is a laughing matter. "It will be interesting to see what happens next. To Riccardo's son, Antonio. May he reign. And to Giulia, Riccardo's widow. May she be at peace. And to Riccardo's girls. May you all find good husbands. Thank you." He walks away without even looking at my family.

"A weird fucking speech," Gemma mutters to me.

"Language, Gemma," Mom scolds. It is amazing how she can still do that while crying.

"Yeah," I say to Gemma. "It was." I watch as Franco takes his seat again, looking like the most confident and most powerful man in the room. I hate him for this, and I don't even know why.

I stand up and approach the podium before anyone else can. "My dad ..."

I trail off. My voice is amplified by the mic, and it makes me sound strange, like I'm a stranger at my dad's funeral. Franco smirks. I clear my throat. "My dad could command everyone's attention the moment he stepped into a room. That was the kind of presence he had. Despite his demanding job, he always made sure to be home for dinner. He never missed our family dinners. He loved my mom." She cries harder at this. I have to clear my throat again to get passed how choked up I'm becoming. "They had a love that was to be studied. To be admired. They were always there for each other, even in subtle ways. Like Dad doing the dishes when Mom would get overwhelmed. Or Mom taking the time to iron his suit because she knew how much he liked waking up to it. They gave and they took from each other in the best way. I hope to have a love like that someday." I blink and a wet spot lands on the podium. It takes me a second to realize that it's my tear. "He also loved us, his kids. I'll miss him every day, and I know my siblings will, too." I look at my dad, dead in his casket despite looking alive. "I'll miss you, Daddy. Cecilia believes you're in heaven, and I really hope you are." I hurry away from the podium and back to my seat.

"That was beautiful, Emilia," Mom says.

"Thanks, Mom."

She clutches my hand like she'll die if she doesn't have me to anchor her to this earth.

After the ceremony, we leave for the reception, which is held across the street at a community center. It's a strange sight, seeing everyone in their finest black cross at an intersection. I hold onto Mom and Mia's hands as we enter the building.

Food is already being served. Drinks are already pouring. It's like everyone has already moved on, despite it being a funeral reception. Only my family and I are left to mourn.

The room is cold and barren, with fluorescent lights overhead. There's no warmth here, and why should there be? It's a funeral, after all.

We stand in a line from oldest to youngest as the guests give us their condolences. I have to nod and smile at these men despite how sad I am. They expect it. I'll be labeled a bitch or difficult if I don't smile. That's how Mafia men can be. It gave me hope that my dad was different and that he was teaching Antonio to be different. But now that Dad's gone, I can only worry.

Franco approaches us, grabbing my mom's hands before she can even react. "I'm so sorry for your loss, Giulia. I can tell how hard this is on you."

She tries to pull her hands back, but he holds on. “It must be hard for you, too. Riccardo was your brother.”

“He was. But he was your husband. I hope you’ll do well on your own. You’re still young. You have many more years of childbearing. It’s a shame you’ll have to waste it.”

I stare at Franco hard. That’s such a horrible thing to say to my mother. But she doesn’t reply. She just smiles stiffly.

It’s Gemma who replies. “Why the fuck would you say that to her?”

“Gemma,” Moms scolds again. “Language. And don’t.”

“Yes,” Franco says, letting my mom’s hands go. “Don’t. Children should be seen and not heard.”

Gemma stands up taller. “I’m sixteen. Not a child.”

“Mmm. You still are in so many ways.” Franco’s eyes land on me. “But Emilia here is finally an adult. How does it feel?”

“It feels fine,” I respond.

“Right.” He gives me a once over before turning back to Giulia. “If you ever need anything, give me a call.”

Mom nods shakily. Franco gives her a wink before strolling away.

“Are you ok?” I ask.

“I will be. I have to be.”

I stare at my mom for a few seconds longer. Even though what Franco said was disgusting, he was right about one thing. My mom is still young. She’s only in her late thirties, having had me when she was eighteen. I can’t imagine becoming a mother yet. I feel like I have so much more to learn.

My dad was significantly older than her, but it never seemed to affect their marriage. I wonder how much older my husband will be.

After we finish accepting everyone’s condolences, Mom stands before the group of people. “I wasn’t able to speak at the ceremony, but ... now, I feel more able to.” Her face is red from crying. It doesn’t diminish her beauty in any way. Her blonde hair still manages to sparkle in the sunlight streaming through the window. Her blue eyes look like their shining even more after all of her tears. The men in the crowd are captivated by her.

“Riccardo was my world,” she continues. “He was a strong leader. And now, it’s up to my son, Antonio, to take over.” She motions for Antonio to come stand by her. He’s like a little male version of her, just as pale and blond. She pulls something out of her purse. It’s a pendant with a wolf crest on it. The crest of my family. Antonio’s eyes light up at the sight of it.

“Is that dad’s?” he asks, his voice still small and squeak. Puberty hasn’t quite hit him yet.

“It is. And now, it’s yours.” She puts the pendant around his neck. “Be a strong leader like your father.”

Antonio stands up taller. “I will.”

I look over at the crowd and notice how Franco’s face looks pinched as he watches the exchange between my mother and brother.

The rest of the day passes in a blur. It’s a relief when we all finally go home. But the minute I step through our front door of our brownstone, I feel like I’m slapped in the face. Dad is officially not coming back home.

I kick off my shoes and shuffle over the couch, plopping down onto it. Gemma joins me. Antonio is showing Cecilia his pendant, the two of them whispering as they walk up the stairs to their respective rooms.

Mia snuggles in next to Giulia on the other couch. Francesca tentatively approaches our mom. “Could you help me undo my zipper?”

Mom doesn’t respond.

“Mom?” Francesca repeats.

“Mom,” I say, nodding at Francesca.

Giulia blinks, and her eyes zero in on Francesca. “Oh. I didn’t see you there. What did you need?”

“My zipper?” Francesca asks.

Mom sighs, hugging Mia in closer. “What? I’m too tired right now to help with anything.”

Francesca looks like she’s about to cry all over again.

“Here.” I say to her. “I got it.” I unzip the back of her dress, and she gives me a small nod of thanks before rushing off to her bedroom. “You shouldn’t ignore Francesca, Mom.”

“I wasn’t.” She plays with Mia’s hair. “She’s just so quiet; I didn’t even notice her at first.”

“That’s because you can be such a bitch to her,” Gemma mutters.

Mom shoots a glare at Gemma. “I’ve had enough with your attitude, Gemma. Either sit there and be quiet or go to your room.”

Gemma gives the biggest eye roll that only sixteen-year-olds can manage before standing up and dramatically trudging out of the room.

“What now?” I ask Mom.

“Now, it’s time to talk about your marriage.”

I sit up straighter, clearing my throat. I knew this day was coming. “Ok.”

“Your father and I made you a match before he died.” She starts braiding Mia’s hair. “The moment he found out he was sick, he began making arrangements to guarantee a good alliance to further ensure our family’s power. Now that Riccardo is gone, anyone can swoop in and take his place.”

“But Antonio—”

She cuts me off. “Antonio is only twelve. I put on a show by giving him his father’s pendant, but that pendant won’t protect him. Any one of your father’s men can decide to take all of this for himself. We’re not safe.”

Mia whirls around. “We’re not safe?”

Mom sighs and kisses the top of her head. “Sweetheart, go to your room. Emilia and I need to discuss some things.”

“But I don’t want to be alone.”

“I know, but this is grown up talk. I need a moment with your sister.”

Mia pouts as she gets up.

“I’ll read you a bedtime story,” I promise her. She smiles slightly before leaving.

“I just can’t deal with any of that at the moment,” Mom says, more to herself than me.

“It’s ok. I’ll check on everyone after we’re done talking.” I’m used to checking on my siblings anyway. It’s nothing new.

She gives me a grateful smile. “Thank you for that.”

“So, this marriage alliance ...”

“Right. Your father made an alliance with a man named Marco Aldi. He’s the ruler of the Italian Mafia in Los Angeles.”

I blink. “LA? No one ever said I’d have to move to marry. I can’t leave you and the family.”

“I know. But you must.” She reaches over and grabs my hands. “Emilia. This is the marriage your father made for you. Everything is already planned, and it’s being put into place as we speak.”

“You mean ... the wedding is already planned?”

“Yes. I bought you a dress. I think you’ll like it.”

“Why wasn’t I included in any of this?”

“Because your father’s sickness came on fast. We didn’t have much time. We planned everything. Marco knows you’ll be coming to marry him in a few days. He was notified the moment your dad died. He’s expecting you on Friday.” Friday is just two days away.

“So, I’m just supposed to show up and marry a man I’ve never met?”

“Yes. You won’t get the chance to meet him before the wedding. We need this to happen as soon as possible before anyone can try and hurt us here. If you’re married to a powerful man like Marco Aldi, we will be protected.”

“I’ve never even heard of this man.”

“I know. Your father has had many business dealings with him in the past, but he never mentioned him to you because you didn’t need to know every part of his business. Just trust me when I say that Marco is the most powerful man on the West Coast.”

“But if he lives in LA, how can he offer our family protection in New York?”

“His reach extends far. And this alliance will merge our families’ power. This is for the best. Trust me.”

“I do. And I knew this was coming. It’s just scary thinking about leaving you all behind.”

“I know.” She cups my cheek. “You’ve always been the strong one in our family. You’ve always been strong for me. By doing this, you’ll be protecting us, as you’ve always done.”

The doorbell rings.

Mom frowns. “I wasn’t expecting anyone.”

“Neither was I.”

We walk to the door together and open it, revealing Franco on our doorstep.

“Hello, Giulia, Emilia. May I come in?”

Mom and I share a look that clearly states we don’t want to let Franco inside, but we’re supposed to be polite Mafia women. If a man shows up on your doorstep, you let him in.

Mom opens the door wider for him, and he strolls on in like he owns the place. He even has the audacity to sit on the couch and put his boots on the coffee table. I can tell Mom wants to tell him off, but she keeps her mouth shut.

“Franco, what is it you need?” Mom and I sit on the other couch, still clasping hands.

“Just to tell you that I’ll be taking over in Antonio’s place, at least until he’s old enough to rule on his own.”

This is what my mom warned me about. I just wasn’t expecting for it to happen literally an hour after my father’s funeral.

“My son can rule just fine,” Giulia says.

Franco gives her a condescending look. “We both know he can’t. He’s too young. He’ll need guidance, and I can offer that.”

“You say this is just temporary.”

Franco sniffs as he shifts in his seat. “Yes. Just temporary. Until Antonio is at least eighteen. You know this is a good idea. I already talked to my men, and they agree with me.”

Mom’s hand tightens around mine. “You mean Riccardo’s men. They’re not yours.”

“They are now,” he says casually like he’s discussing the weather.

“No, they’re not,” I cut in. “They’re Antonio’s men.”

Franco checks his watch like he can’t even bother to give me his attention. “Then why wasn’t Antonio at this meeting, hmm? I didn’t see him there. I was there, and I took the role of leader of the Italian Mafia. Simple as that.”

“You know damn well that Antonio was here mourning the loss of our dad,” I spit out.

Mom doesn’t scold me for my language, for which I’m grateful. “You had no right to do this, Franco.”

“But I did it anyway. And as I said, it’s only temporary. I will pass the baton over to Antonio when he’s eighteen. But then then, I figured I’d move in with you.”

“Why?” Mom asks.

“Because you need a man around this house. It’s not good for all these girls to be running around wild, now, is it? This way, I can keep an eye on all of you. As the newly appointed boss, it’s for the best. Riccardo would have wanted you cared for, after all.”

“And you can do that?” I ask dubiously.

“I can.” He either ignores my tone or doesn’t pick up on it. “I already have movers coming over now with my things. I’ll take the master bedroom.”

“But that’s my room,” Mom hisses.

Franco just smiles.

Mom sits back in her seat, and I angle myself in front of her. “I’ll be married soon,” I tell Franco. “And my new husband will have a lot of power.”

“I imagine so. Whoever he is will help bring even more power to our family. To me. And in fact, I already thought of a marriage match for you.

Giuseppe Ferrari. He's quite a bit older, but he has a lot of money. He'll make a good match for you."

"My father already made a match for me. I'll be marrying him in—"

Mom grabs my arm, cutting me off. "Giuseppe Ferrari sounds like a good choice."

I frown at her. She doesn't meet my gaze.

Franco nods. "I thought so. Now, it's been a long day. I'll see myself to my new room." He walks up the stairs, not even asking permission.

I turn to my mom. "What about the marriage match that Dad made?"

"That is still on. I'm not marrying you off to whoever Franco chooses. Giuseppe Ferrari? Ugh. He's almost seventy years old. I want my kids to make good marriage matches, but I'm not going to subject you to that. Trust me. You're still going to marry Marco. We just need to leave for LA and get you married before Franco can stop it."

"Will Marco be able to kick out Franco?"

She's silent for a moment. "Maybe not. We might be stuck with him until Antonio does come of age. But at least you'll have a powerful husband that your father chose and not Franco. If Franco chooses your husband, you'll always be in his pocket, and I'm not letting that happen."

A thought occurs to me. "Mom, you said you wouldn't marry me to Giuseppe because he's old. How old is Marco? I know nothing about this man either, other than that Dad chose the match."

"He's thirty. So older than you, but not exorbitantly so."

"What does he look like?"

She pauses. "Uh ... actually, I'm not sure. He likes to keep to himself a lot. I've never seen him, and your father never described him to be. He's sort of a mystery. I only know he's rich, rules LA, and your father chose him. That's good enough for me. It will have to be good enough for you."

"I have no choice in the matter. I never had."

"That's how life is for a woman born into the Mafia. None of us gets a choice. But when an opportunity presents itself, we take it. And you do have a choice now. Either Giuseppe or Marco. Franco or your father."

"When you put it like that, it's an easy choice. I know my duty, Mom, and I'm prepared to follow through. I'm prepared to help take care of our family." I've been doing it most of my life. This isn't any different.

"Now, we just need to get you married."

CHAPTER 2

Emilia

Franco is seated at the kitchen table, a newspaper in his hands, as he chews loudly on a piece of bacon that my mom made for him. Already, he acts like he owns this place, like my mom is his wife and we're his children.

Breakfast in my family has always been a chaotic affair with everyone grabbing for food and talking among each other. But today, it's quiet as we all look at Franco.

"Why are you here?" Gemma asks.

"Gemma," Mom scolds. "Don't be rude."

"I'm not being rude. It's just ... he shows up last night and is now living with us? Why?"

"Is it because Dad is dead?" Antonio asks as he clings to the pendant around his neck.

"Yes, in fact," Franco says, finally acknowledging us as he puts his newspaper down, "Antonio, I didn't get the chance to tell you yesterday, but I'll be taking over in your place. Just until you turn eighteen."

Antonio frowns. "But why? I'm old enough to rule."

Franco chuckles. "You're twelve. You're not old enough to do anything."

Mom ruffles Antonio's hair as she passes behind him. "It's just temporary, Antonio. Franco can help guide you to become a good ruler for when you're older."

"But why are you living with us?" Gemma asks. "Can't you just live at your own house?"

Franco looks at Gemma like she's a fly he wants to smash with the newspaper in his hands. "Because your father is gone. You need a man

around the house. That's why I've taken up residence in the master bedroom." His eyes flick to Mom, who's back is to the table as she grabs more food from the counter.

"But that's Mom's room," Gemma reminds him. Mia flicks a piece of food at Cecilia, who shakes her head and clutches her cross tighter, murmuring a small prayer. Francesca chews slowly and barely lifts her head up from her plate.

"It was," Mom says, taking her seat at the other end of the table. Franco is across from her, in Dad's seat. It's not right for him to sit there. "But now, I'm sleeping in one of the guest rooms." She tugs her sleeve, drawing it down, but I catch a bruise on her wrist. I don't remember seeing that before.

I lean over to her and whisper, "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." She looks more tired and worn down than usual. Dad's death is hitting her hard.

"Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine, Emilia," she says more firmly. "I will be fine." She doesn't look at me as she begins to eat.

When I sit back in my seat, I notice Franco watching us. "Your mother is fine, Emilia," he tells me. "She'll be fine even after you're married. Which reminds me, I've set up a meeting with Giuseppe in a couple of days. It's time you meet your future husband."

Every one of my siblings' heads turn in my direction.

"Your future husband?" Gemma asks.

I sit still. "Yes. I will be married soon." But not to Giuseppe. I may not know anything about Marco, but if he offers me an opportunity to protect my family, I'll take it. I don't think Franco has my family's best wishes at heart.

"Yes." Franco stuffs a strip of bacon into his mouth. "And what a beautiful bride she'll be. So much like her mother."

Mom stiffens next to me. "All right. We should be going about the day. Kids, time to get ready for school."

"But we just lost Dad," Antonio says. "Don't we get to take a day off?"

Mom looks at Franco for a second before turning to Antonio. "It will be better for you to be in school. Trust me." She begins clearing plates before we're even done.

Franco remains seated as everyone scatters.

I help Mom with the dishes. "So, what's the plan?" I keep my voice low so Franco can't hear.

“I have tickets for us all to leave tonight. It will look good for the entire family to be there.”

“Just not Franco.”

“Right.”

I sneak a quick look behind me to see Franco watching us. I turn back. “Something tells me Franco won’t be happy with this plan.”

“Which is why I want all of us there for the wedding. Once you’re wed, there’s nothing he can do to stop it. So, get your siblings’ suitcases packed today while they’re at school. But be discreet. We leave tonight at seven.”

“On it.”

Franco watches as I walk past and try to remain calm. Once I’m upstairs, I hurry into my room and begin packing my suitcase. I’m not sure what all I’ll need. Once I’m married to Marco, I’ll live with him in LA. Something tells me I won’t return home for a while.

Franco stays downstairs with Mom while I pack up everyone else’s suitcases. I hide them under their beds in case Franco comes looking.

Once I’m done, I head downstairs, only stopping on the staircase when I hear Franco and my mom talking.

“I want you in my bed tonight,” he says.

“Franco, I’m grieving the loss of my husband. Leave me alone, please.”

“Now, why would I want to do that?”

I hear a clatter of something breaking, which spurs me on. As I enter the kitchen, I see Mom backed against the counter, Franco in front of her. A broken plate is on the ground.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

Franco backs away. “Your mother and I were just talking.”

“Right.” I look between them. “Mom, I need your help with something.” She nods quickly and follows me out of the room.

Once we’re in my bedroom, I finally look at her. “What was that about?”

“It’s nothing, honey. Truly. You know how eager Mafia men can be.”

“Actually, I don’t.” I’ve never been with a man before. I haven’t even had my first kiss yet. I imagine that will change soon.

Mom nods wearily, not quite looking at me.

“Mom, I’m leaving for LA. Come with me.”

“Oh, honey. I can’t. My place is here in New York. In the house your father bought us. Besides, Franco will look for us if we don’t return. And I don’t want to uproot the kids’ life.”

“It was already uprooted the moment Dad died and Franco moved in. I’ll be gone and married, living in a different state. Everything is changing.”

“I can’t impose on your husband. I’ve never even spoken to him. He agreed to marry you because of the deal your father made with him. He never agreed to take in your entire family. Let’s just focus on getting to LA and getting you married. That’s all.”

I want to argue, but Mom is already leaving the room. Once she sets her mind to something, Mom doesn’t waver from it.

The rest of the day I spend pacing my room, waiting for my siblings to come home from school. Every few hours, I sneak the suitcases out to the car to avoid Franco’s suspicion. And once my siblings return home, I spend the rest of the time waiting for seven to roll around.

While Mom makes dinner, Franco continues to be a nuisance, and my siblings and I continue to mourn our dad.

“I’m going to retire to my study,” Franco says, pushing his plate away after we eat. Of course, it’s not *his* study. It’s my father’s office he’s talking about. But we can use this to our advantage.

The moment Franco leaves the room, Mom turns to all of us. “Change of plans. We’re going on a vacation to LA. Emilia is getting married.”

“To Giuseppe?” Gemma asks.

“No, to someone else. Marco Aldi. It’s a deal your father made before he died, and I intend to honor his wishes. This marriage between Emilia and Marco will increase our family’s power.”

“Don’t you just mean Franco’s power?” Gemma says. “He’s taken over, after all.”

Mom shoots her annoyed look. “No. Our power. Antonio’s power. But we need to leave now. So, everyone up and out the front door.”

Even though they look confused, my siblings listen to our mom, and we make it out of the house without Franco noticing.

I get behind the wheel since Mom doesn’t know how to drive. She insisted on drivers taking her everywhere. The only reason I learned is because Dad felt it would be a good skill to have.

“Why are our bags already in here?” Gemma asks.

“Because Emilia packed while you were at school. Now, please be quiet.” That’s a hard thing to ask of six kids. Gemma frowns the entire way to the airport while Cecilia and Antonio talk to each other with Mia trying (and failing) to interject herself into their conversation. Francesca keeps to herself,

drawn inward like usual.

Mom only relaxes once we're on the plane and in the air. My entire family takes up First Class. No Economy for Mom. She grew up with riches and married into riches, and it's all she's ever known. In fact, it's all my siblings and I have ever known.

Landing in LA is a culture shock, to say the least. The weather is cool enough at nighttime, but everything smells warmer. The people milling about the airport smile more. And everything smells of pot.

After we're settled in the hotel, I can't sleep. I'm sharing it with Gemma. Mom and Mia are together, while Antonio and Cecilia are in a room, and Francesca gets a room to herself. Even though it might make her feel like an outcast, I think Francesca prefers to be on her own.

"I'm getting married tomorrow," I say as I look up at the ceiling.

"I wonder what your husband will be like."

"I have no clue. I don't even know what he looks like."

"Hopefully, he's hot."

I snort. "Yeah, that would be something, at least."

Gemma joins me in my bed and grabs my hand. "I can't believe you're actually going to be married. I don't know if I'm ready to lose you yet."

"I asked Mom if you could all stay in LA with me, but she made it clear you all will be going back to New York after the wedding."

"I can't wait to see the anger on Franco's stupid face when he realizes you outwitted him. I can't believe him. Coming into our home like he owns the place."

"I know. Gemma, since I won't be there, you need to promise me that you'll help take care of Mom and the kids."

"I know."

I grip her hand tighter. "No, *promise* me. I've always been the one to look after you all. You haven't had to do that yet. So, you need to promise me that you will."

Gemma rips her hand away. "You act like I'm some bimbo. I can figure shit out, too, you know."

"I never said you couldn't. It's just ... you've always had me. Now, you won't. This marriage is supposed to help protect you all, but ... I won't physically be there to help. I need to know you're prepared."

"I'll be fine," she mutters.

"I think Franco hurt Mom."

She blinks. “What?”

“I found a bruise on her wrist this morning. She tried to hide it. I’m not one hundred percent sure, but you need to keep an eye out. This is serious, Gemma.”

She looks at me intently for a moment. “Ok, yeah,” she says softly. “I’ll help out more. I’ll try to make sure everyone is safe.”

I pull her into a hug. “Thank you. Thank you.”

After a beat, she hugs me back. “I’ll miss you, Em.”

“I know.” I sit back. “But we still have a wedding to get to, so don’t say your goodbyes yet.”

THE NEXT MORNING, we arrive at Marco’s house. He sent a driver to pick us up, even though Mom didn’t tell him we had arrived. I guess he knew from the deal with my father.

... or another alternative is that he’s so powerful he has spies everywhere.

I don’t know the full extent of Marco’s rule, but I guess I’ll soon find out.

Marco’s house is way up in the hills, built in a Spanish style with a good view of the city below. I feel like I’m on a movie set with how gorgeous everything is—from the elaborate garden surrounding the mansion to the water fountain in the front drive to the tiles lining the walkway.

The housekeeper, who introduces herself as Camille, leads us inside. She’s very stern looking, with a bun pulled back tightly, no hairs out of place, and a dress so crisp that there’s not a wrinkle in sight.

“Which of you is Emilia?” she asks, looking around like she’d rather be anywhere else but here.

I step forward. “I am.”

“Right this way. The rest of you can wait in the ballroom.” She motions at a door down the hallway, and my siblings take off.

Mom follows us. “I have her dress,” she explains to Camille.

“Right.” Camille guides me through the house, decorated in dark woods and warm accents. “You can change in here. The wedding will take place in one hour. Marco will meet you in the ballroom, where you’ll be married.” With that, she leaves.

I turn to Mom. “Just like that.”

“Just like that.”

I swallow hard. “I can’t believe I don’t even get to meet Marco first. What if he’s some kind of horrible person?”

“I doubt your father would have arranged a marriage match if Marco was horrible. At least ... I don’t think he would.”

“That’s not reassuring, Mom.”

She offers me a sheepish smile. “Sorry. Let’s get you dressed. I hope you like the dress I chose for you.” She opens her suitcase and pulls out the most beautiful wedding dress I’ve ever seen.

The sleeves are off the shoulder and attached to a lacy bodice that flares out into a full skirt. It’s simple yet elegant. Sophisticated yet feminine.

“A perfect fit,” she says, resting her head on my shoulder after helping me into it.

“It really is. It makes me look mature.”

She fluffs out the skirt. “You’ve always had to be older than your years. Part of that is my fault.”

“Mom ...”

“No, it is. And I’m sorry for that.”

I blink back tears. “Thank you.”

“I just hope this marriage provides us all with protection. I hope you get your fairytale marriage like I got mine.” She lets out a soft sob before collecting herself.

“I hope so, too.”

After taking a moment to wipe away a couple of stray tears, she says, “Now, let’s do your hair and makeup. I want you to look beautiful on your wedding day.”

I STAND before the ballroom doors an hour later, my dress on, my makeup perfect, and my hair in a stylish half updo. Mom is next to me since I don’t have my father to walk me down the aisle.

I can’t hear anything on the other side of the doors. Everything is so quiet.

When they open, I’m shocked to see an nearly empty ballroom. My siblings are seated before a raised platform. Standing on the platform is a

priest. Next to him is an old-fashioned privacy screen. On the other side of the aisle sits one man with sandy colored hair. Is he supposed to be my husband? But it seems like he's more of a guest than the groom.

So, where's the groom?

Mom peeks her head in before looking at me. "Um ..."

"Do we just go in?" I ask. So far, it wasn't shaping up to what I'd expected. For a supposedly powerful man like Marco, I'd assumed there'd be hundreds of people to witness the event.

"I guess."

We walk down the aisle, my heels clicking loudly on the hardwood in the quiet of the room. There's no music playing.

Confused, I stand before the priest. Is Marco going to make an appearance?

"We're gathered here today to witness the wedding of Marco Aldi and Emilia Moretti," the priest begins.

I look at Gemma, who shrugs. I turn to the man in the audience. For some reason, he looks amused, and it annoys me.

When the priest asks us to repeat the vows after him, I almost want to laugh. My future husband isn't even here.

But then I hear deep voice begin to repeat the vows. It takes a moment to realize where the voice is coming from. It's coming from behind the privacy screen. Marco is behind it.

I can't even see him. I can only hear him.

His voice is deep and rich, like a campfire, husky. It almost makes me want to blush.

It also frustrates me. Why isn't he showing himself?

When Marco finishes, the priest turns to me. "Emilia, recite the vows after me." And I do, but it's awkward and strange. I'm talking to a freaking privacy screen!

Once I'm done, it's time for us to say "I do."

Marco goes first. He says it with confidence, like he doesn't think this situation is strange at all. Then, it's my turn.

"Emilia, do you take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband?"

I look between the priest, the privacy screen, and my family. This is the moment. This is what I was born for. My duty.

I take in a deep breath. "I do."

"I now pronounce you husband and wife."

There's a pause. Normally, this is the part where the bride and groom kiss, but Marco doesn't leave the privacy screen. So, I'm left just standing there, feeling weird.

The man with the sandy colored hair stands up and claps his hands. "All right. Let's have a party."

"Wait. Who are you?" I ask.

"I'm Leo, Marco's second in command." He grabs my hand and kisses the top of it. "Nice to finally meet you, Emilia. I've heard a lot about you from Marco."

"But ... Marco doesn't even know me. I don't even know him." I turn to the screen. "Why are you hiding behind there?"

Marco doesn't reply.

Enough is enough. I refuse to be made a fool. I storm up to the screen and walk behind it.

No one's there.

I turn to Leo. "Where did he go?"

"Ah, see ... Marco doesn't really like to be around people all that often. But he did provide us all with a nice meal, so why don't we go into the dining room and enjoy it?"

"Without my husband?"

"Yes." Leo says it like it's normal to have a wedding reception without the groom.

"Am I ... not to his liking?" I ask.

Mom rushes up to my side. "My husband made an arrangement with Marco."

"And so, he did," Leo says. "You got married. That was the arrangement."

"Oh," Mom says. "Does he not approve of my daughter? As you can see, she's quite beautiful."

Leo rakes his eyes up and down my body, making me want to slap him. "I can see that. And trust me, so can Marco. My boss just doesn't like being around people much, that's all. Now, let's go enjoy the meal, shall we?"

Mom and I share a look. then shrug. I'm hungry anyway. I couldn't eat much today, what with my nerves over getting married. And I still haven't even met my husband.

This is not what I expected at all.

Leo guides us to the dining room, which is decorated lavishly. The table

is long and wide and filled with more food than any group of people could eat. The room it's in is echoey and cold, more like a banquet hall than a dining room. Well, if Marco doesn't like people much, then he wouldn't be throwing that many parties, I guess. No wonder it feels like this place is barely used.

I sit at one end of the table, staring down at the other end, which is empty. My siblings dig into the food while I sit in confusion. Leo converses with my mom, who's telling him what a good wife I'll make Marco.

This is all so ... disappointing.

I've been prepared to marry for quite some time, and now, it's finally happened, and I don't even know what my husband looks like. I only know what his voice sounds like, which is deep and beautiful. But a voice doesn't make a marriage.

How am I supposed to do my duty and protect my family if my husband doesn't even show himself?

I manage to eat a few bites of food before it becomes too much on my stomach.

"Where's Marco?" I ask Leo.

"Uh ... probably in his room."

"I'd like to go talk to him." I stand up. "To meet him officially."

"Wait. Marco doesn't like to be disturbed."

I pause. "I'm his wife now. Shouldn't I get to know him?"

Leo just shrugs.

"Well, what am I supposed to do now?"

Camille, who'd been standing against the wall, approaches me. "I can take you to your room if you'd like, Mrs. Aldi. Say goodbye to your family now."

I blink. Mrs. Aldi. I'm officially no longer a Moretti.

Then the rest of what Camille said dawns on me. "I have to say goodbye now?"

"Mr. Aldi doesn't want a large group of people in his home for much longer. The night is wearing on. It's best to say your goodbyes now."

After a beat, Mom stands up and pulls me into a hug. "Be strong, Emilia. You'll be ok. Just remember, with this marriage, you'll be protecting us."

"But how can I protect you from Franco?" I say into her ear.

She stiffens. "Don't worry about me. You've already done so much. You're doing your duty." She pulls back and turns to my siblings. "Come say

goodbye to Emilia.”

Mia is the first one to run up to me. I hug her tightly. She’s so young and fragile. “If you ever need to talk, just call me,” I tell her.

“Ok.” She sniffles before breaking out into heaving sobs. Mom wraps her arms around her.

Cecilia hugs me next. “I’ll be praying for you to have a good marriage.”

“Thank you.”

Antonio keeps his head held high as he gives me a nod.

I open my arms wide. “Come here.”

He smiles and melts into my arms. My baby brother, thinking he needs to be strong for our family.

Gemma hurries forward and wraps her arms around my shoulders. “God, Emilia. I’m going to miss you.”

“Remember what we talked about.”

“I will.”

Francesca hangs back. Instead, I approach her and slip my arms around her. “I love you, Francesca. Don’t be afraid to speak up if you need to.”

She nods before pulling back. “I’ll try,” she whispers.

And with that, I’ve said my goodbyes.

It’s time for my family to leave and return to New York. Return to Franco.

I don’t know what he has planned, but I don’t trust him. Maybe I can convince Marco to kick Franco out of my family’s house, but that might be harder than I anticipated since I still haven’t met him yet.

I wave goodbye to my family as they walk out the front door. Leo winks at me before sauntering out, too. Camille shuts the door behind him, and I realize how alone I am. When you grow up in a household filled with siblings, you never have any space or time to yourself. As a teenager, it would annoy me.

But now, I’d give anything to have my family walk back into this house.

It wouldn’t be so bad if I had my husband with me. Assuming he’s the comforting kind, which, judging by how distant he already is, tells me he’s *not* the comforting kind. Why is he hiding from me?

“Let me show you to your room,” Camille says.

She leads me through the mansion, which is full of twists and turns. I’m going to get lost in here, I know it.

I grew up in a large house, but Marco’s mansion is intimidating it’s so

huge.

Camile finally takes me to a bedroom decorated in soft blues. It's quite feminine. Not at all what I'd expected in the mansion of a powerful man like Marco.

"Where's my husband? When will he be joining me?" I'm ready to perform my duty. Mom prepared me for what happens on a wedding night.

Camille blinks before realization dawns in her eyes. "Oh. No, this is your bedroom. Yours alone. Mr. Aldi will not be joining you."

I can only stare at her in shock. After a beat, she departs with a nod, shutting the door behind her.

So, not only did I not get a true wedding, with no first dance, no cutting of the cake, but now, I don't even get a true wedding night.

Maybe I should be relieved. If Marco doesn't want to spend time with me, I can just do what I want. But how am I supposed to help my family against Franco if I can't even speak with Marco?

I also can't shake the unquestionable, sudden loneliness.

I'd take a disgusting, old husband if it meant having company. But instead, I have a husband who's so distant that he won't even show me what he looks like.

I slump onto the bed, my wedding dress pooling out around me. The sight of my dress makes me cry for the first time since my father died.

Once the tears come, they don't stop.

I cry myself to sleep.

CHAPTER 3

Emilia

For a blissful moment when I wake up, I think I'm back in my bed in New York. Until it dawns on me: I'm in LA, in a stranger's house, married to a stranger.

At least the bed is insanely comfy. Marco has good decor; I'll give him that.

Too bad he can't enjoy it full behind his privacy screen. The thought makes me chuckle.

It's a new day, one I'm determined to make better than the last. My family is on their way back to New York and will have to face Franco. Something tells me he won't like being betrayed. So that's why I need to make good with Marco. I need to know he'll protect my family.

I jerk upright at a knock on my door. "Uh, come in." I'm still in my wedding dress. I don't know how I managed to fall asleep in it.

It's Camille. I'm both relieved and disappointed.

She's carrying a tray with a plate of food. She eyes my wedding dress but doesn't say a word. I pull a blanket over my shoulders. "I thought you'd enjoy your first morning here with breakfast in bed." She sets the tray over my lap.

"Thank you."

"Mr. Aldi wants you to be comfortable. If you need anything else, let me know."

"When can I see him?"

She looks away from me. "Mr. Aldi likes to keep to himself, I'm afraid. You won't be seeing him."

"At all?"

She hesitates.

“Camille, you’re telling me I’m never going to see my husband. Ever?”

“You’d have to ask Mr. Aldi about that.”

“But I don’t even know where he is to ask him!”

Camille looks taken aback by my outburst. I clear my throat. “Sorry. Everything is just so new still.”

She relaxes. “I understand. I’ll leave you to enjoy your breakfast.” She hurries out of the room, like she’s afraid I’ll bite her head off next.

I sigh as I sip the orange juice. At least this is good. Once I’m done eating, I change out of my dress and into a simple loungewear set. Setting my dress down on the bed makes me want to cry all over again. This is not how a marriage is supposed to go. Marco should have been the one to take this off me.

Though, do I even want him to? I don’t even know what he looks like. He could be repulsive, for all I know. But I was taught to do my duty and do my duty I shall. Even if it means being intimate with a man who grosses me out.

I carry my tray with me as I make my way to the kitchen. Or at least I try to. The mansion is so large that I end up down one wrong hallway after the next. Instead of getting frustrated, I decide to use this to my advantage. Maybe I’ll find something that clues me in on who Marco is.

... except the more I wander, the more confused I become.

There are no family pictures anywhere. In my house, you can’t find a wall that doesn’t have a picture of one of the Moretti family. But here, it’s all so ... blank. Just bare tan walls. There’s not even any art. It’s like this house is devoid of any personality.

Who is Marco Aldi, and what is he hiding? He clearly doesn’t want people to learn who he is. I wonder how my father even managed to make a deal with him in the first place.

After wandering around for a half hour, I finally find the kitchen. Camille is there washing the dishes.

I set the tray down and start to help her. She looks at me strangely as I grab a plate. “What are you doing, Mrs. Aldi?”

I pause. “Helping with the dishes.”

“That’s not your job.”

“I know, but I’d do the dishes all the time back at my house.” My house. My house in New York isn’t *my* house technically anymore. This new place is.

Camille gingerly grabs the plate from my hands. “You’re now the mistress of this house. It’s not your job to debase yourself by doing the dishes. I’ll kindly ask you to leave.”

I huff. “And do what? I don’t know anyone here.”

“We have a lovely garden you can walk through.”

“I guess. Thanks.”

She inclines her head as she resumes the dishes.

I sigh and leave the room, shuffling my feet. I should be back home with my family, mourning our dad and helping to protect Mom from Franco. But instead, I’m stuck in this house with a husband who refuses to acknowledge me.

When I enter the main foyer, I stop in my tracks. Leo is walking through the front door.

“Hi, Emilia.” He sidles up to me. “How’s married life treating you?”

“It’s ... going.”

“Marco still hasn’t shown himself to you, has he?”

I frown. “No, he hasn’t. Is there a reason for that?”

Leo slants his eyes at me. “You haven’t heard?”

“Haven’t heard what?” Leo is really starting to annoy me.

“Marco likes to keep to himself.”

“Yes, I know that by now.” I know that *really* well. “Why?”

Leo shrugs. “He’ll have to tell you himself.” He rakes his eyes over me. “And in the meantime, we can get to know each other better.”

I take a step back. “What are you implying?”

“I’m not implying anything.”

“Yes, you are, and you know it. I’m a married woman. I have no desire to get to know any man other than my husband.”

“We’ll see.” He winks as he walks away, whistling. I don’t trust Leo one bit, but he’s Marco’s second in command, so he’ll probably be around a lot. As long as he doesn’t try anything, I have nothing to worry about.

I make my way to the back of the house, where I can see out onto the back garden. Camille was right. It *is* lovely. Short hedges line a walkway decorated with cobblestones. Petunias curve around the hedges, giving the space more color. At the far back of the garden, I can make out a small shed. A pool off to the left is so long, I can barely see the end of it. No one is outside.

I’m about to change that by going outside myself when my phone rings.

It's Gemma.

I settle in one of the many living rooms and answer. "Make it home safely?"

"Yep. Just got in. Franco was pissed. He yelled at Mom for taking you to marry ... shit. What's your husband's name again?"

"Marco," I say stiffly.

"Right. Marco. Yeah, he was angry. But I told him to back off, and Antonio joined me, which seemed to make Franco retreat a little bit. He's been sulking all morning. I heard Mom telling him your marriage is a good thing because it'll bring extra power to our family, which seemed to cheer him up a little. God, I can't stand him. It's like he's trying to be a replacement dad, but he's not *our* dad, you know? No one even asked him to be here."

Gemma's mutterings can either annoy me or make me laugh. Fortunately, today, she makes me laugh. "Good on you for standing up for Mom. She struggles with that."

"Yeah, well, it's because she's always been docile. God, I could never. You'll never see me married to some asshole who's just going to boss me around. I'd kick him in the balls and then leave."

"I don't think it's always that simple, Gemma. Besides, Mom and Franco aren't married."

"They might as well be for how much Franco seems to think they are. He's always around Mom, pestering her and shit."

I shake my head. "That's horrible."

"So, what's it like being married?"

"Uh ..."

"Horrible?"

"Disappointing."

"Well, just do as I said. Leave if you're not happy."

"I can't just leave. I made a promise to marry Marco. I have to do my duty."

"I think that's just fucking stupid. You've always acted like you have all this pressure on you, but that's not true. Just do what you want."

A flash of annoyance flits through me. "Gemma, I have always had pressure put on me. It's always fallen on me to help take care of you and the rest of our siblings when Mom wasn't feeling up to it and Dad was busy with work. It was never you. So, don't tell me that the pressure I feel is imaginary.

It's not. It's real. And now, I have even more of a duty to make sure you guys are all right, what with Franco moving in and being controlling. I have to make sure this marriage works out because it's the best way for our family to gain more power. It's what Dad wanted. I can't just *leave*."

She's quiet on the other line. I make it a habit of not snapping at my younger siblings, but a lot has happened in a short amount of time.

"Gemma ..."

"No," she cuts me off. "If you want to be bitchy, then be bitchy. But I'm not going to listen to it." She hangs up.

I stare at my phone in shock. Gemma and I have always been close since we're the two oldest. She used to idolize me so much when we were younger. But as we got older and I faced more pressures, there were times I'd resent her for her cavalier, I-don't-give-a-shit attitude. Easy for her to not give a shit when she has me to do all the work.

I remind myself we're still grieving. Some snappish behavior is to be expected. I wish Gemma's advice was solid. If only it were that easy to leave, I'd be back in New York where I could keep an eye on my family.

Instead, I'm stuck in this mansion in the Hollywood Hills. It sounds like paradise, but it's really just a fancy prison.

I hear Leo's voice as he comes down the hallway. He's talking on the phone, but I approach him anyway. He looks me over as he raises a finger, telling me to wait. I swear, the next time Leo looks at me in a degrading way, I'm ripping out his eyes.

Once he's finished, he gives me a cheeky smile. "What's up?"

"Where's Marco?"

"Where is he?" He scratches the back of his head.

"Yes," I snap. "Where's my husband? I assume you're coming from him because why else would you be here?"

"I'm not sure my boss likes that information getting out."

"What? He doesn't even want his own wife to know where he is?"

Leo shrugs.

That's it. I brush past him and start walking down the hallway.

Leo follows. "Where are you going?"

"If you came this way, then he must be down here." I start knocking on every door I see. "Marco?" When I don't get an answer, I move onto the next one. "Marco?"

"He doesn't like to be disturbed."

I knock on another door. “Marco?” Nothing. I keep walking.

“Seriously, Emilia, he doesn’t like to be disturbed. Why don’t you and I just go hang out for the day? I can think of some fun activities we can get up to.”

“Oh, shut up!” I snap at him. My sudden anger surprises even myself, and Leo looks stunned. Before he can respond, I turn to the last door in the hallway and knock on it. “Marco?” When no one replies, I feel like I’ll scream.

I’m about to turn away when ... “What is it?” That deep voice I remember so vividly. When it’s all I have to go by, it stands out.

My heart skips a beat. “Marco?”

“Yes, it’s me.”

Leo sighs and mutters to himself. I ignore him. “Can I come in?” I ask, placing my hand on the doorknob.

“No,” comes the gruff reply.

“I tried to tell her not to disturb you,” Leo says.

“You can leave, Leo,” Marco tells him.

Leo looks between the door and me. “Are you sure, sir?”

“Yes. Leave.”

Leo gives me another wink before sauntering off down the hallway.

I roll my eyes before turning back to the door. “Why are you avoiding me?”

A pause. Then, “I’m not avoiding you.”

“Well, I haven’t even seen you. It feels like you’re avoiding me.”

“No.”

“Then, what is it?”

Marco doesn’t reply.

I bite my lip to keep myself from screaming or crying. I’m not sure which. “Am I not what you want in a wife? Is that it? I know my dad made this arrangement. If I’m not what you wanted, you can let me know. Just talk to me.”

He doesn’t respond for a long time. I’m about to give up when he says. “It’s not you who’s the problem.”

“It’s not you; it’s me? You’re really using that excuse? Why did you agree to this marriage when you don’t even want to see me?”

“I agreed to this marriage because I knew it could benefit me. I was looking to expand on the East Coast. Your father was looking to expand over

here. We both knew we could help each other out. This was the best way to ensure that.”

I nod. I knew I was being treated as chattel in a bargaining deal. That doesn’t surprise me. But it still hurts to hear him say it. “Don’t you want to see me?” I hate how pathetic I sound.

“I did see you. At the wedding.”

“You could see me through the screen?”

“Yes.” He pauses. “You were beautiful.”

I inhale. I didn’t expect him to say that. “Why won’t you let me see you?”

“I’m not beautiful, Emilia.”

“That doesn’t bother me. I just don’t want to be so alone here. Please, let me see you.” I touch the doorknob and turn it.

It’s locked.

I know the moment I do this, it’s a mistake.

“You need to leave,” he says, his tone returning to his gruff manner.

“Leave ... altogether?”

“No. Just ... I don’t want you around me. Go spend the day doing something else other than bothering me.”

Tears sting my eyes. “I’m bothering you?”

A pause. “Yes.”

I want to snap at him that he’s bothering me by pushing me away like this, but I don’t. Instead, I respond, “I want to get to know my husband. I think that’s only fair.”

“I don’t want to get to know you. Now, leave me alone.”

I angrily wipe away one lone tear that escaped down my cheek. Without a word, I walk away.

CHAPTER 4

Emilia

I spend the next day in bed. I don't have the energy to do anything else. I'm still mourning my dad, missing my family, and feeling like a stranger in my new home with a husband who wants nothing to do with me.

I don't even have the energy to cry anymore. I just stare at the wallpaper. At least there are flowers in the design to give me something to focus on. I feel like I could crawl into it and never leave.

I remind myself not to go crazy, but it's hard when I have all this sadness inside me.

Camille brings me food, but we don't talk much. I just eat and then set the tray outside my door before going back to bed.

I never knew I could have depression. I was always so focused on helping my younger siblings and mom that I never really had time to myself. I never really had time for my brain to slow down and fall into a funk.

I don't know who I am without my family around.

As if on cue, my phone rings. It's my mom calling. I grab my phone like I might die without it. "Mom?" I wince at the desperation in my voice.

"Emilia, I was just checking in with you. I wanted to make sure you're doing all right."

I gaze around my empty room, devoid of any emotion. "I'm ... dealing. How are you doing?"

She pauses before saying, "I'm fine." I can hear the tightness in her voice.

"Are you telling me the truth?"

"I'm fine, Emilia. You don't always have to take care of me. I am *your* mother, after all."

“Is Franco treating you guys all right? Gemma told me he was angry after you arrived home.”

“He was. But I calmed him down. Otherwise, things have been normal. Well, as normal as they can be. Everyone is still dealing with the loss of your dad. Gemma is brattier than usual. Cecilia is praying, even more than usual. Mia has been crying a lot. I can tell Antonio has been trying to stay strong, but I can see the cracks in him. My sweet boy. I hope he can make it through this.”

Antonio has always been my mom’s favorite. I don’t think she’d deny it if I asked.

“And Francesca?”

She’s quiet for a second. “Oh, right. Francesca. I almost forgot about her. She’s quiet, like usual. I swear, that girl is a mystery to me. I don’t understand her.”

“Maybe try talking to her more.”

“But she never really responds. She’s too shy.”

I sigh. Getting my mom to truly see Francesca is a battle. “Ok, well, just keep me updated on how everyone is doing.”

“How’s Marco?”

I draw my knees up to my chest. “I wouldn’t know. I still haven’t actually met him.”

“What?”

“Yeah. I tried talking to him, but he told me to leave him alone. He doesn’t want to get to know me, Mom.”

“Well, then, you need to try harder. Some men don’t know what’s good for them. It’s up to you to show him that.”

“Why does it always have to fall to me?”

“Because you’re a woman, Emilia. Everything falls to us.”

I slump back onto my bed and put my pillow over my face. “I can try, but I think something’s wrong with Marco. I don’t know what, but he’s hiding something.”

“Then find out what it is. Our family is depending on your marriage to Marco. He needs to hold up his end of the bargain by helping us gain more power.”

“Won’t that power just go to Franco?”

“For now. But, in time, it will go to Antonio, and that’s what I’m choosing to focus on. And so should you. Think of your brother’s future. Of

our future.”

Always. It’s always about my family’s future.

“Ok, Mom,” I whisper. “I’ll try.”

“Good girl. Now, Mia’s calling for me, so I must go.” She hangs up before I get to say goodbye.

“Love you, too,” I say to my phone, knowing she’s already hung up.

My mom has a point. I can’t keep lying in bed all day, expecting things to change. If I want to make a difference, I need to be proactive.

I get up, change, and go in search of Marco.

The first place I go to is his office, but when I knock, I don’t get any reply. Next, I go to the kitchen, where I find Camille working on dinner and ask her where Marco’s bedroom is.

“His bedroom? I’m not sure he’d like you to have that information.” She finishes cutting up some carrots and dumps them in a pot.

“Why not? I’m his wife. Besides, I’ll knock on every door in this house until I find him, but I’d rather you tell me to save me some time.”

She moves on to chopping up onion. “Fine. His room is on the west side of the house. If you go upstairs and down the left hallway, you’ll find it at the end of the hall. He’s probably in there.”

“Camille, how does Marco get any work done if he’s cooped up in this house all day?”

“I’m just the housekeeper, Mrs. Aldi. I don’t know much. But I’ve noticed he has business meetings in his office. He doesn’t need to go out to command respect. From what I’ve seen, all his men truly admire him. He’s a good boss.”

“How so?”

“He pays well and fair. He’s not violent. He rules with justice. That’s all one can hope for in an employer.”

“Right. Thank you.” I hurry out of the kitchen and to Marco’s bedroom. I follow Camille’s instructions, and soon, I’m standing before his door.

Taking a deep breath, I knock. After a beat, he answers. “Who is it?”

His voice sends shivers down my body. I wish I could see if his voice matches his face. “It’s Emilia.”

“I thought I told you to leave me alone.”

“How are we supposed to have a real marriage if I never get to see you? How are we supposed to have children someday?”

“You’re already thinking of children?”

I blush even though he can't see me. "It's just hypothetical. It's usually what's expected from a marriage. I know my mom expects it."

"Well, if we all did what our moms expected, this world would be even shittier of a place."

I flinch back. "Marco, please. Just let me in. I want to know you."

"Are you saying Leo hasn't already told you?"

"Leo hasn't told me anything. He's annoyingly secretive, just like you."

"So, you don't know what kind of monster I am?"

I frown. "Are you a monster?"

"That's what everyone thinks of me."

"Is it true?"

After a beat, he says, "Yes."

My heart begins to pick up its pace. "How are you a monster?"

"I'd have to show you."

"So, then, show me."

"No. Leave me alone, Emilia. Our marriage will exist in name only. Nothing else needs to happen."

I resist the urge to scream and cry. "Camille is making dinner. Join me."

"No. Now, leave."

"Well, if you change your mind, I'll be in the dining room." I force myself to walk away, even though all I want to do is bash Marco's door down and confront him. See what he's hiding.

I stay in my loungewear for dinner, even though it seems too casual in such a grand space. But I'm the only one here. No need to impress anyone.

My mom would always insist on us wearing our best to family dinners, even if it was a random Tuesday night or a high-class event. Honestly, it could get exhausting. So, it's kind of nice to just wear what I want on my own terms. That's probably the only plus to Marco being so distant. He doesn't care what I get up to.

But that's the thing. I want him to *care*. I just don't want to feel so alone.

Camille serves a simple roast with carrots and potatoes. I eat slowly, not feeling much hunger. It's hard to feel hungry when you're so upset.

"Do you want to join me?" I ask Camille before she can return to the kitchen.

"Oh, no. That wouldn't be proper, Mrs. Aldi. I'm the housekeeper. I'm here to serve you. Not the other way around."

"Nonsense. You have to eat, too. So, sit. Grab a plate."

“Mr. Aldi wouldn’t approve.”

I make a big show of looking around the room. “Well, is Mr. Aldi here right now?”

“No, he’s not.”

“Exactly. So, you can eat with me.” I push out a chair for her. “I could really use the company. Please?”

Camilla wavers for a moment before nodding and taking a seat. “All right.”

We eat in silence for a while. It’s obvious Camille is uncomfortable with this arrangement. but I’m desperate for conversation.

“How did you start working for Marco?” I ask.

“A few years ago. I responded to the job online and was hired soon after.”

“What were your first impression of him?” It’s obvious to both of us that I’m digging for information.

“Are you asking if I’ve seen him?”

“Yes.”

She takes a sip of water before replying. “I have.”

“And?” I try to calm my racing heart.

“And he wouldn’t want me to talk about it.”

“Is there something wrong with him? Just tell me.”

Camille sighs. “He’s actually quite handsome, if you’ll forgive me for saying it.”

Not going to lie—I’m almost disappointed. I was expecting something else. “So, then, what’s he hiding?”

“His scars.”

“His scars?”

“Yes. He ...” Camille stops short, her eyes widening, looking at something over my shoulder.

“What is it?” I’m about to turn around when a deep voice stops me.

“Don’t.” It’s Marco.

I pause in my chair. “Marco?”

“Don’t turn around. Camille, you may leave us.”

Camille nods, clearing her plate before practically running out of the room.

“I want to see you,” I tell him, trying to turn around, but he tells me to stop again.

“I don’t want you to see me. Just stay facing that way.”

“How are we supposed to have dinner together if you don’t sit down?”

“Why are you so insistent on us spending time together?”

“Why are you so insistent on us not spending time together?”

I can feel him step closer to me. “I asked first.”

“Because you’re my husband. I have the right to know my husband, especially since I moved across the country for this marriage. The least you could do is talk to me.”

“I am talking to you.”

“You know what I mean.”

He’s quiet. I gasp when I feel something touch my shoulder. His hand. He has long, masculine fingers. His skin is tan and is a stark contrast to my fairer tone. The feel of his hand on my shoulder is intense. It’s like dying of dehydration and then getting the chance to finally drink something to save yourself.

I don’t say anything. I fear that if I do, Marco will pull away.

He grips my shoulder tightly before relaxing his fingers. I don’t see any scars on his hand, and his forearm is covered by his sleeve.

I’m breathing heavily. I never knew something as simple as a touch to my shoulder could feel this ... erotic.

Marco moves his hand over to my neck, where he trails his fingers across my skin. I let out a soft sigh. I’ve never been touched like this.

Hugs? Yes. Kisses on the forehead? Many times, from my mom. But I’ve never been touched so intimately before.

Marco brings his fingers up to my cheek. My skin tingles from his touch. His fingertips brush my lips, and I gasp.

It breaks the spell.

Marco pulls away. And I can’t take it anymore. I turn around to see him.

... except, he’s facing away from me.

All I can see is his back. His black hair is cut short on the sides and longer on the top. His shoulders are broad, and he’s clearly tall. He’s wearing a black suit that’s fitted to his body to perfection. I can tell he’s fit, even from behind. Well, he spends a lot of time at home. He probably has a home gym.

He doesn’t look ugly from here, but I still can’t see his face. Is he a monster physically, or did he mean emotionally? Because so far, Marco has done nothing but mess with my emotions.

“Why won’t you look at me?” I finally ask.

“You’re not ready to see me.”

I bristle at this. “You don’t know me. You’ve made it clear you refuse to get to know me. So, how can you tell me what I’m ready for?”

He’s silent for a moment before saying, “You’re right. It’s me who’s not ready.”

I deflate a little. “Then why not just say that? Why are you pushing me away, Marco? Am I really that unappealing of a wife?”

“You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.”

“You haven’t seen me.”

“I did. On our wedding day, remember?”

That’s right. He could see through the privacy screen. “Why won’t you extend the same courtesy?”

“Because I’m the boss. This is my house. I make the rules. What I say goes.”

“I’m your wife. Not your employee.”

“You might as well be. Your father and I made a deal. You were just a transaction.”

I flinch. “Why are you being so mean?”

“I was raised by cruelty. It’s in my blood.”

“That’s no excuse.”

“But it is. It explains everything. And you would do well to stop asking questions.”

“I’ll stop asking questions if you just show me who you are.”

“You’re quick on your feet; I’ll give you that.”

I clench the back of my chair tighter. “Ugh. You’re insufferable, you know that?”

He chuckles, but there’s no humor to it. “That’s why people think I’m a monster. I use it to my advantage. It scares away my enemies.”

“It’s gonna push me away, too.”

He tilts his head slightly in my direction, giving me a quick glimpse at the side of his face before he looks away again. I couldn’t make anything out in time. The dining room is too dimly lit to see properly. “You say that as if I care. You’re just a means to an end. Nothing more. Don’t think I care for you, Emilia. You’re just a stranger I married for political gain. Remember that.” With those words, he walks out of the room.

I always knew words could hurt more than any other weapon, and Marco just showed me how true that can be.

CHAPTER 5

Emilia

A week goes by, and nothing changes. I eat alone at every meal. Marco never shows his face. Leo stops by and winks at me, making me uncomfortable. And I'm crippled by the utter loneliness I feel.

I haven't even left the house since I don't have a car, and you need a car to get around LA. I'm bored. I'm tired of feeling unwanted. Mostly, I miss my family.

I think over the fight I had with Gemma. I've tried calling her over the week to make amends, but she ignores me. Gemma has a habit of being immature and stubborn.

I talk with my mom most days, but she doesn't give me anything to work with. Usually, she'll just tell me that the kids are settling into their new lives without Dad. Franco is still being overbearing, but he's manageable. Everything else is fine, she says.

I don't believe her. I know not everything is fine, but there's only so much I can do across the country.

I haven't tried to talk to Marco at all since he told me I was nothing more than a business deal to him. I can't stop thinking of how he caressed my neck and cheek. The way he touched my lips. It was so intimate.

Over the past week, I've found myself touching my lips with my fingertips, almost like I'm trying to recreate Marco's touch. It's not the same, not by a long shot. It just ends up making me feel even lonelier.

After the eighth day of this, I've had enough. I call Mom. "Tell Gemma to answer her phone when I call," I tell her. "I want to talk to her."

"I'll do that. But you know Gemma never listens to me."

“Just try for me, please, Mom. Or just give her your phone right now.”

“I’ll try.” She’s quiet as she goes to find Gemma, and over the line, I can hear her tell Gemma that I want to speak to her. Gemma says no. “She said no,” Mom tells me.

“Tell her I want to make amends. Say I’m sorry.”

I can hear Mom tell Gemma this. After a beat, the sound of the phone scuffling is loud in my ears, and then Gemma is on the other end. “What do you want?”

“I want to say sorry. I don’t like how we left things.”

“When you pretty much called me useless.”

I wince. “I’m sorry, Gemma. Ok? A lot has changed in a few short weeks. We’re all still dealing with this. I don’t want to fight with you.” Even though Gemma insulted me, too, I’m not looking for an apology. I’ve learned you need to let things go sometimes in order to be happy, which is something I’m trying to do with Marco; thought it’s proving difficult.

“I don’t want to fight with you either,” she mumbles.

I let out a deep, relieved sigh. “Good. I actually thought more about what you told me.”

“What did I tell you?”

“To just leave if I’m not happy.”

“Your marriage isn’t paradise, I take it.”

“Not at all. Marco barely talks to me. I still haven’t seen him. I can’t actually leave this marriage. It’s too important. But I figured I would try and get out of the house today. Maybe go shopping. Just do anything, really.”

“Good for you. Don’t twist yourself into knots for some man.”

“That *man* is my husband.”

“Hey, if he doesn’t respect you, then you don’t have to respect him.”

Despite how sad I feel, I manage to laugh. “Duly noted. I love you, Gem.”

“I love you too, Em.”

“Hey, put Mom back on the phone. I want to ask her something.”

“Emilia?” Mom asks once she’s back on the other end.

“Mom, has Marco been in talks with you about expanding? I know he married me to gain more power.”

“He hasn’t spoken to me, but I know he’s spoken to Franco. You were right. Marco’s power helps benefit Franco, which isn’t ideal, but as long as this marriage alliance holds until Antonio becomes boss, it will help your

brother.”

“How often do Franco and Marco speak?”

“They’ve been talking on the phone for the past week now. Maybe every other day.”

“So, my husband has spoken to my uncle more than he has to me. Great.” I don’t even care if I sound bitter. I am bitter.

“Remember to try, Emilia. If you want your marriage to work, you have to try.”

“But how am I supposed to try when Marco doesn’t let me in?”

“You just have to keep trying.”

I can’t help it. I roll my eyes at her advice. “Ok. Well, I’ll talk to you later.”

After we say our goodbyes, I hang up. My mom means well, but she had a loving marriage with Dad. She doesn’t know how hard it can be to be married to man who wants nothing to do with you.

Gemma is right, though. I can’t sit around all day for a man, even if he is my husband. I need to get out and live my own life. I need to make LA my new home.

Except I still don’t have a car, and I’m way up in the Hills.

I’m not about to ask Marco to borrow his car, so I go to Camille instead. She’s in the living room, dusting off the coffee table. “Does Marco have a car I can borrow?”

She pauses after I ask my question. “Mr. Aldi does have multiple cars.”

“Can I use one?”

“Shouldn’t you ask your husband?”

“The thing is, I don’t trust him. I have a feeling he’ll tell me no.”

She points the duster at me. “Then that’s your answer.”

“But I need to get out, Camille. I’m going stir crazy. Let me just borrow a car.”

“What do you plan on doing?”

I shrug. “Nothing much. Shopping. Doing whatever. Anything. Just something.”

She raises an eyebrow as she walks past me. “Doesn’t sound like you have much of a plan.”

“Please, Camille. You know how much Marco ignores me. Let me have a fun day out. I need it.”

She sighs as she places the duster in a hallway closet. “Fine. You’re right.

It's not good for a young woman to be kept all alone. The car keys on are the table by the garage."

I continue to look at her.

She chuckles. "You don't know where the garage is, do you?"

"This place is so big."

"It's past the kitchen and down the hall. You'll find it. Just be safe."

"Why wouldn't I be safe?"

"Mr. Aldi has enemies. He wouldn't want you getting hurt."

"I don't even think he cares. Besides, I was allowed out on my own back in New York. Why should LA be any different?" I walk away before Camille can change her mind.

I find the bowl of car keys and enter the garage. Row upon row of cars reside within the cavernous space. There's got to be around ten cars in here, all of them clearly expensive. My family is well off, but even this is a lot for me.

I don't know which car key goes to which car, so I try them all until one clicks. It's a little white Porsche. Don't mind if I do.

The car practically hums when I turn it on. I never thought I'd describe a car as being sexy, but this car is sexy.

After a few minutes of finagling, I figure out how to open the garage door, and then, I'm backing out. I turn the car around to face the long driveway before me. For the first time since I got here, I feel free.

I let out a whoop of enjoyment as I drive away from the house. I doubt Marco will even notice I'm gone, which makes me both relieved and sad.

I plug in where the nearest mall is into my phone and then head off in that direction. "Huge" is an understatement to describe this mall. New York has tall buildings, but not many that are long and large. Everything is more spaced out in LA, and it feels larger compared to New York.

I don't have a care in the world as I spend the next few hours shopping. It's mindless fun and a good way to ease the worry out of my mind. Gemma ultimately offered me good advice. A day away from Marco's house and my marriage is just what I needed.

I've never had the chance to go out by myself like this before. Usually, all my siblings would be with me. Mom or Dad would insist that we all go together. They claimed it was never fair if Gemma or I spent the day out by ourselves. Nope. It had to include Francesca, Antonio, Cecilia, and Mia. Even though I miss them, it's nice to have time to myself. No pressure to watch the

kids while Mom and Dad have date night. No pressure to make sure they're all accounted for when we go out. No pressure to make sure they don't get into fights with each other.

No pressure at all for once in my life.

I almost don't know what to do with myself.

I get a pretzel and dip it in a cheese sauce that is both delicious and disgusting. Mom would never allow me to eat something like this. She always claimed I needed to keep my figure in check to appeal to a future husband.

Well, the jokes on her. Marco doesn't even care what I look like. He doesn't care about me at all.

I finish wandering the mall three hours later and decide to return to Marco's place. I can't think of it as home yet. It's still too empty.

When I step into the house, I find Camille waiting for me. She looks worried.

"Camille?"

"Mr. Aldi wants to talk to you."

"Really?" I so surprised by this I could fall over.

"He's ... not happy that you left without his permission."

"Huh. Where is he now?"

"In his office, waiting for you." Camille hurries away like just being near me will give her some disease that will make Marco disappointed in her.

My heart beats fast as I approach Marco's office door. I try the knob. It's still locked.

"Marco? You wanted to talk to me?"

"I did." I can't help it. His warm voice makes me shiver, even through the door. "What the fuck were you thinking?" he hisses.

I take a step back. "I just wanted to have a fun day out. So, sue me."

"I never told you that you could leave this house."

"Well, you never speak to me to begin with, so I didn't think it was a big deal."

"It is a big deal, Emilia. You are not to leave this house without my permission or a bodyguard. And you definitely don't get to take one of my cars on a joy ride, for fuck's sake."

I've never heard Marco this angry before, and I have to say, I despise it.

"I didn't go off on some joy ride. I went shopping to clear my head."

He scoffs. "Like that's any better."

“It is. Marco—” I stop myself from saying something I’ll regret.

“What?”

“You’re impossible. You expect me to sit around all day while you ignore me, and when I finally decide to do something just for myself, you tell me I’m never allowed to do it again. Why are you doing this to me?”

“I already explained it to you before. My house. My rules.”

“How can this even be your house when you’re barely in it!” I shout.

“What do you mean? This is my house.”

“No, it’s not Marco. It’s a fancy showpiece in a catalog. There’s no personality anywhere in this house. Nothing shows me that this is *your* house.”

“It’s how I like it,” he growls.

“How can you even enjoy it when you never leave your office? I’ve spent the past week here, wandering around, and I’ve never even spotted a glimpse of you. What are you hiding?”

“I’m not hiding anything. And you’d do well to follow my rules.”

I place my hands on my hips even though Marco can’t see me. “Or what? You’ll hurt me?”

“I’ll pull back on my deal with your family.”

I pause. “What? You can’t do that. Our marriage ...”

“Was to benefit me. I get the pull your family offers on the East Coast. But I’m already a powerful man. I don’t technically need it.”

If Franco was already angry with me for marrying Marco, he’ll be even angrier if Marco reneges on his deal. I don’t want to know what Franco will do when he’s angry. The only reason he calmed down was because he saw the opportunity Marco provided for him.

“You can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Please, Marco. Don’t. My family is depending on me. Just keep to the deal. Please.”

He’s quiet for so long, I almost think he left out a back door or fell asleep. But then he speaks again, and it startles me to hear that he is closer to the door. “Your family means a lot to you?” he asks in a softer tone.

“Yes. They mean everything to me. You made a promise when you married me. Just ... don’t back out of the deal. My uncle won’t be happy with you.”

“I don’t give a fuck about Franco Moretti. He’s nothing compared to your

father.”

“Well, I care.”

“Why do you think I care if you care?”

“Because you’re not heartless.”

He chuckles darkly. “Then you don’t know me very well.”

“You make it hard for me to get to know you.” I place my hand on the door. “Please, Marco. Don’t do this. Just let me in.”

“I won’t go back on my deal if you don’t go galivanting around town again.”

“Fine,” I say before my brain can even think it. The urge to protect my family is instinctual. “But you need to let me get to know you. See you,” I add.

“I won’t go back against my deal, but I won’t promise anything else. Now, leave. I have work to do.”

And for the third time, I walk away from Marco, trying to resist the urge to cry.

CHAPTER 6

Emilia

“Looking good there,” Leo says as he walks by, heading toward Marco’s office. I’m in the living room, reading. I think the last book I read was a children’s novel to Mia. Just another thing I have more time for, which should make me happy but just makes me miss home even more.

I snap my book close. “Why do you do that?”

He stops and turns back to me. “Why do I do what?”

“Flirt with me. You know I’m married to your boss.”

“Who says I’m flirting with you?”

I level him with a look. “You are. Every time you see me, you either give me a compliment on how I look or ask me out. It’s tiring, Leo. Please stop.”

He shrugs. “Since I’m not doing anything, I don’t see what the problem is. I need to go see Marco, so I’ll talk to you later.” He saunters off with a wink.

I glower at his departing back. What is up with these men not respecting me? I fling my book across the room. It lands with a crack on the hardwood. I don’t even care if what I just did was immature. I’m beyond that. No one is here to judge since no one really pays me much attention anyway.

I stare at the book on the floor before sighing and picking it up. I place it carefully back on the bookshelf. The spine is slightly cracked, but the book is still holding up. I might be angry, but I’m not careless.

After wandering the house for a bit, I stop at the back of the house. I still haven’t explored the gardens. They’re beautiful, but their beauty makes me sad for some reason. My eyes land on the shed near the back of the garden. It looks so out of place compared to everything else. It’s a dark brown with

peeling paint while the rest of the garden is pristine and green.

Leo, who must have finished his meeting with Marco, comes down the hallway and stops when he sees me. "I like the view from here."

I spin around the face him. "See? Things like that."

"So, I like to flirt. Sue me."

"I don't like it. Stop."

He gives me a wry smile before walking away. "Nobody tells me what to do," he calls out over his shoulder.

I let out a huff. Screw him. Seriously. Screw all these men.

I go to Marco's office and pound on the door.

"Leo, did you forget something?" he asks through the door. Always through the door.

"It's me."

He doesn't respond.

"Leo won't stop flirting with me. It's making me uncomfortable. Tell him to stop."

"I'm sure Leo isn't doing anything. You're probably seeing something that isn't there."

God, I want to rip right through this door and slap Marco across his face. The ironic part is that I wouldn't even recognize him if I saw him since I've never fucking seen him before.

"So, you're not going to tell Leo to stop?"

"No. Because my men know how to stay in line. Leo knows you're off limits. He's not doing anything."

"Ugh. You're impossible." I storm away before I can get into another fight with him. How is it possible to hate someone you've never seen?

I slam my door to my bedroom, not giving a fuck if it's immature. As if on cue, Gemma calls me. "What?" I answer.

"Hi to you, too."

I suck in a deep breath before releasing it slowly. "Sorry. What's going on?"

"With everything that's happened lately, I think some of us forgot, but it's Mia's birthday in a couple of days."

"That's right. She'll be nine."

"Yeah. Mom asked me to call you to remind you."

"And I won't be there." Tears sting my eyes. I've never missed any of my siblings' birthdays, and I don't want to start now.

“You can be here. Come home for a few days. Invite your mysterious husband.”

“He won’t come. I know it. But ... I’m not sure if I can come, either.”

“Why not?”

I slump onto my bed. “Marco said that if I didn’t listen to him, he’d renege on his deal. He won’t work with our family, and that’s gonna be a problem for Franco. I know it.”

“That’s fucking stupid.”

“I agree.”

Gemma’s quiet for a moment before she says, “So, just ask him if you can go. I’m sure he’ll understand. It’s your sister’s birthday.”

“I mean ... I can try. But no promises.”

“Good.”

“I never thought you cared much for our siblings’ birthdays. You never took part in planning any of them.”

“Yeah, well ... things change. I seem to remember someone telling me I need to help out more now.”

I chuckle. “Thank you for that. Those kids need you.”

“Don’t I know it. I never realized how much you really did for this family. I miss you, Em.”

“I miss you, too. Let me go ask Marco if I can come.”

“And screw him even if you can’t. Mom will appreciate you being there. I know it’ll make Mia happy.”

“I know.”

After we say our goodbyes, I head back to Marco’s office. I feel awkward knocking after our last conversation, but my sister is more important than my pride. “Marco, I have a favor to ask.”

“What is it?”

“It’s my sister’s birthday in a few days. I want to go back to New York to see her.”

“No,” is his instant reply.

I bristle. “It will only be for a few days. If you’re worried about my safety, you could send a guard with me. Or ... *you* could come with me.”

“I said no, Emilia. End of discussion.”

“What is your problem?” I snap back.

“My problem is that I seem to have a disobedient wife who hasn’t learned anything yet. My word is final. You’re not going to New York. You’re

staying here so I can keep an eye on you.”

“You don’t even look at me as is.”

“I know where you are. I have cameras in the house.”

I step back, feeling instantly violated. “In my room?”

After a beat, he says, “No.”

I sigh in relief.

“Just in the main parts of the house,” he explains. “I had them installed after your little getaway the other day.”

“When? I didn’t see anyone come in.”

“It was at night while you were asleep. So, I’ll know if you get into trouble again. You’re staying here, Emilia. End of discussion.”

“You really are a monster,” I hiss before walking away.

Even though Marco just told me not to be disobedient, I can’t miss Mia’s birthday. It would break both of our hearts.

I can protect my family better than Marco can. Who cares if he reneges on his deal? I’m going back home to New York and staying there. If Marco doesn’t want me for a wife, I’m going to be with my family who actually appreciate me and need me right now.

I hurry up to my room and immediately book a flight for New York for tonight. One nice thing is that Marco isn’t in charge of my finances. I pack my bag and wait.

When it comes time for me to head to the airport, I walk confidently to the garage. So, what if Marco stops me? If he does, he’ll have to show me who he is. Maybe this will draw him out, but I’m guessing he won’t. He’s afraid of something. Of showing me the real him.

I get into the Porsche and drive to the airport. I make it all the way through the TSA check and am at my gate before I notice two men approaching me.

“Mrs. Aldi?” one of them says. He has gray in his hair and is super muscular. “Mr. Aldi wants you back home. You should come with us now.”

“How did you find me so fast?” I ask.

“Mr. Aldi is a powerful man. It’s not hard for him to keep track of his wife. Now, come with us.”

“No.” I walk away from them. They just follow.

“Please, Mrs. Aldi. Just come with us. This doesn’t have to be hard.”

“I’ll scream,” I warn them. “I’m going to New York to spend time with my family. I’m not a prisoner. I’m Marco’s wife. You can remind him of

that.”

The gray-haired one grabs my arm. “You’re coming with us now.”
And I scream.

It draws the attention of everyone at the gate, including a security guard, who comes rushing over. He’s large with a porn-styled mustache. “Is there a problem here?”

Gray-hair lets me go. “No. There’s no problem.”

“There is,” I tell the security guard. “These men are attacking me. Please get them away from me.”

“Let’s go,” the guard says to the two men, motioning them away.

They comply with the officer and walk away. Their frustration is written clearly over their faces. Did Marco really think it would be easy to intimidate me into going back to him?

“Tell Marco,” I shout after the men, “that if he wants me, he can come get me himself.”

People shoot me curious looks. I just sit down and try and calm my racing heart.

I only feel safe when I’m on the plane and we’re in the air. It takes over five hours to get back to New York. I try to rest on the way, but my mind is spinning. Is my family all right? Has Franco completely changed things? Will Marco come and get me?

I’ve never caused a scene, and while it was scary, it was also exhilarating.

I take a cab back to my house after I land. This is *my* house, not Marco’s. His mansion will never feel like home.

I enter the house. All is quiet. It’s strange. Usually, the house is full of noise and chaos with the eight of us roaming around. It dawns on me. There’s only seven of us now. My siblings, Mom, and me. Dad’s no longer around.

“Hello?” I call out.

Mom enters the foyer, looking surprised. “Emilia?”

“Hi, Mom.”

She pulls me into a deep hug. “What are you doing back home?”

“I’m here for Mia’s birthday.”

She looks puzzled before she blinks. “That’s right. It’s in two days. I haven’t planned a thing. I’ve been distracted.”

“It’s ok. But Gemma called and told me that you wanted me here for it.”

Mom narrows her eyes. “Did she? That girl, I swear.”

“I take it you didn’t ask Gemma to tell me.”

“No, I did not. You should be in LA, working on your marriage. Mia will be fine.”

“I want to be here. I *need* to be here.”

She sighs. “Well, you’re here now.”

Footsteps come running down the stairs.

“Hi, birthday girl,” I say as Mia runs into my arms. I hug her tightly. It doesn’t take long for the rest of my siblings to come down. It’s an old house. Sound carries. Soon, I’m being hugged by everyone. Antonio’s hug is rough, while Cecilia’s gentle, and Francesca’s is so faint I can barely feel it.

Lastly, Gemma says into my ear as she hugs me, “I knew you could do it. Screw husbands. You’re back where you belong.”

“Did you trick me into coming back home just so you don’t have as many responsibilities?”

Gemma just laughs as she pulls back.

Franco enters the room, and all the chatter and laughter dries up. “Emilia. Nice to see you again.”

“Franco.” I look around at my siblings. They all look instantly uncomfortable now that Franco’s here. “How are things?”

“They’re good,” Franco says before anyone else can get a word in. “But shouldn’t you be back in LA with your husband?”

“That’s what I said,” Mom says, almost like she’s trying to defend herself.

Franco levels his cold eyes onto me. A shiver goes over me, but not the kind of shiver I get when I hear Marco’s voice. No, this shiver is pure ice, like death. “Well, we could use the help around here. These kids are wild.” With that, he walks away, dismissing me like I’m just a gnat beneath his shoe.

I shake it off and turn to Mia. “Are you excited for your birthday?”

“Yes!” But then she frowns. “I just ... I’m sad Dad won’t be there for it.”

I ruffle her hair. “He will be. In spirit. Just ask Cecilia.”

Cecilia brightens up. “That’s right. He’s looking down at us from Heaven.”

“Let’s get you settled,” Mom says, taking my bag from me.

Antonio passes by and something catches my eye. A bruise on his wrist. I grab his arm. “Hey, how’d you get that?”

He freezes like a deer in headlights. “Uh ...”

“Antonio?” It’s just him and me. Everyone else has dispersed, off doing

their own things. “How’d you get that bruise?”

“I tripped.”

“You tripped?” I ask dubiously. “You’re not clumsy.” My brother has been trained in multiple fight styles. Dad wanted to make sure he was prepared for anything. He’s the steadiest on his feet out of any of us.

“I don’t want to talk about it, Em,” he mutters, pulling away from me.

“Did Franco do that to you?” I make sure to lower my voice.

His eyes flash before he turns away from me. “We were ... practicing. He was teaching me how to handle a knife better. He grabbed my wrist too hard. Not a big deal.”

“That is a big deal, Antonio. Whenever Dad taught you anything, you never came back with any bruises.”

“Well, Uncle Franco isn’t Dad. Dad’s dead,” he snaps before running up the stairs.

I walk with a purpose as I seek Franco out. I find him in the living room with his feet on the coffee table. Mom never lets any of us put our feet on the coffee table. She never even let Dad.

“Get your feet off that,” I snap.

He turns his eyes away from the TV. “This is my house now, Emilia. Not yours anymore.”

“This will always be my house. I’ve lived in it for eighteen years. Much longer than you.”

“I plan on living in it for more than eighteen years myself. I like it here. Your mom likes me here.”

I huff. “I doubt that.”

He slowly turns the TV off and faces me. “Is there something you’re trying to tell me?”

“Yes. Keep your hands off Antonio and my mom.”

“I’ve never laid a hand on them.”

I shake my head in disbelief. “You’re full of it. I’ve seen the bruises.”

“What bruises?”

“Just stop, ok?”

He stands up slowly and approaches me until we’re toe-to-toe. “It’s because of who your husband is that I won’t put my hands on you right now.”

I suck in a breath and take a step back.

“This isn’t your home anymore, Emilia.” He sits back down and turns the TV on. “Remember that.”

Mom enters the room, looking cautiously between Franco and me. “Is everything all right here?”

“Everything’s fine, Giulia,” Franco tells her.

I just walk away. Mom follows me. “He hurt Antonio,” I hiss once we’re alone.

“They were just practicing.”

“Mom, why are you dismissing this? Franco is not a good guy.”

She stands up taller. “You don’t think I don’t know that? But what else can I do? I can’t kick him out. He has the power of the entire Italian mob at his back. Your father’s men.”

“Won’t they help you? They respected Dad. You’re his wife.”

She huffs. “They don’t respect women. The moment your dad died, I was left without any protection.”

“I’ll protect you.”

Her eyes soften as she pulls me in closer. “Honey, as much as I love to hear that, there’s only so much you can do. This isn’t your home anymore. You should go back and try harder with Marco.”

“Marco could kick Franco out, couldn’t he?”

“I doubt he will. He made a deal with your dad, who’s now dead. Franco is in charge. He’s not going to want to lose his power over here.”

“He already threatened to pull out of the deal because I was being ‘disobedient’.” I use air quotes. “I don’t think he cares all that much. Everyone I talk to acts as if he’s as powerful as God.”

“No one is as powerful as God.” Mom sighs. “Either way, we’re on our own here. The kids and I. I’m trying to protect them.”

“How?”

She looks away from me.

“How, Mom?”

“Just drop it, ok? All you need to know is that I’m keeping Franco’s attention on me and no one else. That’s all that matters.”

“Is ...” Realization dawns on me. “Is he ...” I can’t even say the word. *Rape.*

“Honey, don’t ask something you don’t want the answer to. Now, I unpacked your things. Even though I think you should return to LA, I know you won’t listen. So, let’s just enjoy the next few days while we plan Mia’s birthday.”

I can’t even talk. Mom gives me a forced smile before she goes into the

living room, probably to check on Franco.

I go to my old room and sit on my bed, contemplating everything I've just learned. I'm in a state of limbo. Neither of my so-called homes are my homes. The house I lived in all my life isn't technically my home anymore, and Marco's house will never feel like home.

Franco is hurting my family, and there's nothing I can do about it.

And the sad part is? I've already cried so much that I don't have any more tears to give.

Gemma enters my room without knocking. "You look upset," she says.

"I am."

She bounces on the bed. "Well, why don't we go out to celebrate you being back?"

"You know I've only been gone for, like, two weeks."

"I know. But it's been hard without you. You deserve some fun, especially since it sounds like you've been miserable in LA. And, like, how can you be miserable in LA?"

"You'd be amazed. When you're treated like a prisoner in your own home, you don't really get to do much."

"Ugh, same. Franco has set so many stupid rules I can barely keep track. I hate him. He comes in here, acting like he's our dad. I'm sure Dad is rolling over in his grave."

"I think he'd be sad to see what's going on."

"I know. So, that's why we should go out." She stands up.

"Where?"

"To a club."

CHAPTER 7

Emilia

My first instinct is to laugh at Gemma's suggestion. "A club? Gemma, you don't have an ID."

She shrugs. "I have my school ID."

"Yeah, I don't think that's going to get you into a club."

"Come on, Emilia. Our dad was one of the most powerful men in this city. You're telling me we can't get into any club we want?"

"I don't know. I've never been to a club before. And neither have you."

"Well, it's time we start. I've always wanted to go to one, and now's the perfect time. You'll soon have to return to LA. We need to make the most of our time together."

I squint at her. "Why do you even want to go to a club in the first place?"

"To have some fun! I never get to have any fun. Since Dad's death, it's been nothing but darkness around this house. I want some color in my life again. Don't you?"

She makes a good point. My life since our dad passed away has been fairly dull. It wouldn't be so much if my husband made an effort to get to know me ... But instead, I've been cooped up in his mansion for the past week and a half.

"Fun does sound ... fun."

Gemma grabs my hands and spins me around. "Now, you're talking. Let's go."

"What? Now?"

"When else?"

"I doubt Franco will be happy if we just leave."

"Fuck him."

I blink. “Gemma, I don’t want you getting into trouble. I don’t trust Franco. I’m worried he’ll hurt you.”

“I’m not. If he tries, I’ll just hurt him back. So, let’s go.” She tugs me toward the door. “We can slip out without him noticing.”

“I’m still not sure about this ...”

She gives me a pointed look. “*I’m* sure. Don’t you trust me?”

“Do I trust my sixteen-year-old sister? Let me think about that.”

She swats my arm. “Come on, Em. Let’s have a fun night out. Just the two of us. No husbands, no creepy uncles.”

I sigh. “Fine. Let’s go.”

Gemma squeals and hugs me.

Together, we move toward the front door as stealthily as we can. I can see Franco still in the living room, his feet still on the table. Mom is in there with him, talking. I want to walk in there and pull her away from him, but I know I can’t. It’s not my place. If Mom says she can handle herself, I need to trust that.

I have to shush Gemma as we open the door because she starts laughing quietly. She grabs the car keys off the side table. I’m barely breathing as we walk outside and shut the door behind us. I wait a moment, seeing if Franco will come running after us.

But nothing happens. We’re in the clear.

I have to spend a few minutes looking up nearby clubs. I know nothing about that lifestyle, and I’m not about to bring Gemma into a seedy place where she could get hurt.

Once I find one that seems reputable, we take off in that direction. Gemma sings along to a song on the radio, her head thrown back, excitement written across her face,

I lower the volume. “It’s nice to see you happy.”

She flashes me a smile. “You’re back home. Why wouldn’t I be happy?”

“Just after Dad ...”

“I miss him every day,” she admits.

“I do, too.”

“I have to deal with Mom. Which is *not* fun.”

“You have to try and get along with her.”

“She makes it hard. Always telling me how I should act. I mean, she did it before Dad died, but now, it’s even worse.”

“She’s grieving, too,” I remind her. “We all are.”

Gemma sighs deeply. “I know. But enough sad talk. Tonight is about fun!” She blasts the volume and sings at the top of her lungs.

Her theatrics manage to make me laugh.

When we arrive at the club, the first thing I notice is the long line. It’s intimidatingly long.

“I hate waiting,” Gemma mutters as we begin heading to the back.

“Well, we have no choice.”

Gemma tosses her hair over her shoulder. “I have a better idea.” I watch in horror as she turns around and saunters up to a man near the front of the line. He looks to be in his mid-twenties. “Hey,” she says in a sultry voice. I never knew Gemma had that in her. I knew she could be wild, but I swear, this girl will get herself in trouble. She thinks she’s so much older than she actually is.

The man turns to her and eyes her over before smirking. “Hey back.”

“Can my sister and I join you in line?”

He looks over at me, raking his eyes down my body, before turning back to Gemma. “Sure. Why not.”

Gemma motions for me to join her. I do, reluctantly.

“Enjoying the night so far?” the man asks.

“Yep. I’m Gemma. This is Emilia.”

“I’m Mark.”

I almost jerk back. It’s so similar to Marco. I wonder what my husband is doing right now. Probably all alone in his study, brooding. Well, he can brood all he wants. He’s not going to control me.

“What’s a girl like you doing in a place like this?” Mark asks.

Gemma laughs in a way I’ve never heard before. It’s higher and sultrier. It takes me a moment to realize my sister is flirting. “How many times have you used that before?”

Mark steps closer to her, blocking me off. “Just on the pretty girls like you.”

I roll my eyes. I want to tell Gemma to stop flirting with him, but we reach the front of the line before I can.

“ID,” the bouncer growls out.

I hand over mine, and the bouncer stamps my hand. Mark hands his over next. Gemma, with more confidence than I have in my entire body, hands over her school ID like it’s nothing.

The bouncer grunts. “You’re not eighteen. Sorry, sweetheart. You’re not

getting in.”

“Oh, come on, James,” Mark says. Apparently, he comes here enough to know the bouncer’s name. I’m not sure how to feel about that. “Let her in. I’ll make sure she doesn’t drink.”

“Sorry, no.”

Gemma stands up straighter, pushing her chest out. Both James and Mark notice, whereas all I want to do is grab a blanket and cover my sister up. “My father is Riccardo Moretti. You can let me in.”

James’ eyes widen. “Moretti. Shit. Ok, sure. Go on in.” He motions us forward.

Gemma squeezes my arm excitedly as we enter. “I wasn’t sure that would work.”

“Give thanks to Dad, I guess,” I say dryly.

“I know!” Gemma doesn’t seem to notice my sarcasm.

“You girls want a drink?” Mark asks.

I say no as Gemma says yes. I shoot her a look. “We’re good, Mark,” I say over the loud thumping music. “My sister and I appreciate you letting us stand with you, but we’re going to spend time together. So, you can go.”

Mark frowns and looks at Gemma. “Is that what you want?”

Gemma wavers between Mark and me before sighing. “It’s supposed to just be a girls’ night. Sorry.” She grabs my hand, and we hurry off into the crowd of people, leaving Mark by himself, looking confused.

“Let’s have fun!” Gemma shouts over the music.

We dance for a while, our bodies shaking and moving to the music. Gemma keeps hopping around, looking like she’s on cloud nine. My dance moves are more subtle, but as the night goes on, I shed some of my shyness. I start dancing so hard, I feel sweat drip down my back.

“I’m thirsty,” Gemma says.

“I’ll go get us some water.” She continues to dance as I head for the bar. “Two waters,” I tell the bartender. He hands me two water bottles, and I chug one.

I take a moment to watch Gemma on the dance floor, having the time of her life. She’s right. This is how life should be—having fun and being carefree. I wish it were only that simple for me.

Someone taps me on the shoulder.

I turn. It’s a man with dark hair and eyes. For a second, my heart stops beating. This man is ridiculously handsome.

“Yes?” I manage to say.

“You’re Emilia Aldi, aren’t you.” He states it like a fact.

“Yes.” I’m wary now.

He holds out his hand. “I’m Viktor. I was wondering if you could pass on a message to your husband for me.”

I take a subtle step away from him, but he narrows his eyes, noticing it. “Who are you?”

“Viktor Levin.”

His name sounds familiar, but I can’t place it. I continue looking at him until he explains.

“I’m in charge of the Russians in this city.” Meaning, he’s in charge of the Russian mob.

That’s where I’ve heard his name. My dad probably mentioned it before.

“What’s your message?”

“Tell Marco I want to work with him. The power I bring here on the East Coast, mixed with the power he brings on the West Coast, we could be unstoppable.”

“He already has power here on the East Coast. When he married me, he was making a deal with my family. You know, Moretti.”

He chuckles darkly. “Oh, I know who you are, Emilia. I know all about the Moretti children. Your dad and I ran into each other many times.”

I clench my water bottle tighter. “As friends or enemies?”

His smile takes on a dangerous edge. “Just pass along the message to your husband.”

“And if I don’t?”

He shrugs. “You’ll still be seeing me around anyway.”

Before he can walk away, I ask him how he knew I’d be here.

“I have eyes and ears all over this city. I found it curious you came back to New York without your husband in tow. If you were my wife, I wouldn’t let you out of my sight.”

I shiver. I don’t trust Viktor at all. There’s a darkness to him that scares me. “Well, I’m not your wife.”

“Oh, I know that.” He leans against the bar and looks out over the crowd. “That’s your sister out there, yes?” He nods at Gemma, who’s still dancing like she doesn’t have a care in the world.

“What about here?” I snap.

He holds up his hands. “Easy. I just couldn’t help but notice how

beautiful she is.”

“Well, don’t. She’s sixteen.”

“How was I supposed to know that? This is an eighteen and up club.”

I huff. “You just told me you have eyes and ears everywhere. You know how old my sister is.”

He chuckles as he takes a sip from his drink. “Don’t worry. I don’t care for underage girls. But I’d keep an eye on her if I were you. She doesn’t seem to realize how vulnerable she is. Dancing like that. All the men in this club are watching her.”

“You just want to keep her safe, is that it? Somehow, I doubt that.”

Viktor slants his eyes at me. “Just give Marco the message. I’ll see you around, Emilia.”

I want to snap back a witty comeback, but nothing comes to mind. All I can do is stand there, trying to calm my racing heart before heading back to Gemma.

“Here’s your water.” I hand it to her.

“Oh, thanks.” She takes a swig. “God, this is so much fun, Em! I could stay here forever.”

I glance around, looking for Viktor. My gut tells me I should keep an eye on him. The intimidating part is that he already has eyes on Gemma and me. “Well, you can’t,” I snap.

She pauses, raising an eyebrow. “Are you ok?”

I rub my temple. “Sorry. Just getting tired. We should probably be heading home soon.”

“Just one more dance. Please?”

I don’t see Viktor, which doesn’t put me at ease, but Gemma is begging so much I feel bad for her. “Ok. One more dance. And then, we have to go home.”

“Great!” She gives me a hug before returning to shimmying around.

I sway back and forth, not really in the mood.

Mark approaches us. I’d honestly forgotten about him. “Want to dance?” he asks.

“No.” I turn away.

He looks at Gemma. “Do you want to dance with me?”

Gemma hesitates before shaking her head. “Sorry. Girls’ night, remember?”

“Come on. One dance. It’s the least you can do for using me earlier.” He

puts his arms around Gemma's waist. She looks uncomfortable. All the bravado she had earlier in the night disappearing.

"Take your hands off her," I snarl, grabbing his arms. He just tightens them around Gemma's waist, making her cry out. "Let her go."

"Or what?" He gives me a dark look. "Do you want me to touch you instead?" He pushes Gemma away before grabbing me. "Are you just jealous that I was giving your friend here more attention than you?" He grinds his hips against me. I can smell the alcohol on his breath. He's practically drenched in it.

"Stop!" Gemma shouts, swatting at him. "Back away, loser."

Mark laughs and pulls me in closer. I feel like everything is caving on around me. My dead dad. My marriage. My family. Franco. Marco. It's all too much.

I'm hyperventilating before I can stop it.

"Let her go!" Gemma shouts.

Suddenly, Mark's arms loosen around me, and I stumble back. A man dressed all in black punches Mark in the face. I recognize him—it's Gray-hair from the airport. I guess he followed me here. That's neither comforting nor unsettling. I don't know how to feel about it.

"Come on, Mrs. Aldi," Gray-hair says to me, grabbing my arm. "Let's get out of here."

"Wait." I try planting my feet, but Gray-hair is too strong. He tugs me out of the club, Gemma following. "Did Marco send you?"

He leads me to a car parked down the street. "Get in."

"No way. I brought my own car. I'm going to drive myself home."

"LA is many miles away. It would take you a week."

"I meant my home here in New York." I pull Gemma close to me. "Let my sister and me go."

"I'm not going to hurt you, Mrs. Aldi. I just have orders to bring you to the Four Seasons Hotel. Now, get in the car."

"I'll scream again." A quick glance around shows people walking past on the sidewalk.

"This is New York at night. No one is going to help you."

"We're not going with you," Gemma snaps. "My sister and I are going home."

Gray-hair sighs deeply. "I swear, I'm not going to hurt either of you. But come with me now before I throw you into this car."

“Will we get to go home?” I ask.

“I will make sure you get to say goodbye to your family before you return to LA. Now, get in the fucking car,” he says like he’s tired.

Gemma and I share a look. “He works for my husband,” I tell her. “I don’t think Marco would want me hurt.” I don’t *think* so. He sees me as nothing more than chattel, so I’m not one hundred percent sure.

“Are you sure?” Gemma asks.

I can’t look at her as I answer. “Let’s just see what’s going on.” I get into the car. After a beat, Gemma scrambles in beside me. Gray-hair looks relieved and gets behind the wheel.

Everyone is silent as Gray-hair takes us to the Four Seasons. I can feel my heart beating faster the closer we get.

Once inside, he leads us to the top floor, where he instructs Gemma to enter one room. I start to follow, but he stops me. “You’re going into this room.” He opens another door.

“No way. I’m not going to be separated from my sister.”

“Your sister will be fine, Mrs. Aldi. Just walk into the room. I’ll stay with Gemma to make sure she’s ok. You don’t need to worry.”

“Worry? I don’t need know you. Hell, I don’t even know my own husband.”

“Well, you’re about to,” he says cryptically as he nudges me into the room. He shuts the door before I can stop him.

I go to open the door when a voice stops me. “Don’t, Emilia.” It’s Marco’s voice. I’d know it anywhere.

I turn around, but it’s dark in the room. So, Marco did come for me. He actually left his office for me. I’m not sure if I should be flattered or terrified.

“Why did you bring me here?”

The light floods on, blinding me for a second. When my eyes register, I see a man before me.

A man with dark hair and broad shoulders.

A man with a deep-seated scar across his face.

A man who is my husband.

CHAPTER 8

Emilia

The scar extends across Marco's face from his left temple over his eyebrow, down his nose, to the bottom of his right cheek. I can't look away.

"Realizing how ugly I am, are you?" he mocks, pulling me out of my trance.

I quickly look away. "No ..."

He huffs, crossing his large arms across his chest. I can see the muscles rippling under his suit jacket. "I think you may be a liar, wife. You've been begging to see me for a while now. Well, here I am. What do you think?"

I force myself to look back at his face. Other than the scar, the rest of him is normal. High cheekbones, a strong jawline, dark eyes, hair that frames his face perfectly.

He's handsome, despite the scar. I wonder why he hides away. It's not like he's a hideous monster.

"Why do you do it?" I ask, surprising him.

"Do what?"

"Keep yourself hidden from people?"

"Do you not see me?"

I shiver at his voice. It's nice to be able to place a face to it, that deep, thunderous voice. "Your voice suits you."

He blinks. "Huh."

"You're a feared Mafia boss. Does one scar really frighten you? It seems like something you can use to scare your enemies."

"Oh, I do," he says darkly.

"So, you don't hide yourself from everyone, then. Just me." I look at him

more closely. “Are you afraid of what I’d think about you?”

He doesn’t reply.

“Why? Why did you hide from me?”

“You never answered my question. What do you think?” He motions toward his face.

I feel rooted to my spot, either from fear or something else. “I think ... I think you didn’t have to hide from me.”

“If I hadn’t, would you have still run away to New York?”

“I don’t know,” I whisper.

He approaches me, getting super close to me but not quite touching. I have to resist the urge to back away. He smells like pine and sandalwood—a manly scent. Having grown up in a house with mostly girls, I’m used to floral and vanilla scents. His musk feels overpowering in a good way.

“You weren’t supposed to leave,” he growls.

It’s fascinating watching his face move as he talks. The passion behind his eyes, the way his lips curl into a frown, and the angry little crease in between his brows.

I swallow hard, trying to remind myself not to feel afraid. I think I don’t have to fear Marco, but the truth is, I don’t know anything about him. Now that he’s shown himself to me, I don’t know how he’ll act.

“Are you going to hurt me?” I ask.

His eyes widen a fraction before they narrow. “You’re my wife. I’m not going to abuse you.”

“No? Well, you sure did neglect me.”

“You weren’t supposed to leave,” he repeats, pointing a finger at me. “I told you to obey me, yet you left anyway. It was reckless. It was stupid.”

“If you didn’t treat me like a prisoner, I would have been fine staying. I know my duty was to marry you. I was ready to perform that. But you’re the one who’s made it difficult.”

“So, you just run off when you feel like it? How naive are you, girl?”

I bristle, backing up a step. “Girl? I’m your wife.”

“Then act like it,” he says in a dark tone. “You are to never leave the house again. I’m taking you back home.”

“That mansion in LA is not my home.”

“Well, it’s my fucking home!” he shouts at me. I can’t help it; I flinch. He’s an intimidating figure, from his height to his perfectly fitted suit to his scar. I can’t deny it. His scar is strange to look at.

Marco stares at me for a moment. “I scare you, don’t I?” Before I can respond, he says, “Of course, I do. I scare everyone. So, come on. Tell me. Tell me how my scar makes you uncomfortable.” When I don’t say anything, he shouts, “Tell me!”

I look down at the floor, curling in on myself. “You really are a monster.”
“I told you, didn’t I?”

I blink back tears as I force myself to meet his gaze. “Why are you so cruel? Why are you trying so hard to push me away?”

He laughs darkly. “Because I’m Marco Aldi. I’m the feared Mafia leader of L.A. It’s in my nature, which is something you need to learn.”

“I already learned that. You’ve been nothing but mean to me since the moment we married. Why do you think I left? If you’re not going to be my family, I’d much prefer to be with the family that needs me. That *loves* me.”

His lips curl into a snarl. “You think love is a part of a marriage? You’re more naive than I thought.”

I take the bait. “It’s my sister’s birthday in a couple of days. I wanted to be here for her. Can’t you understand that?”

“I’m a single child.”

“Obviously,” I mutter.

“What was that?” he asks in such a cool, dark voice that it makes the hair on my body stand up in fear.

Taking in a deep breath, I say, “Obviously, you don’t have siblings. Otherwise, you’d know how important it is to be there for them.”

He turns away from me with a scoff. “I’m taking you home.”

“No.”

Marco turns slowly to stare at me, his entire body like a tightly coiled spring ready to be released. “No?”

“No. I promised my sister I’d be here for her birthday. My *eight*-year-old sister. I’m not going back to L.A. Not yet anyway. Just give me until after her birthday. Please.”

He stalks up to me again, this time closer than before. I can smell the peppermint on his breath. It’s intoxicating. His body is so large compared to mine, all broad shouldered and muscles. I can barely think with him standing so close.

Marco’s eyes dart down to my lips and back up to my eyes. Is he going to kiss me? Do I want him to? Will I stop it if he tries? Or will I pull him in closer?

Looking at his face so close, I can see all the ridges of his scar. The skin around it is tan color the scar itself is slightly red, like it never quite healed. It definitely makes him look scarier, but it also gives him an edge that is sort of beautiful.

I don't know what compels me, but I reach up to touch his face. The moment my hand is an inch from him, he frowns and backs away from me, breaking the spell between us.

He turns away, breathing hard. "I'll give you the chance to say goodbye to your family, but you're not staying here any longer."

I feel shaken after that intense moment, and it takes me a second to register what he's saying. "But Mia's birthday—"

"I don't give a fuck about your sister's birthday," he snaps. "You're my wife. I want you where I can keep an eye on you. Where I can protect you."

"Protect me from what?"

He doesn't answer the question. "I'm giving you the chance to say goodbye to your family. Do you know how easy it would be for me to grab you and throw you onto a plane?" He closes his fist. "But I'm being considerate. Say your goodbyes. Then we're going home. Jack will drive you back to your family's house."

"Who's Jack?"

"The one that brought you here." Oh. Gray-hair. Of course, he has a name.

"Where are you going?" I ask.

He sits down in a chair, looking at me intently. "I'll be waiting here for your return. Don't think you can run away from me again."

I look between him and the door. "Do I just ... go now?"

He checks his watch. "You're wasting time. Our plane leaves in a few hours. If you want to say your goodbyes, I suggest you do it now."

Without giving Marco a backward glance, I leave the room.

I find Gray-hair—Jack—waiting outside the room Gemma is in. "Marco said to give my sister and me a ride home."

He raises a surprised eyebrow. "And leave you there?"

I sigh. "No. You're to bring me back here after I say goodbye to my family."

"Duly noted."

I could have tried to lie, but Jack would have just checked in with Marco. There's no getting out of this. It's time I return to LA and deal with my

marriage.

I hug Gemma tightly when she steps out of the room. “Are you ok?”

“Yeah. I just watched some TV. There was nothing else to do.”

“Good.” I pull back. “We’re going back home. And I’m going to say goodbye. Marco is here. He’s taking me home.”

“But what about Mia’s birthday.”

“I won’t get to go.” I try to hold back my tears. “But I’ll make sure she knows how much I love her.”

Jack takes Gemma and me back home and waits outside as we go in.

Franco is waiting in the foyer for us. “Where were you two?”

“Oh, thank god, you’re all right,” Mom says as she rushes toward us. “When I saw that you two were gone, you about gave me a heart attack.”

“As you can see, we’re fine,” Gemma mutters. She had been in a pouty mood the entire drive home. I know she’s not happy about me leaving, but I can’t keep disobeying Marco. I’m already on thin ice with him. “I’m going to bed.”

“Gem,” I call out.

“Love you,” she says over her shoulder. “But I’m tired of always saying goodbye. I can’t do it again.” She leaves me standing before Giulia and Franco.

Mom paces the room while Franco glares at me. “You think you can just leave when you want,” he says.

“Yes. I don’t live here anymore. You’re not my dad, and Marco is my husband. You’re not in charge of me.”

“No, but I’m in charge of your siblings. We wouldn’t want your little indiscretion to hurt them. Now, would you?”

“Indiscretion?”

“Going to a club. I had my men out looking for you. They saw you enter the club and reported back to me.”

“You’re spying on my family?” I demand to know.

“Keeping an eye on *my* family.”

“They’re not your family,” I spit out. “You’re just trying to replace my dad, and it won’t work.”

“Emilia,” Mom says, surprise woven in her words.

“Now, I have to say goodbye to everyone before I leave for LA with Marco. He came for me. I’m going home. I need to explain to Mia why I won’t be here for her birthday.” I glare at Franco as I walk past. “Some of us

actually care because some of us are actually family.”

Franco whips his head to glare at me, but I keep walking. I hurry to Mia’s room and find her asleep. I hate to wake her, but I’d hate to leave without saying goodbye more.

“Hey, Mia,” I whisper, gently shaking her awake. She blinks up at me.

“Emilia?”

“Hey. I have to say goodbye. I’m leaving. I’m so sorry I can’t be here for your birthday.”

Her eyes instantly water. “Why?”

I hug her tightly. “Because my husband needs me in LA. Trust me. If I could stay, I would. But I’ll send you a present, ok? And we can talk on the phone. I’ll still be with you, even if I can’t physically be here.”

Mia grips me, stuffing her face into my chest. “I don’t want you to go.”

Her words almost make me lose my resolve. “I know. I don’t want to go either.”

“Then, stay.”

“I can’t. You’ll understand more when you’re older and married yourself. I love you, little bean.”

She smiles even through her tears. “I love you, Em.”

“We’ll talk, ok? Remember that.”

She nods as she lies back down. I tuck her covers around her before giving her a kiss on the head. “Be strong. I know it’s hard, after losing Dad and me moving out. But I’m so impressed with you, you know that?”

She shakes her head as she snuggles into her bed.

“I am. Soon, you’ll be nine. Practically an adult.”

She giggles. “I can’t wait until I’m ten.”

“Slow your roll, there. Let’s just get you to turn nine first, ok?”

“Ok,” she whispers.

I give her another squeeze before standing up. “Goodnight.” Her eyes are already closing as I leave the room.

I almost can’t stand the thought of saying goodbye to the rest of my siblings, but I can’t just leave them.

Cecilia tells me she’ll pray for me. Antonio doesn’t shed a tear, instead remaining the strong young man he thinks he needs to be.

“You can cry, you know,” I whisper to him as I hug him.

“Dad wouldn’t want me to.”

I think back to Dad’s smiling face. “I think he would. So, if you ever need

to cry, Antonio, you can cry.”

He hugs me tightly, his head reaching my chin. It won't be long until he sprouts, and he'll be taller than all of us. When I pull back, I notice the slight wetness on my shirt. Antonio rubs his eyes and looks away from me. I just give him a smile before leaving.

I check in on Francesca last. She's busy reading a book about Roman architecture. “I'm leaving, Fran.”

“Ok,” she whispers, keeping her chin tucked.

“Ok. Can I have a hug?”

She gets up and walks into my open arms. “If anything happens, call me, ok?” I tell her. “You can talk to me.”

“Ok.” She goes back to her book. That's the thing about my sister; she prefers the company of books over people. I'm biggest fear for her is that people will walk all over her. But that's not something I can deal with tonight, so I just give her one more look before walking away.

Franco is waiting downstairs for me as I lug my bag down the steps. “Tell your husband that I intend to see some of the advantages he can provide soon.” I'm not sure what “advantages” he's talking about, but I'm sure it has to do with Mafia business. I won't ask questions about that since nothing I say will change anything.

“All right,” I say wearily, looking around. “Where's my mom?”

“She went to lie down.” He opens the front door. “I guess it's time for you to leave. Your husband must be waiting for you.”

“I'm going to see my mom one last time.” I head for the stairs when Franco's words stop me.

“I wouldn't bother your mother if you know what's good for you.”

“Is that a threat? You know who my husband is. I wouldn't do that if I were you.” Even though I'm not sure how far Marco would go to protect me, after seeing him tonight, it's obvious he's not a man you want to mess with.

His hand tightens around the door. “Just leave, Emilia. This is no longer your home.”

“No. I'm going to see my mom.” I run up the stairs and burst into her bedroom. She's sitting on the bed with a pack of ice on her face. “Mom?”

She glances at me before looking away. “You should be returning to Marco.”

“Did Franco hurt you?”

“No. I tripped walking up the stairs and hit my face on the banister while

you were saying your goodbyes. Nothing to worry about.”

“If he’s hurting you, just tell me. I’ll—”

“You’ll what? Stop it? How?”

My mouth hangs open in surprise. “I’ll find a way.”

“Fine. And until you do, I’ll deal with this on my own. Now, go back to your husband and focus on your marriage. That’s what will make me truly happy.”

I know fighting my mom on this is pointless, so all I can do is give her a kiss on the head before walking away. I glare at Franco as I walk out of the house and get into Jack’s car.

He drives me back to the Four Seasons, where Marco is waiting for me in the lobby. I notice others eyeing him, particularly his scar, though everyone keeps their distance. Marco keeps his focus on me.

“Ready to leave?” he asks.

“Things have to change between us,” I blurt out. “I refuse to be treated like a prisoner. Open up to me, Marco.”

His eyes soften for the shortest second, and I think I might have imagined it. “Ready to leave?” he repeats in a harder voice.

I swallow hard. “Fine. I’m ready.”

CHAPTER 9

Emilia

I feel my world grow instantly smaller when Marco's mansion comes into view. It's beautiful on the outside, but knowing how dark and cold it is on the inside makes me dread re-entering it.

Marco pulls into the garage and shuts the car off. "You will obey me. When I tell you to stay inside the house, you will do it." He doesn't even look at me as he makes his demand.

"Why?"

He shifts in his seat, staring at me out of the corner of his eye. "Why?"

"Yes, why? Why should I have to obey you? You've been nothing but mean to me."

"I'm your husband."

"No. Not good enough."

"Because I hold the key to your family's power. I can strip it away so that when your younger brother, Antonio, comes into power, he won't have any to claim. How does that sound?"

All I can do is stare at him in horror.

"That's what I thought." He steps out of the car. I only move once his door slams shut.

"You would really do that?" I ask, following him into the house.

When he stops and spins around to face me, I almost run into his chest. "Do I look like a man who likes to be trifled with?"

I gulp. "No."

"Good. Now, I married you, which means you are *mine*." I shiver at the word. "So, just do as I say, and we won't have any problems."

"I'm just supposed to be your little trophy wife, is that it? Stuck on a shelf

forever?”

He doesn't reply as he walks away from me.

I'm desperate to keep talking. I can't stand the thought of being in this house all alone again.

A thought occurs to me. "Marco, do you know Viktor Levin?"

He stops, his back tensing. "What?"

"Viktor Levin."

"I know who he is." He turns back to me, bringing me some small relief. "How do you know who he is?"

"He found me in New York. He asked me to give you a message."

Marco's face contorts into an expression of pure hatred. "I don't want to know what that bastard has to say. You stay away from him, you hear me?"

"Since he's in New York, I don't think that will be a problem." I cross my arms. "Who is he exactly? He told me he was the head of the Russian mob."

"He's no good, is what he is. If he ever comes crawling out of his hiding place, don't talk to him. Get far away from him."

"He told me he wanted to work with you."

Marco scoffs. "No. Not in a million fucking years."

"Why is he so bad?"

"Why is he bad? Does sending decapitated heads as a message sound like something a good man would do?"

"He's done that?"

"It's his signature. Viktor Levin is fucking crazy. That's all you need to know. Stay far away from him."

"And you're not evil like that? You've never done anything bad?"

Marco doesn't respond for a moment. "I'm not a good man. But I'm fair. I don't kill innocent people to send messages. That's the kind of man Viktor is. He has no moral compass. So, stay away from him."

"Ok, I will," I whisper. "But he approached me. It's not like I sought him out."

"That's what worries me. You're a target for my enemies. That's why I want you in this house, safe where I can see you."

"You almost make it sound like you care about me."

His eyes search my face, his expression something I can't make out before he turns and walks away. I know it's futile to follow him.

I find Camille in the kitchen, working on breakfast. I can barely believe it's morning already, after the night I had.

“You’re home,” she says warmly, handing me a plate of scrambled eggs. I just give her a small smile. At least someone thinks of this place as my home. I just wonder when it will finally start to feel like it.

EVEN THOUGH MARCO finally showed himself to me, things go right back to normal after I settle in. Meaning, Marco returns to ignoring me.

I make good on my promise to call Mia on her birthday, so at least I’m not completely alone in spirit.

“Happy birthday, little bean,” I tell her as we videochat.

“Thanks. I was just about to blow out my candles.” She points the phone down at a pink cake covered in sprinkles.

My family gathers around the table and sings happy birthday. I join in, even though it breaks my heart that I can’t be there in person. Mia looks so happy as she blows out her candles.

I try to hold back my tears, but eventually, they slip over. Mia’s too busy eating cake to notice, but Mom, who’s now holding the phone, does.

“Are you ok?” she asks, walking to a quieter spot in the house.

“I just miss this. My life with Marco isn’t the same.”

Mom points the phone at table, where all my siblings are laughing. Franco is there, being a stick in the mud as usual, but at least he’s not ruining this day for my sister.

“It’s nice to everyone smiling after Dad.”

Mom turns the phone so I can only see her. “It is nice.” The bruise on her cheek has grown into a nasty yellow.

“Mom, do something, please,” I whisper.

“About what?”

“You know.”

She looks over her shoulder before turning back to me. “Honey, I have to go.”

“Don’t want to upset Franco?”

“I’m trying here, ok? I’m doing the best I can. Now, I love you, but you need to spend time with your husband. That’s your future. Focus on it.” She hangs up before I can get another word in.

I toss my phone onto the bed and cry frustrated tears. I can’t get through

to my husband. I can't save my mom from Franco. I can't even be there for my sister's birthday. I'm going to miss so many birthdays, and the thought makes me cry harder.

After a while, I get tired of crying and decide to get up and move.

I find myself outside of Marco's office door, desperately wanting to go inside. I want him to talk to me. To touch me. Anything.

The sad reality is, I know he won't respond if I reach out to him, so I don't even bother.

I stop at the back of the house, looking at the gardens. I still haven't taken the time to go out there. I guess now is better than never.

The moment I step outside, I'm hit by the lush scent of hundreds of flowers. It's almost overpowering. At least it doesn't smell like a cold, sterile house with no personality. This garden is in direct contrast to the rest of the house. It's bright, loud, and alive. It doesn't feel like Marco at all.

I spend time wandering, taking in the sights and smells. My eyes land on the shed near the back of the property. It looks so shabby compared to the rest of the garden. My feet start taking me in that direction.

The inside of the shed is musty and full of dust and cobwebs. Boxes cover the floor. A pair of garden shears rest against one wall, rust covering the blades. At least, I think it's rust.

I lift it up to inspect them when I hear a shout.

It takes me a second to realize it's someone shouting my name. Marco.

I spin around and hurry out of the shed, the garden shears still in my hand.

Marco is storming up to me, his face flushed, his body tense. "What are you doing out here?"

"Uh ... looking around."

"Looking around? In there?" He points at the shed. "That place doesn't belong to you. You have no right to be out here. Come back inside."

"You said I couldn't leave the house. The garden is part of the house. I didn't do anything wrong."

"You're a sitting duck out here. Anyone could find you. Hurt you."

"It's at the back of your house in a secluded piece of property. Who's going to find me back here?"

"Just come inside." His eyes land on the shears in my hand, his gaze darkening. "You're not supposed to have those." He tries grabbing them from me, but I hold on. "Let go, Emilia."

“No.” I tug it back, feeling fear, true fear, around Marco for the first time. We grapple with it, but Marco is so much stronger than me. He rips it from my hands, but in the process, my hand gets cut.

I wince as a single line of blood starts to run down my hand.

Marco stares at the shears before tossing them to the ground. “Emilia, are you hurt?”

I cradle my hand close to me. “Leave me alone, Marco.”

He reaches out for me, and I flinch. He sighs, dropping his hand and his head. “You’re afraid of me.”

I don’t reply.

“Just let me look at that. Those shears are old. I don’t want you to get an infection. Let me clean up your cut. Please,” he says after a beat.

I stare at him for a moment, feeling conflicted. Eventually, my throbbing hand wins out, and I nod. “Ok. Fine.”

Marco guides me back inside the house and to the guest bathroom. He grabs a first-aid kit. “Let me see your hand.” His voice is softer than I’ve ever heard it before. I’ve thought about everything Marco has said to me since we married. Every inflection in his voice. Every tremor. Every tick. Since I couldn’t see him for so long, all I had to go on was his voice.

I give him my hand. He takes it gently, and I have to stop myself from gasping at the sensation. It’s electric.

Marco examines my hand before he runs it under some water, then cleans it with an alcohol swab, making me wince. “It’s only a swab,” he murmurs.

“Easy for you to say. You’re probably used to pain.”

His hand tightens around mine for a second. “What makes you say that?” he asks darkly.

I swallow hard. “I just meant because of your profession. I know it can be a dangerous one.”

He nods sharply as he loosens his grip. Marco goes back to cleaning up my wound before he bandages it.

He doesn’t let go of my hand.

I don’t pull away.

I wet my lips to speak. “Is that ... how you got ...”

His eyes meet mine. It’s only now that I notice how tiny this bathroom is. It’s just a toilet and a sink. There’s barely any space between Marco and me.

“How I got my scar?”

“Yes.”

“No. It’s not.” He doesn’t elaborate more, and I know better than to push it.

I look down at my hand in his, so small compared to his. “Thank you for bandaging me.”

“I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“I figured.”

“But you still seemed afraid of me.”

“Well, you were yelling at me and trying to take the sheers from me. I was ... scared, yeah.”

His eyes look pained for a moment before returning to his usual closed-off expression. “I just don’t want you to get hurt.”

“You don’t seem like you care about me at all.”

“I care if you get hurt. I don’t like physical violence unless that’s the only option.”

“You don’t like to hurt your enemies?”

“I prefer to use psychological torture.”

Tell me about it, I almost mutter, but I don’t want to ruin this moment between us. Marco is finally opening up to me—or at least *talking* to me.

“Why don’t you like violence? Most men in your profession have no issue with it.” My mind flashes back to Mom’s bruised face.

“Did your dad have an no issue to it? From our meetings, he seemed like a good man.”

My throat chokes up. “He was. He never brought his job home with him, so ... I’m not sure. He didn’t talk a lot about what he had to do, and I didn’t ask. I felt it would be better not to know.”

“But you want to know with me,” he states.

I grip his hand tighter, and his eyes flit down, then back up. “You’re my husband. I’m not just a daughter anymore. I’m a married woman now. I’m supposed to be your partner. I feel like it’s partly my job now *to* know.”

“You want to get to know me.”

“Yes,” I say almost desperately. “I’m tired of being alone. Don’t shut me out again.”

He strokes his thumb back and forth across my hand. I’m not even sure if he’s aware that he’s doing it. “There’s a lot about me, Emilia, that would scare a lot of people away.”

“I don’t care. I want to know.”

“Why? Why do you care to get to know me? And don’t say because

we're married."

"I ... it's my duty," I finally say.

He huffs. "Duty." He starts to pull away, but I tighten my grip.

"Yes, my duty. I was taught that I'd be married someday. That I would have to make a marriage alliance with someone to help my family. That's always been my duty. To help my family. I want this marriage to work because I want to make sure my family is safe in the long run."

"So, you view me as a business deal, too."

"Huh. I guess I do, in a way. I want to know you because I want to help my family. But ..." I inhale deeply, taking in his warm scent. "I want to know you because ... I just want to know you." Marco's eyes blaze with an emotion I can't make out. "You frustrate me, but you also fascinate me. So, I want to know you because I want to know you."

Marco looks down at our enclosed hands. He presses his lips to my bandage, then lets my hand go before I can react. Without a word, he leaves.

I don't follow him because I'm too distracted by my hand. It feels like it's both burning and covered in ice. Marco has an effect on me. There's no use denying it.

Now, I just need to figure out if I affect him the same way.

CHAPTER 10

Emilia

I can't stop looking at the bandage on my hand, the spot where Marco brushed his lips. Whenever I do anything—brush my teeth, comb my hair, pick up a fork—it's all my eyes can see.

I go to Marco's office in the hopes that we can continue our progress from the day before. With a deep breath, I knock and wait.

"Come in," he says, his deep voice filtering through the door.

I step inside. At least he's not completely shutting me out. It's the first time I've ever seen his office. It's what I expected—the same dark brown and tans as the rest of the house. And just like the rest of the house, no pictures of any kind. It clean and well-kept but lifeless.

"Hi," I say, feeling awkward.

Marco looks up from the paperwork on his desk. "Did you need something, Emilia?"

I glance away as I speak. "I ... was wondering if you'd want to have lunch together? I noticed you didn't come down for breakfast." I try to hide the disappointment in my voice, but I was slightly upset when I had to eat breakfast alone this morning.

"I have things to do." He nods at the papers. "So, no. I won't be joining you for lunch."

"Right. Do you mean just today or ..."

He stares at me for a moment. "I think it's best we just go about our lives separately."

One step forward and a hundred steps back.

I had a glimmer of hope yesterday, and Marco just crushed it with a few simple words. "Is that what you really want?"

He doesn't reply.

"Marco, if you're worried about letting me in ... don't be. I ... I'm not bothered by your scar, if that's ..." I let out a huff. "Please just ... don't. We should try and get to know one another. The first step can be lunch. It doesn't have to be complicated. I'm not asking you to spill your guts to me. I'm just asking for your company."

He looks down at the paper in his hand for a so long that I'm about to leave when he sighs. "I don't think you quite understand what you're asking for. I ... I'm not a man you want to get to know. Trust me. Let's just leave it at that."

I turn to leave, but something stops me. I spin back around and ask, "Is the problem really just you? Or do you hate me for some reason? Am I not up to par for what you had in mind for a wife?"

"Emilia, don't."

"No, tell me. I deserve to know."

"I said no."

"Tell me," I demand.

"Stop!" he shouts, standing up. His booming voice makes me take a step back. "Just stop," he adds in a softer tone. "Just go."

We have a stare down for a few seconds before I give up and turn away.

"It's not you," he says. I stop. "It's not you."

I'm desperate to know more, but I know Marco won't tell me a damn thing, so I have to push aside my curiosity and keep walking.

I'm too upset to eat, so I spend the rest of the day in my room, scrolling on my phone. This is not how I imagined married life at all. I pictured long talks with my husband in bed and date nights and laughter and fun. I never pictured arguments and distance.

After a while, I get hungry and search for Camille. She's not in the kitchen where I expect her to be. Normally, she'd already have dinner done by now. I wander around the rest of the house, but Camille isn't anywhere to be found.

I don't want to talk to Marco, but he may know where Camille is. "Marco?" I knock on his door.

He waits for a beat before answering. "What do you need?"

I don't open the door, not ready to face him again. "Do you know where Camille is? I can't find her anywhere."

"I got a text from her earlier saying she had a family emergency to attend

to.”

“Gotcha. Ok, well ... do you need dinner? I’m going to make myself some.”

“You know how to cook?”

I lean against the door. “I have five younger siblings. Trust me, I know how to cook. Do you want something?” Honestly, it’s so much harder being mad at Marco. I hope he does something with my olive branch.

“Actually, dinner would be nice.” Before I can ask him to join me, he says, “Bring it to my office once you’re done.”

I sigh.

I make a simple dinner of baked ziti and broccoli and eat it by myself in the large dining room. If Marco wants his food brought to him, he can wait until I’m done eating. I stab at a noodle, piercing it so roughly with my fork that it tears in two.

Tears prick my eyes before I can help it, and I set my fork down, rubbing my face hard to stop myself from crying.

Once I’m done, I set Marco’s food down outside his office and knock on the door. I don’t bother waiting for a reply. I just leave.

I hear the door open behind me once I’m farther down the hallway. God, I want nothing else but to look back, but I don’t want to give Marco the satisfaction. I keep walking until I reach the corner, and then I glance back.

Marco is picking up the plate. He sniffs the food, and a faint smile crosses his lips before he goes back into his office.

CAMILLE IS STILL GONE the next day, so I’m left to do the cooking, which is fine by me. It helps distract me from my marriage.

Tired of being inside, I decide to go back out into the garden. I know Marco told me to stay inside for my own protection, but I don’t really care. The garden is beautiful, and the fresh air does me good.

My eyes land on the shed, but I don’t go back inside. Though I want to, the last time I did, I ended up getting cut by gardening shears. I don’t want to somehow get hurt again, so I leave it alone.

I’m leaning down to sniff a flower when I hear Marco shout my name. This time, I don’t jerk back. I just calmly straighten up and face Marco as he

approaches me.

“Emilia, what did I say? I don’t want you out here.” His crisp suit is a funny contrast to the natural beauty of the garden.

I shrug. “Well, I want to be out here. So ...” I lean back down to smell the gardenias.

“Come inside. Now.”

“Marco, you’re going to have to drag me back inside. And I seem to remember you telling me that you hate physical violence. So, what’s it going to be?”

“Why do you have to be so difficult?” he growls, raking a hand through his hair. “Why can’t you just be a good little wife?”

“Because I have a mind of my own. You don’t get to boss me around.”

“If only I could,” he scoffs. “Just come inside.”

“No.”

A loud crack in the air makes me jump. Clouds form overhead, and it begins raining, at first a few sprinkles, but it doesn’t take it long until it starts pouring.

“Come inside, Emilia,” Marco shouts over the pounding of the rain.

“I didn’t know it could rain this much in L.A.”

“Well, it can, and it is. So, come inside before you make yourself sick.”

Instead of listening to him, I throw my head back and spin around, soaking up the rain.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m dancing in the rain.” I spin faster to the point where I start to get dizzy. The rain is hitting me hard, but I don’t care.

“Why?”

“Because it’s what my siblings and I would do whenever it rained. We’d run outside and jump into puddles. Dancing. Laughing. Having fun.”

“And your parents allowed that to happen?”

I shrug. “Why not? My parents weren’t opposed to us having fun.”

Marco looks around in disgust. “I don’t think this my definition of fun.”

“Maybe you’ve just never tried it.” A puddle is already forming near my feet. I jump into it and kick out, splashing Marco’s shoes with water.

He steps back, looking down at his feet in horror. “This is the finest quality Italian leather.”

“So?” I kick more water at him, the droplets landing on the bottom of his slacks.

“It’s expensive and shouldn’t be ruined by muddy water. Now, stop messing around and come inside.” He tries to grab me, but I dance away. Marco sighs, rubbing a hand over his face. “Emilia.”

“Marco,” I repeat in a serious voice, matching his.

“You’re being ridiculous. You’re going to make yourself sick.”

“I’ve never gotten sick from dancing in the rain before.” I tip my head back and let the water roll over my face. It’s like washing away a bad day, and I’ve had many bad days lately. “Come on, Marco.” I hold my hand out to him. “Dance with me.”

He stares at me for a moment before his expression softens. “Emilia ...”

“Just dance with me. You take everything so seriously. Have fun.”

“I’m not the kind of man who has fun.”

“What kind of man are you, then? A lonely one?”

He looks away. “I’m not having this conversation with you, especially out in the rain. Let’s just go inside.”

“No. I’m going to stay out here and dance. You can join me if you want.” I jump into a puddle and laugh, remembering all the times my siblings and I did this together. I wish they were here now to join me. “Mia would always make the cutest sound whenever she’d jump into a puddle. It always made me laugh.”

“Mia’s the youngest?”

“Yes.”

“The one who’s birthday you missed.”

“Yes.” *Because of you.* But I don’t say it. Something in Marco’s expression tells me he already knows it’s his fault. “When she was a toddler, she’d always screech when we’d play in the rain. It made my brother, Antonio, laugh so hard that he slipped and fell into a puddle, which just made the rest of us lose our minds.” I spin around, arms flung wide, soaking up the rain. My hair is plastered to my face. My dress is like a second skin. Even though goosebumps are rising on my skin, they feel like an old friend and not something to worry about. It’s still a warm day despite the rain.

Marco watches me dance, not saying anything, but he does have a softer expression on his face, letting me know he’s not too upset with me.

When he does speak, I can barely hear him over the roar of the rain. “It must be nice to have those memories.”

“It is.” I stop moving, catching my breath. “Do you have any fun memories from your childhood?”

His expression darkens all over again. “You’ve had enough time to dance. Let’s go back inside now.” He steps toward me with his hand reaching out, but I step back.

“No, I’m not ready.” My foot catches in a root, and I stumble back. I fling my arms out to steady myself, but it’s not enough, and I end up falling back, landing right on my butt. I groan.

“Emilia?” Marco sounds so worried that I don’t know what to make of it.

I rub my low back as I look around at myself. My legs are covered in mud, and the sight makes me laugh. It starts as a giggle before turning into an all-out belly laugh. My sides hurt, and my cheeks ache from smiling.

Marco looks at me like I’m a crazy person before his lips turn up into a small smile. Then a soft chuckle escapes him. “Come on,” he says calmly. “Let’s go back.” He extends his hand out to me.

I take it and let him haul me up, but I don’t let go of his hand once I’m standing. And Marco doesn’t let go of me either.

He somehow looks even more handsome with wet hair. His eyes seem to sparkle in the rain. His scar is just a part of him. It’s not even something I really notice any more.

I raise my hand and hover it near his cheek. Marco tenses. Before I can touch his face, he grabs my hand and stops me.

“Don’t,” he murmurs.

“Why not?”

His eyes flit down to my lips and back up to my eyes. A sudden heat fills my body, warming me up from the inside out.

“You’re beautiful, Marco.”

He sucks in a breath, stepping closer to me. There’s barely any space between our bodies. He radiates heat, like he stepped out of the bowels of hell. But despite Marco’s monstrous side, I don’t think he’s all evil. I think he’s hiding something, some type of pain, and I just want to know what it is.

“Truly,” I say, wetting my lips.

Keeping his intense gaze locked with mine, he slowly lets go of my hand. I place it on his cheek, my thumb brushing over the edge of his scar. Each of us begins to breathe heavier.

“You’re the only beautiful one here,” he murmurs.

“That’s not true. Not at all.”

He leans his head closer to mine, and I tilt my chin up. There’s a moment’s breath as we wait. As we stare into each other’s eyes. As our

breath intermingles.

And then his lips brush against mine.

It's so faint, but it sends an intense shiver over my entire body. I stand on my tiptoes and press my lips against his. It's like a dam breaks, and Marco is kissing me harder, his arms wrapping around my body. I gasp against his lips but don't pull back.

Our lips meld together as our kiss becomes more passionate. My hands rest against his chest as his rest against my lower back. Marco's lips feel like heaven. He grips my back tighter, pressing me more firmly against him.

He growls and then lets me go, breaking the moment between us like a snap.

I'm breathing heavily as I stare at him in confusion. "Wha—"

He rakes a hand over his face as he looks at me with so much darkness in his eyes that I'm uncertain if he's going to kiss me again or eat me alive.

But he does neither.

Marco blows out a rough breath before walking away. He doesn't even command me to follow him.

I feel rooted to my spot. The only thing I can feel is the rain pounding down onto me and the burning sensation on my lips.

CHAPTER 11

Marco

I shouldn't have kissed her.

She's wormed her way into my heart, and I don't know what to do with that.

I rush back into the house, going straight to my office. After slamming the door behind me, I pick up the lamp off my desk and throw it across the room with a wordless shout. The room turns black. How fitting.

I live in the darkness. I have ever since I was a child. Emilia is intent on bringing me out of it, but it's all I've ever known.

I shouldn't have kissed her. To kiss her means I'm starting to care for her, which means she has the power to become my weakness.

And I am not weak. I vowed years ago I would never be weak again. I would never let anyone hurt me again. But here's this woman, pushing through my barriers. Why can't she just listen to me? Why does she even want to know me? It would be so much easier if she just kept her distance.

I knew that bringing a wife into my life would complicate things, but I wanted power. I wanted to grow my empire. I didn't think about the reality of living with a woman. I've fucked woman before, sure. But I've never lived with one. I've never had a responsibility to one. Already, I've fucked things up with Emilia. I've seen her eating alone, looking like she might cry over a plate of food. I've seen her wandering the halls, looking lost and confused.

And yet ... I can't seem to change it. I don't *want* to change it. Emilia will just be safer if she's kept inside away from everyone, including me. That way, she can't be hurt by anyone. I've seen enough violence in my life. I refuse to see anymore.

That's why I rule from my office. I'm the boogeyman of LA, instilling

fear into my enemies. Only the closest of my men have seen me, and I'm still able to command respect for my empire.

It's not that I've never left my house before. There are times I've had to deal with someone or take a meeting elsewhere. I've visited whorehouses to get my fill, to curb that edge inside me.

But I don't walk the streets in broad daylight. I don't go out for nice meals. I don't go out to the movies. I don't enjoy my life.

Because I don't deserve it.

THE ABUSE STARTED when I was ten years old.

The first day it happened, I was running around inside the house, and my mother didn't appreciate it.

"Will you stop, Marco?" she hissed, grabbing my arm and stopping me dead in my tracks.

"Sorry." My mother had snapped at me before, so I figured she'd just let me go, and I'd go back to playing.

Instead, she dug her nails into my skin until blood appeared. "You could break something. I have sculptures all over this house that I don't want to see broken. You stop this nonsense at once."

"You're hurting me," I gasped out.

A sneer crossed her face, and she raked her nails across my arm, drawing even more blood. "Maybe this will teach you a lesson, huh?" She finally let me go, and I ran away, cradling my bloody arm.

Beatrice Aldi, my mother. She'd always been a cold woman, rarely smiling. It seemed that ever since I was little, she hated me. But she usually reserved her anger for a quick shout or a scolding, maybe a spanking or two. She never did anything more.

Until she did.

That day, as I held my bloody arm up to my father, the great Paolo Aldi, leader of the Italian mob, he just shook his head and reminded me not to get on my mother's bad side.

"You know your mother," he told me. "She gets upset easily."

"But my arm ..."

"Marco, soon you'll be a man. You don't have time to waste your tears

on a few scratches. You'll be fine." He turned away from me, ending our conversation.

Beatrice went back to being distant with me over the next few weeks until I did something to upset her again.

My parents and I were going to the opera, and I'd worn the wrong suit. Beatrice slapped me across the face, telling me to change. When I did, the suit I chose still wasn't up to par. So, she raked her nails against my face, drawing blood. Father told me to get cleaned up, looking at me with disgust as if I'd caused the bloody welt on my face myself, even though he'd seen Beatrice do it.

And on it went.

A slap here. A cut there. Nothing ever too serious, but it was constant. At first, it was every few weeks, and then, it became every few days until it became every day. Not a day went by that I didn't do something wrong in my mother's eyes.

The rage began to build up inside me.

Until one day, I wanted to get back at Beatrice.

So, I walked up to one of her precious sculptures that she loved more than me, and with her in the same room, I pushed it over, watching in satisfaction as it cracked against the tile floor.

Beatrice broke out into a screaming fit. "How could you do that?" She rushed over to the broken bust and tried picking up the pieces, but it was futile. There were too many of them.

I began to laugh.

She whirled around with a growl. "You little shit!" She grabbed my ear and yanked me toward her. I cried out, but that didn't stop her. My pleas for her to stop never made a difference. "You are going to pay for that."

She grabbed my arm and dragged me out of the house. I tried fighting her, but she was still bigger and stronger than me. My growth spurt came at fourteen, so at that time, I was still just a small kid.

Beatrice took me out into the garden—another place she loved to spend her time to get away from m—and drew me close to the shed. Picking up a pair of gardening shears, she shoved me to the ground.

I winced, the wind getting knocked out of me.

"I'm so tired of you, boy," she growled, pointing the shears at me. "I'm so fucking tired of you."

She slammed the end of the shears against my face. I still remember the

horrendous pain. After that day, I made sure I'd never hurt in the same way again, and I built my pain tolerance to a much higher level.

Beatrice dug the shears across my face. The smell of copper was strong in the air. I was bleeding, but I was in so much shock, I didn't realize it at first. She just kept digging the blades into my face until I blacked out.

When I woke up, I was still on the ground in the garden. Beatrice was no longer holding the shears, but she was still above me, giving me a glare that chilled me to the bone.

"Don't upset me, Marco," she said calmly. "Never again. You're just a little shit who's not deserving of love." She left me lying there.

When I looked over, I saw the shears beside me, covered in my blood. I stood up, despite how badly I was shaking, and I put them back in the shed. When I came back inside, I found my father standing at the back door, just looking at me.

Blood dripped from my face, droplets falling onto the hardwood.

"What did you do this time, Marco?" Father asked, his arms crossed, looking at me like I deserve it.

And at that moment, I knew I had. I'd pushed my mother to the breaking point. It was my fault. I really wasn't deserving of love and only deserving of hate.

I didn't say anything because I began to cry.

Father looked at me with pity. "Grow up, son. I don't have time for this, and neither do you. If you want to make it in this world, if you want to take over after I retire, then you need to be strong. No time for tears. No time for love. Now, wipe up your face. You're getting blood on the floor." He turned away from me like I wasn't even worth his time.

I had to clean up my face by myself, but it wasn't easy. My flesh was torn across my face, an open wound. So, I grabbed the first-aid kit and stitched myself up. I had to bite down on a washcloth to keep from screaming as I worked the needle through my face. Once my wound was closed, I stared at myself, the stitches running from my temple, over my nose, and across my other cheek. It was ugly. I was ugly.

I bared my teeth at my face in the mirror. If I was going to look like a monster, I decided that I would be one. I needed to be ruthless to survive. I'd always be a monster, so others would fear me instead of me fearing them.

I rolled my shoulders back and kept my head high. I refused to ever be scared again.

Now, I pick back up my lamp and replace it with a new bulb, lighting my office again. With a sigh, I slump against my desk. I try not to think about my past much, and I was succeeding until Emilia came along. With her around, it's opened my memory floodgates, and everything has come back.

Emilia told me I was beautiful. I know she was just trying to be nice. How anyone could care for a man like me is beyond my understanding.

She kissed me back, but I doubt it was because she likes me. I think she's just lonely. If I were anyone else, she would have done the same. I know.

So, that's why I can't let myself get close to her.

A knock on my door makes me jerk up. I know it's her on the other side. "Emilia, leave."

"Marco?"

"Emilia. I want to be left alone."

I can hear her sigh and her footsteps fade as she walks away. Even though I told her to leave, a part of me wishes she would have stayed.

My phone rings. "What?" I snap into it.

"Just checking in to see if you've thought more about my offer."

My blood chills. It's Viktor fucking Levin. After Emilia told me he contacted her, I called Viktor, letting him know I wasn't interested in working with him. Even so, he still made his offer about us teaming up. My response was to just hang up.

Now, he's calling back. "Viktor, I told you no. Stop calling me." I slam my phone down, almost breaking the screen.

I rub a hand over my face. Fuck. Between my marriage and business, my life is not going how I planned. Things were supposed to be easy. My deal with Riccardo Moretti pretty much guaranteed I would have influence on the East Coast, but since he died, things have been shaky. I've been working with Franco Moretti, but he's more resistant to change. So, my growth to more power has been slower than I'd anticipated. And with my complicated feelings for Emilia ... I've been angrier lately.

I don't leave my office for the rest of the day as I get more work done. I have a shipment of guns coming through Long Beach that I need to be ready for.

I glance at the monitor on my computer, showing the recordings from the cameras placed around the house. Emilia is in the dining room, eating alone

like usual. A sudden yearning fills my heart to join her. What would it be like to have a nice meal with my wife? I could get up, enter the dining room, sit with her, converse with her, *be* with her.

The moment the feeling presents itself is the moment it passes.

Emilia is too good for me. She's stunningly beautiful and has a heart that could save the world. Her determination to be there for her family is inspiring, honestly. I can barely even imagine what it would be like to miss my family.

Both my parents are dead now.

I don't miss either of them.

I inherited this house after they died. One would think I'd want to move out after everything that happened, but I'm used to this place. Why would I want to be anywhere else?

Emilia eventually finishes her meal and goes to her bedroom. I didn't put a camera in there, even though I'm curious to know what she gets up to.

The doorbell rings, drawing my attention to another of the cameras. A delivery man stands out front, a box in his hands. Normally, Camille would answer the door, but she's away dealing with her family. I did think it was strange that she texted me she wouldn't be coming in since she usually calls if she can't make it. But I trust Camille. She's probably just busy and didn't have time to call me.

It's up to me to get my delivery.

When I open the door, the reaction I get from the delivery man is one I'm used to. A widening of the eyes. A slight crinkle of the nose. Before they realize how rude that is and their expression turns neutral, even though their eyes can't stop flicking to my scar.

This man is no exception. He clears his throat, keeping his head down. "Delivery for Marco Aldi. You need to sign here." He hands over a clipboard.

"I didn't order anything."

He checks the clipboard before handing it over. "Well, it says your name and your address. Do you want the delivery or not?"

I sigh and sign off, taking the box from him. He looks relieved to be leaving as he gives me a quick nod and hurries down the steps. I take the box with me back to my office and open it up.

I freeze at the sight before me.

Camille's cold, dead head encased in bubble wrap.

CHAPTER 12

Emilia

Marco storms into my room, shocking me so much I almost fall off my bed. He's breathing heavily and has a crazed look in his eye.

I set down the book I'd been reading. "Marco?"

He doesn't answer me as he starts looking around the room, checking behind the dresser, looking under the bed.

"What are you doing?" It's strange to see him in my room. He's such an imposing figure that he makes the room seem smaller. For some reason, this makes me blush. "Marco? Hey." I place my hand on his arm as he stands. Once again, there's that electricity I felt when we kissed.

He whips his head toward me. The sudden motion makes me stand back. "Emilia?"

"What's going on?"

"Are you ok? Has anything happened?" He grips my upper arms. "Tell me."

His grip is tight, and it makes me wince. "You're hurting me, Marco."

He immediately backs away. "Are you ok?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

He doesn't look at me as he begins pacing the room.

"Marco, what is it?"

"Nothing. You're ok. That's all that matters." The way he's speaking, it's like he's talking to himself rather than to me.

"I'm ok. What is it? What has you acting like ... this?"

The look he gives me is filled with so much intensity it makes me breathless. "You're ok." He takes one step toward me and hesitates. I think back to our kiss earlier. It left me feeling hot and wired, so I showered and

changed once I came inside. A part of me didn't want to wash away Marco's touch. He walked away from me, which hurt after we'd shared something so intimate. My very first kiss. The other part of me desperately needed to wash his touch away just so I could focus on something other than him.

I stand still, watching him, waiting for him to make the next move.

Instead of coming forward, he walks out of the room, leaving me disappointed again.

I follow him. "Marco, what's going on? Why are you acting weird?"

He huffs. "This is me when I'm worried. You haven't seen this side of me yet."

I haven't seen many sides of him yet, I think, trying not to dwell on that fact. "Why are you worried?"

He stops short and turns back to me, making me bump into him. He steadies me, and that small act makes my stomach flutter. "Emilia, something bad has happened."

"What? Is it my family?"

"What?" He frowns before he shakes his head. "No, it's not your family."

I let out a rough breath. "Ok. Then, what?"

"You really care about them, don't you?" he asks in a softer tone.

"Of course, I do. They're my family. If they were hurt or something was wrong, I'd want to know. I'd be on the first plane back to New York with or without your permission."

"No," he snaps. "You can't go back to New York."

"I'm going to see my family again, Marco. You can't stop me."

"Emilia, listen to me. Something bad has happened," he repeats. "It's about Camille."

His tone makes my stomach drop to my knees. "What about her?"

"She's dead."

I gasp, taking a step back. "What? How?"

Marco grimaces, and he can't quite meet my eye. "She ... was murdered." I stare at him in horror as he continues speaking. "Viktor Levin killed her."

"How do you know?"

He hesitates before saying, "Her ... head was delivered to me in a box."

My stomach sways so painfully I'm close to vomiting. "Her head? What ..."

"Remember how I told you that Viktor likes to send messages that way?"

“I do,” I whisper.

“He’s sending me a message. He wants to work with me, and I’ve refused him countless times. Now, he’s showing me that he’s willing to invade my home and kill my housekeeper.”

“He got in here?”

“No. He must have grabbed Camille when she went home. But the point stands—he’s coming for me, which means there’s a good chance he’ll use you to get to me. You can’t be leaving on your own. It’s too dangerous, Emilia. I *need* you to understand that.”

“Yeah. Yeah. I understand.” I blink back tears. “Oh my god. This is horrible. Poor Camille.”

“I know. She was a good woman. She didn’t deserve this.”

“What are we going to do?”

“Nothing. I’m not provoking Viktor by attacking him. I’ll set up more defenses around the house so he can’t get in. You’ll be safe ... as long as you listen to me.”

I swallow hard. “Why do you care?”

He blinks. “Why do I care?”

“Yes. Why do you care if Viktor hurts me?”

Marco’s eyes soften as he stares me down. “Because I don’t want you to die.”

“Because you care about me or because it would ruin the truce you have with my family and the power you stand to gain in New York?”

As his breathing becomes heavier, I just want to reach out and place my hand above his heart. “I ... I just don’t want you to die,” he finally says, making the small amount of hope inside me shrivel up.

“What are we going to do about Camille?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, we should have a funeral for her and—”

“No,” he cuts me off.

“What do you mean ‘no’?”

“I mean her family can plan her funeral. I’m just her boss.”

“So, you’re going to tell them that you received her ... head ... in a box because some psycho murdered her?”

“No. They don’t need to know. They just need to know she died.”

“Then how can they plan the funeral without her body? Because they’ll see her body and know what happened to her. It’s better if they hear it

coming from you.”

He starts walking away from me, back toward his office, and I follow. I’m not letting Marco off the hook that easily. “I don’t deal with families,” he mutters.

“Who cares? You need to tell them how she died. Her family has a right to know.”

He whirls around to face me. “So, if one of your siblings was murdered, would you want all the grisly details?”

I place my hands on my hips, not letting him intimidate me. “Yes. I would. Because then I could start to find closure. How is her family supposed to mourn if they never get closure on what happened to her?”

“Just drop it.” He walks into his office. I enter before he can stop me. “Emilia, don’t.” He blocks my way, but I can just see the side of a box on his desk.

“Is that her?” I push around him and look inside. Her head is bloated and paler than it had been when she was alive. A surge of pain hits my stomach, and I vomit, getting it on Marco’s Egyptian carpet that I’m sure was expensive.

“That’s why I tried stop you,” he says dryly. “You don’t need to see this.”

I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand. “This ... is Camille.” I point to the box. “And she deserves the respect of you telling the truth to her family. Now, call them. Right now.”

“You’re going to watch me?”

“I’m going to make sure you do it.”

Marco looks like he wants to drag me out of the room, but instead, he sighs and picks up his phone. “This is Marco Aldi, Camille’s boss. Is this her husband?” He pauses. “Right. Hi, John. Listen, something horrible has happened to Camille. She’s dead.” He’s quiet as John takes in the news on the other line. “She was murdered. She was ...” He sighs roughly. “She was decapitated.” I can hear John crying on the other line. “I’ll make sure you get to see her so you can plan the funeral.” He throws me a look, but I don’t take the bait. “I know. I’m sorry.” He hangs up. “Happy?” he asks me.

“No. None of this makes me happy.”

He looks away from me. “That’s not what I meant. I’ll have her sent to the morgue so John can get her. I ... don’t know where her body is.”

“Can you call Viktor and ask?”

“I don’t want to contact that man. It’s just going to lead to trouble, I know

it. You should go to your room while I deal with ... Camille. I need you to be safe, understood?"

"I do. And thank you for reaching out to her husband. It was the right thing to do."

He nods, looking uncomfortable. "Just stay inside. Please."

I go to my room as Marco advises and start pacing. I only met Viktor the one time, but I remember the chills he gave me. A comment he made about Gemma makes me stop cold. Gemma. She was with me at the club when Viktor introduced himself. Would he go after her? I don't know why but I need to warn her just in case.

"Gemma," I say into my phone after she answers. "Are you ok? Is the family ok?"

"Uh, yeah. As ok as we can be, given everything."

"Right." I force myself to calm my breathing down. "Right. Listen to me. You need to be careful going forward, ok?"

"Why?"

"Because ... because there's a crazy man targeting Marco, and I don't want that man setting his sights on you and our family. So, please, no sneaking out to clubs. No going off on your own. Just continue to do your normal routine, ok? No more rebellious behavior."

"But I live for rebellious behavior," she teases.

"Gemma, I'm serious," I snap. "Be careful for me. Please."

She's quiet for a moment. "Em, this sounds serious. Who is this man?"

"His name is Viktor Levin. He runs the Russian mob in New York. He's a dangerous man."

"How dangerous?"

"Like ... sending decapitated heads as a message dangerous."

"Gross," she mutters.

"This is serious. A woman was murdered because of him. Be careful."

"Ok," she says in a much more serious voice. "Ok, I'll be careful."

I let out a rough sigh as I sit on my bed, all the energy leaving me. "Thank you. I didn't mean to scare you. I just needed you to know." I pause. "So, how has everything else been since I left?"

"Franco's been nothing but a hard ass. He keeps training Antonio until Antonio comes home all exhausted. Mom is worried, but she hasn't told Franco to stop." Gemma lowers her voice. "I think Mom may be afraid of him, but I just see Franco as an annoying asshole."

“Mom has reason to be afraid,” I snap.

“Why are you mad at me?”

“I’m ... I’m not, Gem. It’s just sometimes you can be obtuse. Just keep an eye out for Mom, ok? I think Franco may be hurting her, but I have no proof.”

“Well, sorry I can be obtuse,” she snaps back.

“Just—I don’t want to fight with you. Not right now. Please.”

I can hear her sigh loud into my ear. “Ok. Sorry. How’s married life?”

“It’s more complicated now. I just wish I could be home with you guys.”

“Me, too. And, Em, I’ll be careful, ok?”

“Thank you.”

Once we hang up, I curl into a ball on the bed. Not going to lie, I’m incredibly scared. Viktor murdered Camille and sent her head bubble wrapped to Marco. If Viktor can do something like that to Marco’s housekeeper, what could Viktor do to me, Marco’s wife?

I stay awake staring at the wall most of the night before sleep finally takes me.

I FIND Marco in the kitchen the next morning. “What—what are you doing in here?”

He’s wearing a simple white button-down shirt and slacks. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him look so casual. “I thought I’d make breakfast since ... you know.” Camille is no longer here.

“Ok. Thanks.”

“I’ll have to hire someone new soon.”

I go cold. “Really? Isn’t that ... kind of harsh?”

“No. It’s just business. I lost a housekeeper, and now, I need a new one.”

I sigh as I grab out the orange juice and pour myself a glass. “Did John get to see her?”

“He did.” Marco won’t look at me as he flips pancakes. “He cried. It was—it wasn’t easy to watch.”

“I’d imagine. That poor man. Any plans on a funeral?”

“No. I assume he’ll plan it.”

“Marco, he just lost his wife. Not only that, but he also lost her in a brutal

way. He might not be in the right mind to plan a funeral. You should do it.”

“I told you before—”

I cut him off. “I know what you said yesterday. But you should offer to plan the funeral. It would be a nice gesture.”

“I don’t like dealing with people.”

“This goes beyond what you’re comfortable with. It’s about doing the right thing.”

He shoots me a look. “I’m a mobster, Emilia. When have I ever done the right thing?”

I take a sip of my orange juice. “Maybe now is the time to start.” I head into the dining room to await breakfast.

Marco brings out one plate filled with pancakes and sets it down before me.

“You’re not eating with me?” I ask.

“Did you want me to?”

I think about it for just a few seconds, but I already know my answer. “Yes.”

Marco comes back with another plate for himself and sits across from me. For a moment, it’s awkwardly silent as we just stare at each other across the table. I pick up my fork and dig in, and soon after, Marco follows suit.

An explosion of deliciousness melts on my mouth. “These are great,” I tell him, already taking another bite.

His lips curl upward slightly. “Thank you.”

“Who taught you how to cook?”

His small smile turns to an instant frown. “My mother.” He clears his throat before taking a large bite.

“What was she like?”

“You know what?” He pushes his plate away. “I’m not hungry. I have more work to do now that Viktor has set his eyes on me.”

“Wait.” I grab his hand. He pauses. “Don’t go just yet. We can eat in silence if that’s better. I don’t think I can bear eating alone again.”

He stares down at my hand for a few seconds before nodding. “All right.”

“Thank you.”

The only sound that fills the room is the scraping of forks and clinking of glasses.

Once I’m done eating, I give Marco a small smile. “That was really good. I’d like to do it again.”

“Have pancakes?” His tone is almost teasing.

“No. Have breakfast with you.”

Marco nods. “It was nice,” he admits.

“It was.” My smile grows wider. “I would dare say even more than nice.”

He smiles back, just slightly, but it’s enough to make his face light up.

I’ll be thinking about his smile the rest of the day.

CHAPTER 13

Emilia

“We should go out,” I tell Marco the following day over breakfast. When he sat down before me earlier, it warmed my heart. He’s trying, at least, even if it is in the wake of Camille’s death.

“No,” is his immediate reply.

“Listen to me. We can’t stay holed up in this house forever, waiting for Viktor to strike. We need to continue to live our lives.”

“No.”

I sigh, stabbing a piece of egg with my fork. “Camille is dead. That could happen to us, too. I don’t want to die knowing I had the chance to live, and my stubborn husband stopped me from doing it.”

He levels me with a look. “Emilia, no. It’s too risky. I don’t know exactly what Viktor’s plan is, other than he’s stirring up trouble. You’re not going out just for him to get his hands on you.”

“That’s why I suggested we go out together. On a date,” I add, looking down at my plate.

I can sense him going still. “A date?”

I chance a glance up at him. He’s frowning, not a good sign. “Never mind. Don’t worry about it.”

We eat in silence for a while until Marco sighs. “A date?”

“Yeah. A date. We’re married. It would be nice to go out on a date with my husband.”

“It’s still too risky.”

I drop my fork, and it clatters onto the plate. “Marco, do I have to say that I’ll leave this house without if you don’t come?”

“You’re forcing me to go out with you?”

“If that’s what it takes. The entire time I’ve known you, you’ve barely left this house. The only time was when you came for me in New York. It would be good for you to get out more.”

“I don’t need to get out more. I’m content with my life.”

“Are you?”

He levels a look at me. “Emilia, if I say I’m content, then I’m content.”

“Right. Sorry. I just—you seem sad a lot of the time.”

“I’m not sad.”

“Well, I’m sad. Losing Camille. Missing my family. Scared that Viktor might come after me. Stuck in this house. I’m not happy, Marco. And you telling me to suck it up won’t change that fact. I’m *not* happy.”

Marco stares at me with those intense eyes of his. “I didn’t know that,” he finally responds.

I don’t remind him that if he’d let me in when I first arrived, maybe he’d know more about how I’m feeling. Instead, I just say, “Now, you do.”

He picks at his omelet for a few seconds before looking at me. “You really want to go on a date?”

“Yes, I do.”

He sighs deeply as he pushes his plate away. “A date it is, then. Tonight, we’ll go out for dinner. I know a nice Mexican place.”

“That sounds great.” My heart is beating faster, and my palms are sweaty. *Calm girl, stay calm*, I remind myself. Marco is making an effort. I can’t mess this up.

The rest of the day, I pace around the house, too eager to sit still. When evening finally comes, I get dressed into a simple black cocktail dress and heels.

Marco is waiting for me in the foyer in a casual navy-blue button-down and slacks. He looks so handsome that it almost hurts. His scar just adds character to his face, making him look more distinctive.

His eyes rake over my body, making me shiver in the best way possible. He doesn’t say anything as we leave the house, but I can tell he likes how I look. That makes me happier than maybe I should feel.

“I don’t normally do this,” Marco admits on the drive to the restaurant.

“When’s the last time you’ve been out in public. *Really* in public?”

“A while. I hold most of my meetings at the house. Sometimes, I’ll have to meet up with other people to make deals, like I did with your father, but

then it's usually in one of the bars I own."

"Why do you hide away?"

"Isn't it obvious?" He gestures at his face.

"No. It's not. You have no reason to feel embarrassed about how you look."

"It's not ... embarrassment."

"Then, what is it?"

His hands tighten on the wheel. "It's nothing. Bad memories, I suppose. It's just easier to keep to myself. I don't mind scaring my enemies, but I don't like scaring the general public with how I look."

As I place my hand over his, Marco sucks in a breath. "You don't scare me. Not anymore, at least."

He keeps his eyes on the road, but I can sense that my words please him by how his shoulders relax.

We arrive at the restaurant. It's an upscale Mexican place where people are dressed in suits and the food costs an exorbitant amount.

The hostess can't stop looking at Marco's face as she takes us to our table. Marco ignores her. She practically scurries away after giving us our menus.

"This place is nice." My eyes widen at the price of the food. "And expensive."

"It's the best Mexican food in the city."

"Is it? You've been here often?"

"I used to go when I was younger and always enjoyed it. My father would take me here, just the two of us."

"That sounds nice. And your mother? She wasn't allowed on the male-bonding trips?"

He stares intently at the menu. "No, she wasn't."

By his tone, it's clear he doesn't want to talk about his mother. I'm desperate to know why, but if I've learned one thing about Marco, it's that he hates being pushed for answers.

We order our food and drinks. The waiter, just like the hostess, eyes Marco's face for a beat too long. Marco just stares the man down. The waiter gulps and tells us he'll be back with our food in no time.

"How strange is it? To be stared at like that?"

"I've gotten used to it."

"It doesn't hurt?"

“I never said that. But what am I going to do? It’s my face. It’s a part of me. So, instead of letting it be my weakness, I use it to my advantage.”

“Like intimidating your enemies.”

He gives me a dark grin. “Exactly.”

The waiter comes back, except he has no plates in his hands. “I apologize,” he says in a low voice, “but I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

Marco turns his dark eyes onto the waiter. The poor man looks like he might pee himself. “For what reason?”

“You’re ... uh ... making the other customers uncomfortable. I’ve received a complaint.”

“Again, for what reason?”

The waiter looks between Marco and me, but I’m just as confused. “You heard my husband. What reason?”

“Look, can you please just leave without causing a fuss? It would make my job a lot easier.”

“I’m a paying customer, just like anyone else,” Marco says. “I’ll be staying.”

“I’ll bring you your food ready to go. Does that sound good?”

“Just say it,” Marco grits out. “Say it’s because my scar is making the other customers feel uncomfortable. Just say it.”

“I’ll ... go get you your food in a to-go bag.” The waiter scrambles away.

“That’s discrimination,” I say. “They can’t kick you out because of how you look. Who complained?” I look around the room until I find an older woman and man staring at our table. A sudden surge of anger washes through me, and I stand up and confront the couple. “You two are bigots,” I say.

Marco approaches me. “Emilia.”

“No.” I glare at the couple, who at least have the decency to look sheepish. “You can’t ask the waiter to make us leave because you don’t like how my husband looks. You two are horrible people, you know that?”

“We want to eat our meal in peace,” the older man says. “You’re making us uncomfortable.”

“Just go,” mutters the woman.

“No, we won’t leave. We have a right to be here, same as you.”

“Emilia.” Marco grabs my arm. “Let’s just go.”

“No. This is uncalled for. If this happened to any of my family, I’d do the same.” I point a finger at the couple. “You two should be ashamed of

yourselves.”

The waiter comes running over. “Is there a problem?”

“Yes,” the woman says. “This lady is crazy. She’s yelling at us. Make her and”—she gives Marco a disgusted look— “this man leave.”

“You’re going to have to go now.” The waiter hands Marco a to-go bag. “Here’s your food. Now, leave.”

“This is ridiculous,” I mutter.

“Let’s just go, Emilia.”

“I’m giving this place a one-star review after how we’ve been treated. Just so you know. My husband is a powerful man. You shouldn’t have done this.”

“Emilia,” Marco growls.

I finally follow him out of the restaurant after giving the waiter and the old couple one last glare.

Marco is quiet as he stares at me before he shakes his head. “What was that in there?”

I shrug. “I get passionate sometimes.”

“I’ll say.” He pauses. “Did you mean what you said? That you’d do this for any one of your family members?”

“Of course. I’m used to standing up for them. I’m used to being there for them. You’re my family now, too,” I add more softly. “That wasn’t right what happened back there.”

“I know it wasn’t. And I’ll send Leo to deal with the owner later.”

“What do you mean by that?”

Marco doesn’t reply, and I realize that I don’t really want to know. Marco is still a mob boss, after all. Who knows to what extent he’ll go to seek justice.

“You were really something in there,” he finally says.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” A small smile tugs at his lips. “It was impressive, actually. I didn’t know you had it in you.”

“Now, you do.”

“Now, I do.” His smile grows more rueful as he shakes his head. “Let’s go home.” It’s the first time that I’m starting to see that maybe Marco’s mansion can be my home after all.

Once we arrive home, Marco wishes me a goodnight. We both hesitate, like we want to say something. I notice Marco eyeing my legs before he

looks away. I wonder what it would be like to invite Marco to join me for the night. Am I even ready for that? Does Marco even want me like that?

“Do you,” I start to say right as he says, “So, I—”

He motions for me to speak. “You first.”

“Oh. I ... Never mind. You go.”

“I was just going to say goodnight again.” He steps forward and brushes his fingers against my arm. “Have a goodnight.”

“You, too.”

Marco doesn’t move. I don’t either.

For a moment, I think we might kiss again. God, I’ve been wanting to do it again for days now. It was so passionate and consuming.

Instead, Marco takes a step back. “Goodnight.” He walks away, heading toward his room, which is on the other side of the house from mine.

I don’t stop him or follow. I just let him walk farther and farther away from me despite how achy my body feels for him.

LEO ARRIVES at the house the next day, giving me another wink as he walks by. I ignore him and focus on the book in my hands. I wonder if Marco is telling him to go deal with the restaurant owner.

Leo comes back out an hour later, stopping by me. “Looking good there, Emilia.”

“Leo, leave me alone.” I turn a page in my book.

“Remember, if you ever need a man to show you a good time, I’m always available.”

“Leo!” Marco’s voice snaps.

Both Leo and I jerk up as Marco walks into the living room.

“Hey, boss. Forget something?”

Marco glares at him. “What did you just say to my wife?”

Leo gulps and steps back. “Nothing.”

“That’s right. Nothing. Because if I ever hear you making inappropriate comments to my wife again, you’ll regret it. It doesn’t matter if you’re my number two.”

“Gotcha, boss. Won’t happen again.” Leo walks away, not giving me a wink this time. I sigh in relief.

Marco turns to me. “You told me before he was flirting with you, and I didn’t believe it. I should have believed you.”

“Thank you.”

“Leo’s a good employee, but he’s not the best when it comes to women.”

“How so?”

“He ...” Marco scratches the back of his head. “He tends to seduce women for sport. Make a game of it. And then, when he has a woman’s heart, he breaks it.”

I snap my book shut. “That’s horrible.”

“I agree. But it doesn’t interfere with his work or my business. It’s his personal life. There’s nothing I can do about it.”

“But he’s hurting women!”

“Not physically.”

“But emotionally.”

Marco sighs and nods. “Yes. Emotionally. But that’s not exactly a crime.”

“No, it’s not. But it still makes him a bad person.”

“Listen, Emilia, I’m not going to argue with you about Leo. I know he can be an ass, but he’s a good worker. He’ll leave you alone from now on, trust me. You don’t need to worry.”

I settle back in my seat, not exactly satisfied with his answer but knowing it’s the best one I’m going to get. “Ok.” I pause. “You came out of your office. Why?”

“I ... wanted to see you,” he admits.

My heart flutters. “You did?”

“Yes. And now, I’ve seen you, I should get back to work.” He turns awkwardly on his heel.

“Marco, wait.” I stand up as he looks back. “Stay with me for a while.”

“And do what?”

I shrug. “We could talk.”

“Talk. Right.”

I chuckle. Marco is cute when he’s nervous, which is something I’ve rarely seen from him. “Or we could do something else.”

“Like what?”

“Like ...” My eyes land on the record plater in the corner of the room. “We could have a dance party.”

“A dance party,” he states, looking at me like I have two heads.

“Sure. Why not. It’s something my siblings and I would do all the time.” I

walk over to the record player and start going through the albums. Mostly groovy rock from the seventies.

“You and your siblings like to dance a lot. First in the rain, and now, dance parties.”

“We had fun; that’s for sure. My parents wanted to see us happy. And it was easier to keep an eye on all of us when we were in the same room together, so dance parties it was.” I put a record on, and a high-tempo song comes out. I start swaying my hips. “It’s fun.”

Marco’s eyes flit to my hips before he meets my gaze. I try not to blush. “Fun, huh?”

“Yes. I know you didn’t approve of me dancing in the rain, but maybe you’ll approve of me dancing inside, where it’s safe.” I start wiggling around, purposely making myself look silly. A soft chuckle escapes Marco’s mouth. “Was that a laugh I heard, Mr. Aldi?”

His smile disappears. “No.”

“I think it was.” I shimmy over to him. “Come on. Join me. You need to learn to have a little fun in your life.” I grab his hands and start swaying with him. Marco is stiff. “Loosen up. Come on.”

Marco sighs and finally joins me in dancing. At first, he’s holding back, not moving a whole ton. But as the next song comes on—one even groovier with a good beat—Marco starts to let himself go.

We swing around the room, holding hands, laughing together. Seeing Marco smile is the highlight of my day—my week even. We laugh so hard that we end up falling back onto the couch, trying to catch our breath.

“That *was* fun,” he admits.

“I told you so.”

The next song turns on, slow and sultry. Marco holds out his hand to me. “Care for another dance?”

“I’d love to.”

Marco keeps my hand in his while I place my other hand on his shoulder. His other hand settles on my low back as he brings me in closer. I can smell his musk, which makes me blush, and his touch sends electric flashes over my skin.

We sway together, our bodies touching.

I rest my head on his chest. “I can hear your heartbeat.”

After a beat, he places his chin on my head. We hold onto each other, letting the sultry song wash over us. I look up at Marco to see his dark gaze

on me. It's filled with ... lust.

My lips part as I swallow hard. Marco's eyes flit down to my lips before he meets my gaze again. We reach for each other at the same time.

Our kiss is hard and all consuming. Marco's tongue brushes mine, and I part my lips wider. A small moan escapes me as Marco draws me in closer to him. I wrap my arms around his neck. The sensation of him touching me leaves me breathless.

I gasp as Marco lifts me into his arms. My legs wrap around his waist on instinct. I've never been this close to another human before. It's intoxicating.

Marco sets me on the armrest of the couch, still kissing me deeply. My hands grasp the back of his neck as his hands tangle into my hair.

When my hand brushes his scar, he tenses for a moment but doesn't pull away.

"It's ok," I murmur against his lips.

Marco lets out a low growl as he kisses me harder. He presses his hips firmly against mine, and I open my legs wider. I don't know what's come over me, but this passion is so consuming; it's taking over me completely.

Marco grinds his body against mine. The sensation of his slacks, cool against my inner thighs, almost makes me pass out. Every shift of his hips hits that pleasure spot between my legs. It's one I've explored before, but my hand can't compare to this. Even through the fabric of my dress and underwear, the sensation is strong.

I grip the back of Marco's neck harder as I let my own head drop back. He kisses down my neck, sending goosebumps across my skin. He continues to hit the right spot, sending pleasure over my entire body. I know the feeling growing inside me—an orgasm. I've only ever felt it before from my own touch, and it was nothing compared to this.

I'm getting closer and closer.

"Marco," I whisper as I bury my head into his neck.

Like a snap, Marco backs away from me. I gasp, almost falling back onto the couch. "What is it?" I ask, trying to catch my breath. I didn't reach my orgasm, even though I was so close.

Marco stares at me with so much intensity before turning and leaving the room. My entire body is achy and alive. I don't know what Marco's problem is, but I know I'm not satisfied, and I don't just mean physically.

Marco doesn't get to toy with me like this. I deserve an explanation for his moods.

So, I stand up on my shaky legs and follow him.

CHAPTER 14

Marco

I can feel Emilia right behind me. “Marco,” she calls out. “Stop. Why are you doing this?”

I spin around to face her. “I can’t do this.”

The look of pain that flashes across her face sends a tinge of guilt through me. “Can’t do what? Us? Our marriage? What?”

“This.” I wave a hand between us. “You and me. I can’t do it.”

“Are ... are you asking for a divorce?”

“No.” I can see the relief on her face. “We’ll still be married. But I can’t do this with you.”

“Do what?” She puts her hands on her hips, staring me down. She’s brave; I’ll give her that. It just makes me want to grab her in my arms and make her mine for good.

“I can’t fuck you,” I growl, knowing it will hurt her.

She flinches. “I never asked you to.”

“What we did back there can’t happen again.” I turn away.

“I deserve an explanation. Why can’t that happen? Why can’t we have a marriage like a normal couple?”

“Because I can’t love you!” I shout as I spin back around. “I can’t love you, Emilia,” I add in a softer tone. “I just can’t.”

“Why not?”

I groan. “Why does everything have to be a question with you? I just can’t. Leave it at that.”

“You’re keeping something from me, and I deserve to know what it is.”

I step right up to her so there’s barely any space between us. She doesn’t back down. “You deserve, do you? What makes you think that? Because

we're married? I married you to gain power, not because I love you. You don't deserve anything from me."

"You're just saying this to hurt me," she whispers.

"No. I'm saying this because it's the truth. I don't love you, Emilia. And I never will."

She stares at me hard, her eyes watering, but she keeps the tears back. "Why can't you just let me in?"

"I've faced a broken heart before," I admit before I can stop myself. "I'm not going through it again."

"Who broke your heart? Who was she?"

I blink. The image of my mother flashes through my mind, telling me I can never be loved. "It's no one."

"Who was she?"

"No one. Now stop asking me so many damn questions." I walk away, and this time, Emilia doesn't follow.

"You'll always be alone if you keep pushing me away." I can hear a quick sob escape her, but I don't turn around, even though everything inside me feels like it's snapping in half.

I slam my office door behind me and lean against the desk, breathing heavily.

I lied to Emilia. She does deserve to know the truth. She's such a good person, with her passion for her family and the light that exudes from her. I'm just a bitter man stuck in a mansion all alone. The truth is, I don't deserve her.

I don't know how to open up to her without her hurting me.

It's just easier to push her away when things become too much.

My eyes land on the mirror across the room. I've never seen myself look so ugly before. With a growl, I cross the room and slam my fist into the glass. A crack appears, making me look even worse. I guess that's fitting.

Blood appears on my knuckles. I welcome the pain as a reminder of who I really am.

Unlovable. Ugly. A monster.

I CLOSE myself off in my office the next day, stewing in my self-loathing.

Everything in me wants to go to Emilia and explain to her why I am the way I am. I want to see her smile in the way that makes her eyes crinkle and warms my heart. She smiles so infrequently. I know it's because of me. I'm the one making her miserable.

I want to hear her laugh. To see her dance. To hear her talk about her family. I want to know what it's like to really love your family.

But I don't go to her.

Instead, I focus on work. I have a gun shipment coming in that I need to keep an eye on. I have business I need to check in on to make sure they pay me the money they owe me.

And I have Viktor to think about. So far, he hasn't made a move since killing Camille, but I know he's waiting, biding his time, which leaves me more worried than I've ever been.

Thinking of Camille, it reminds me of something I need to do.

I call John, Camille's husband.

"Mr. Aldi?" His voice is shaky.

"John, I—I wanted to ask you something." Emilia's words resonated with me when she told me that I had a responsibility to Camille. "I wanted to ask if you would be all right if I ... planned Camille's funeral."

He sucks in a breath. "You—you would do that?"

"I would," I say, clearing my throat. "Camille worked for me for many years. She deserves to have a nice funeral. No budget. Anything she would want. It's the least I can do." Since she died because of me. John doesn't need to know the specifics, though.

"T-thank you. That would help a lot. I just ... can't plan it right now. Every day has been a struggle without her."

Her lifeless head flashes through my mind, and I push the image away. "So, email me the specifics for the funeral. Anything that Camille would have wanted at her funeral. I'll get working on it."

"Thank you. So much."

"You take care. I ... mean that."

After hanging up, John emails me a list of things Camille would have liked at her funeral. One of those things is a coffin. The easy thing would be to order one online and have Leo go make arrangements, but none of that feels right this time.

The right thing to do is go in person to a funeral home and pick out the one Camille wanted.

I force myself to leave my office, and on the way to the garage, I stop short when I run into Emilia, who's leaving the kitchen. We pause, staring at each other.

I want to tell her everything. I want to fold her into my arms and kiss her like I might die without her. I want her to know she has brought a lightness to my life that I don't think I can live without now.

But instead, I remain silent.

Emilia gives me a stiff smile. "Marco."

"Emilia."

"I was just ..." She points behind me.

"Right." I step out of her way, and she walks past. "I'm on my way to pick out a coffin." She pauses but doesn't turn around. "For Camille's funeral. I'm planning it."

"That's good. That's really good, Marco." She doesn't turn back, and then, she's walking away for good.

If only I could just follow her ...

Instead, I head for the garage.

Leland and Sons Funeral Home is on the corner of a busy street. I have to walk outside, in broad daylight, to get to it. People glance at me and quickly look away. Let them see how much of a monster I am. I don't give a damn anymore.

Inside, the building smells musty, like it hasn't been fully cleaned in years.

Joe Leland greets me with a handshake. His eyes flit to my scar, but he doesn't show how scared he is. He deals in death every day. We have that in common.

The coffin John wanted me to pick out is a deep mahogany, almost red in color. In his email, he wrote that Camille's favorite color was red. I never knew that.

"This is a great one," Leland tells me as we go over the price. "It will provide your loved one with a comfortable resting place. It's around ten grand."

"All right. I'll take it." His eyes widen slightly, like he's surprised I didn't balk at the price range. Money is of no consequence to me. Not when I have tons of it.

"I'll get the paperwork. And where will you be hosting the funeral?"

"In a church. That's what she would have wanted."

“All right. I’ll make sure everything is delivered and ready to go on the day. I’ll be right back.” He pats my arm before leaving the room.

I stare at the rows of coffins laid out before me. I’ve never given much thought to what I’d be buried in. In my line of work, there’s a good chance I might just be buried in an unmarked grave in the earth, killed by Viktor himself.

If Viktor comes after Emilia, I don’t know what I’ll do. I can’t lose the little bit of light she’s brought me. A piece of my heart is already hurting at the thought.

Leland comes back and we finalize plans.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” he tells me before I leave.

“She was just my employee,” I say on instinct. Leland’s mouth drops open in shock. I clear my throat. “She’ll be missed.” That seems to appease Leland, and he nods as he opens the door for me.

The sun is bright after being in a dark funeral parlor, so it takes me a moment to recognize the face before me.

Dark hair, eyes as black as midnight, and a grin that speaks of dangerous things.

Viktor.

I freeze. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

He’s alone, leaning against a car. “Just wanted to check in on you.”

“You’re supposed to be in New York.”

“Well, here I am.” His eyes slant to the funeral home behind me. “Someone die?”

A flash of anger hits me, and I grab Viktor by the front of his shirt, dragging him toward me. He doesn’t even fight it. “You know damn well someone died. You beheaded by housekeeper.”

Viktor chuckles. “Oh, yeah. I did, didn’t I? I grabbed her when she was coming home after working a day at your place. She was so easy to take. So frail. She didn’t even know what was happening to her before I cut her head off.”

“You’re a sick man,” I growl, clenching my fists in his shirt.

“I didn’t know you cared so much about your housekeeper. If this is the reaction I get, I wonder what will happen when I go after your wife?”

“Stay away from my wife.”

“She’s a pretty little thing. I almost wanted her for myself when she and I met in New York. But I didn’t take her. I figured she’d look much better as a

head on my coffee table.”

I slam him into the car, and Viktor grunts. Pedestrians on the street look our way but don't get involved. “You're playing with fire,” I tell him. “You're just asking me to kill you.”

“But you're a man who doesn't like to kill, last I remembered. So, that's one disadvantage you have. Me? I'm not afraid to kill anyone in my path to get what I want.”

“And what do you want?”

“Power.” Viktor's lips turn into a sneer. “I want what you have. I want what the Moretti's have. I want to be a king of a city. The only way I can do that is by teaming up with you ... or killing you. I figured the former would be easier, but now, I'm reconsidering. I think I'll just kill you and get it over with and take your city for myself.”

“You're not getting close to me again. Not now that I know you're in LA. You just ruined your element of surprise.”

“Did I?”

I push Viktor to the ground. “Keep the fuck away from me if you know what's best for you.” I walk away without looking back. Everyone on the street gives me a wide berth. Good. That's how I like it.

Viktor doesn't follow, but that doesn't mean he's done. I know he's already scheming to figure out what will work to his advantage. I need to be on guard.

When I arrive home, I don't run into Emilia anywhere. I'm both relieved and disappointed. Then I remember Viktor's not so subtle threat to kill Emilia, and I rush into my office to check the monitor to see where she is. She's not in the living room, kitchen, garage, or any other part of the house I can see.

I check her room, but she's not there either. My heart begins pumping faster as I go outside to check the backyard. The garden is before me in all its natural beauty. Despite its grandeur, I only have bad memories of it.

A splash to my left makes me turn. The pool, which extends from the left side of the house to the edge of the garden at the far end, is occupied. Emilia is in it, swimming.

At the sight of the pool, a memory hits me.

I was eleven, having had my scar for the past month. My skin was still healing. Beatrice had given me a wide berth ever since the gardening shears incident. She didn't look me in the eye, which was fine by me because her

lack of attention meant I wasn't getting abused.

Until one day, I was taking a swim when I saw her approach the edge of the pool. I was underwater and saw her staring down at me, a calm expression on her face. She normally looked at me with anger, so seeing her look calm made me feel slightly safer.

I emerged out of the water.

"Marco, come here." Her soft voice drew me to the edge of the pool.

"What?" I had hope in my chest—hope that after she scarred my face, she'd feel bad and never want to hurt me again.

I was wrong.

Beatrice grabbed my head and plunged me back under the water. I scratched and clawed at her hands, but she didn't let go. My legs kicked out, only feeling the water. My lungs burned from lack of air.

She was killing me. My own mother.

Darkness began to cover my eyes, and I knew that was it.

Until she let go, and I came out of the water, coughing and spitting.

My father was there, holding her back. "Let me go, Paolo," she screamed at him, trying to get to me again.

"Not this time," he said softly to her. With a glance at me, my father turned my mother and took her back into the house. Father saved my life, but he didn't even check to see if I was ok. He didn't even come back out of the house. I was left on my own to get out of the pool. My throat burned, and my head hurt.

I slumped to my knees and cried so hard, my lungs, my face, my entire body hurt from the tears.

That was the last time I truly cried.

Father kept Beatrice away from me after that, but I would never forget about the day my mother tried to murder me.

Now, back in the present, all I can think as Emilia swims is that she might drown.

I run to the pool, which I haven't been near since the incident. Emilia is near the bottom, and I can't see if she's alive or not.

I jump into the water and dive underneath, wrapping my arms around her and bringing her to the surface. Emilia stares at me with wide eyes once we surface. "Marco?"

I get out of the pool and pick her up, placing her on the ground. She doesn't fight me. "Are you ok?" I croak out.

“Yes. I was fine. Until you dragged me out. What’s gotten into you?”

“But you’re ok?”

“Yes, I’m ok.”

“Good.”

I grab her face between my hands and kiss her deeply. Emilia tenses for a moment before melting into my touch, wrapping her arms around my back. My suit is soaking wet, dripping water onto the tile. Emilia is in a bikini. I’ve never seen this much of her body. It makes me feel unhinged.

Our lips and tongues meld together into a perfect rhythm. I don’t stop kissing her as my hands roam up and down her body. Emilia presses herself closer to me, closing the last remaining gap between us.

I need to touch her. I need to be with her. Even if it breaks my fucking heart.

My hand brushes the side of her breast, making her gasp into my mouth. I cup her breast, feeling her nipple under her bikini top.

“Marco,” she sighs as I kiss down her throat.

My hands move down to her ass, squeezing gently. Emilia’s hips jerk into mine. With my gaze meeting her, I push my hand between her legs and start to rub her through the wet bikini bottom. Emilia’s lips part, and her eyes grow dark as she stares intently back at me. She grips my shoulders like she’s seeking something to hold on to.

I grind my palm into her pussy, rubbing her harder.

Neither of us says anything as I touch her, our eyes locked in a battle of wills. Emilia lifts her right leg to wrap it around my waist, giving me more room to touch her. I push my hand firmer against her folds, making her cry out.

Her cheeks are flushed, her skin is warm, and her body is receptive to mine. She’s a vision.

My thumb rubs circles against her pussy, getting her closer and closer to what she deserves. Emilia’s hands tighten around my arms, and her leg tenses. I press my forehead against hers, never taking my eyes away from hers.

Then she comes for me.

“Marco,” she gasps as her orgasm rocks her body. I can see the realization in her eyes. Her body shudders as she presses her head into my chest, finally looking away from me. I hold her as she finishes.

Emilia drops her leg and leans against me, like all the energy has left her.

“Marco ...”

I let myself have this moment as I hold her in my arms.

She eyes me over. “Your suit is wet.”

“I know.”

We look at each other for a moment, neither of us knowing what to say.

My hands grip her upper arms. I need to feel her for a moment longer.

“You’re sure you’re ok?”

She nods slowly, looking up at me with dazed eyes. “I am. I was swimming. I hadn’t before, and ... I know you told me not to be out here alone, but it’s a beautiful day, and I just needed to do something. You’re not mad at me?”

“No. I had a run in with Viktor and wanted to make sure you were ok.”

Her eyes widen. “Viktor. He’s here?”

“Yes. So, you need to be extra careful being alone.”

“Ok. I will.”

“Good. Good.” I let her go, taking a step back. “I’m glad you’re ok.” She opens her mouth to speak, but I’m already walking away.

I can feel her gaze boring into my back the entire time.

CHAPTER 15

Emilia

It's the day of Camille's funeral.

It's surreal to be going to another funeral so soon after my dad's. It brings up a lot of memories, making me miss my family even more. The longing for them hasn't gone away. It's only increased as my marriage with Marco has become more complicated.

He hasn't talked to me since the day by the pool when he gave me an orgasm. My body has never felt better than in that moment while my heart was crushed as he walked away. He keeps toying with me, showing me affection and then pulling away. It's breaking me down from the inside, and I'm not sure how much more of it I can take.

I dress in a simple black dress, so similar to the one I wore to my dad's funeral. This time, I'll be on my own, without my siblings and mother. I didn't know Camille long, but I want to show my support to her family, even if they've never met me before. It's the right thing to do.

Staring at myself in another black dress brings a sudden bout of tears to my eyes. My dad was a light in my life; he made me laugh when we had our dance parties and always made sure to be home for our family night dinners, even when work was chaotic. He made us a priority. He made my mother a priority.

I wonder if Marco will ever make me a priority.

I call my mom with shaky hands. "Mom?" I say as a sob breaks out of me.

"Emilia, what's wrong?" The warmth of her voice makes me cry harder. She doesn't say anything as I continue to sob. I clutch the phone to my chest, hoping it will help me feel my mother in a symbolic way.

Once my tears finally dry, I can speak again. “Mom.”

“Honey, what is it? What’s wrong? Are you ok?”

“As ok as I can be. I’m just so ... lonely.”

She sighs roughly. “I wish I could be there for you, but you know I can’t.”

“I know.”

“You just have to stay strong for our family. We’re counting on you. Your marriage is already helping us. Franco’s been happier now that he and Marco are really working together. It’s taken his attention off us slightly.”

“That’s good. I don’t like that Franco hurts you.”

Mom doesn’t respond to that. “Just stay strong for me.”

I always have to stay strong. I wonder when someone can be strong for me for a change. “I just needed to hear your voice, that’s all.”

“I’m happy to hear yours, too.” A loud crash happens in the background. “Shoot. Knock it off!” she shouts in the distance. “Sorry about that,” she tells me. “Antonio knocked over one of my vases. I need to go deal with this.” She hangs up before I can say goodbye.

I stare at the black screen of my phone, unable to shake the deep ache within my chest. I’ve always had to be a second mom to my siblings, and I’m still doing the self-sacrificing work of a mom in my marriage. It’s exhausting. I just want someone to take care of me for once.

I stay in my room until Marco knocks on my door, telling me it’s time to go to Camille’s funeral. It’s the first words he’s said to me in days.

He’s waiting in the hall for me, looking handsome in his black suit. “Ready?”

“Ready.”

We’re quiet on the drive to the church. All I want to do is scream at Marco and beg him to explain why he’s always pushing me away. But today isn’t that day. Today is the day to honor Camille.

The church is packed full of people seated in the pews, speaking quietly to each other before the ceremony starts. When Marco and I step inside, the chatter dries up. Everyone looks at him. Some immediately look away while others openly stare.

Marco keeps his head high as we walk down the aisle toward the front where Camille’s husband is. “John,” Marco says, shaking hands with a man with silver hair that’s balding.

“Thank you for planning this,” John tells him, giving me a quick smile.

“It’s helped me a lot.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Please, have a seat.” He motions toward the front pew.

Marco shakes his head. “I think it will be better if I sit near the back. I don’t want to draw the attention away from Camille.” Marco starts walking back down the aisle before John can say anything.

I stand there awkwardly. “Your wife was nice,” I say lamely to John.

“Thank you. She was.”

“I didn’t know her well, but she would talk to me when no one else would. That meant a lot to me.”

“You’re Mr. Aldi’s wife, correct?”

“I am.” I shake John’s hand. “When I married Marco, Camille welcomed me into his home.”

“It was her job to be polite.”

“Still. It meant a lot to me.” I clear my throat. “It’s horrible what happened to her.”

John’s eyes darken. “It was. I’m still not sure exactly what happened. No one is telling me anything.”

“You don’t know?”

“I know she was ... was ...” A sob escapes him. “I saw her head. But not ... not her body.” He crumples inward, clutching his stomach. An older woman approaches and places her hand on his back, whispering soothing words to him.

“I’m so sorry for what happened to her. I ...” There’s nothing else I can really say. On the day of my father’s funeral, everyone offered their condolences, but it was never enough to ease the pain in my heart. I know my words won’t offer John much comfort either. Instead, I put my arms around him, drawing him into a hug. John cries into my neck as he holds me close.

He eventually pulls back, offering me a smile. “Thank you. I’m sorry if that was inappropriate.”

“It wasn’t. You needed it. When my father died, all I wanted was a hug.” No one gave me one. Instead, I had to be the one to give all my siblings and mom a comforting hug rather than any of them giving *me* the comforting hug.

“I appreciate it.”

I look down the aisle, searching for Marco. I find him in the very back row, staring at me intently. “I should go sit with my husband.” I give John’s arm a reassuring squeeze.

As John turns to the woman next to him and leans against her, I leave him to be with his closest friends and family.

I approach Marco, who keeps his gaze forward as I sit down. “That was nice of you,” he murmurs.

“I know what it’s like to lose someone you love. Words don’t always offer the comfort you need.”

“I wouldn’t know. I’ve never lost someone I love.”

“But you told me that you’ve experienced a broken heart before. Even if that person didn’t die, it’s still a loss.”

“Not that kind of broken heart,” he says cryptically.

I want to ask more, but the funeral begins. A priest walks behind the podium and talks about Camille and all the ways she was a wonderful person. I’m learning so much about her, like how she volunteered for children in need and how she always supported her husband in his endeavors. I just knew her as Marco’s housekeeper who faced a terrible end. I wish I’d asked her more questions, but she was always busy either cooking or cleaning. Still, I could have tried harder.

Marco is so still next to me that he could be made of stone. But when I look over at him, I see his eyes look watery. He’s more affected by this than he lets on.

Once the funeral is over, Marco tells me we’re going home.

“Can’t we stay for the reception? It would be nice to stay.”

Marco looks at me for a moment before nodding. “Fine. We can stay.”

The reception is held at a nearby rec center. Inside, tables are laden with plates of food, and guests mingle, talking in low voices. John is surrounded by people, offering their condolences. I hated going through that at my dad’s funeral, and I can see the strain on John’s face as he shakes everyone’s hand. It’s taking a toll on him.

“You should go help him out,” I say to Marco.

“What do you mean?”

“Look at how much pain he’s in. Offer to take the condolences yourself. It would help him out.”

“Emilia, I’m not sure.”

I put my hand on his arm, making Marco look at me more intently. “You say you’re a monster, but I don’t believe it. So, show me how you’re not a monster. Do a good deed.” I don’t remind him that Camille died because she worked for him. It’s not Marco’s fault; it’s Viktor’s. But Marco does have a

certain responsibility for her.

Marco nods after a moment and slowly approaches John. As before, I can see people staring at my husband like he's an ugly freak. The look of disgust on their faces revolts me. They don't know him. He's a man with a scar, not a villain. It makes me want to tell everyone off who looks at him like that, but I keep my mouth shut. Today is not a day to make a scene.

Marco says something to John, and John looks grateful before he walks away. Marco remains standing, talking to the people who'd been crowding John. It's obvious they want to leave, but don't want to look rude.

Once Marco is done speaking to the group, he returns to me. "There. John will be left alone now."

"You helped him." I nod at where John's seated. "He already looks lighter."

Marco clears his throat. "Why is it important to you that I do something nice?"

"Do I have to state the obvious?"

We sit at one of the tables, and the couple next to Marco stand up and find somewhere else to sit. I shoot them a glare, which makes them look away in embarrassment.

"It's not the worst feeling in the world to help out," he admits.

"That's good. You did a good thing planning Camille's funeral." I pause, thinking about what John said to me about only having Camille's head. "Marco, do you know where Camille's body is?" I keep my voice low so only he can hear.

His eyebrows shoot up. "No. I never found out. Viktor never offered it up."

"That's so sad. She'll be buried without her body, and her husband will probably never find closure because of it."

"I'm going to kill that man," he growls. "If he shows his face again, I'm going to kill him."

"I thought you didn't like violence."

"I don't. But sometimes I have to do things I don't like to do."

I grab his hand. "You'll do the right thing. I know it."

He looks at me with an expression I can't make out. "Your faith in me is astounding sometimes. I don't deserve it."

"Marco, why were you so worried for me that day by the pool? I've been thinking it over, and I can't figure out why. Is it just because of Viktor?"

He envelopes my hand in his, and its warmth sends a shiver down my spine. “I just needed to make sure you were ok.”

I want to ask why, but I know he won’t tell me. “All right. I’m ok, Marco. I’m ok.”

He pulls his hand away, putting his walls back up. I can see the moment it happens from how his body tenses. “We should be getting back home. It’s not safe to be out for too long.”

I don’t argue.

The look of relief in the crowd as Marco heads for the door sends a flash of anger through me. These people are at a funeral. Maybe now is not the time to be so judgmental.

I stare down a woman who makes an exaggerated shudder, laughing with her friend. When she catches my eye, she ducks her head, embarrassment creeping up her face. Good.

I follow Marco out the door.

The entire ride home is uncomfortable, with a lot left unsaid between us. I can feel it building until the pressure becomes too much.

When we get inside, I stop in the foyer. “I lied.”

Marco pauses, looking back at me.

“I’m not ok,” I tell him. “I’m not ok, Marco. I’m so *lonely*. You keep pushing me away, and it’s tearing me apart. You’re breaking my heart.”

His eyes widen before they soften. “Emilia ...”

“Open your heart to me. I can’t bear this distance between us. I think I’ll die inside if what we have now is our future. I can’t keep talking to a closed door forever. I married you with an open heart. I was ready for anything. I was ready to be your wife, but you pushed me away. And you keep pushing and pushing. And I can’t stand it!” My voice comes out as a scream and a sob. “I’ve lost so much. My dad. My family. My home. I don’t want to lose you, too. I can’t.”

Marco just looks at me.

“Say something,” I plead.

He doesn’t.

Instead, he walks right toward me and grabs my face, looking into my eyes with a million things left unsaid.

Then, he kisses me.

I sink into him, kissing him back with all my might. I’m praying he won’t push me away again. That he’ll allow himself to be in this moment with me.

His hands encompass my back, pulling me tight against him. My breath comes out rough as I kiss him harder, while my hands wrap around his shoulders. Our lips and tongues meld together. The only sound in the room is our heavy breathing.

Marco lifts me up, and I wrap my legs around his waist. A low growl escapes him, sending a shiver over me. Our lips never part.

I cling to him as he walks upstairs, taking us to a room I've never been in before. His bedroom. It's all dark blues and browns, just as I expected. A cave for Marco to retreat to, but he's letting me inside.

He lowers me onto the king-sized bed, pulling back from our kiss to look down at me. I try not to squirm. "You've never done this before."

"Yeah."

His eyes darken. "Good. I want you to be only mine." He leans down and captures my lips again in a kiss so passionate, it leaves me breathless.

I sigh when his hands slip under the straps of my dress, his touch sending a ripple of goosebumps across my body. He pulls my dress down, exposing my lacey black bra underneath. For a moment, I feel uncertain, but the way Marco is looking at me lets me know he finds me desirable.

He trails his fingertips over my upper chest and between my breasts. My breath comes out faster. He meets my gaze as he unclasps my bra and draws it down my arms. I keep myself from moving as Marco rakes his eyes over my bare chest. He swallows hard.

"Marco," I whisper.

My voice seems to urge him on as he bends down and plants kisses on my throat. I arch my back as I sigh into his touch. It's like flashes of electricity all over my body in the best way. He cups my right breast in his hand, his thumb brushing over my nipple. I breath out roughly from the touch. He kisses my neck harder, making my body feel more alive.

I clench my legs together, feeling the growing arousal within me. I remember his touch from the day by the pool, and I've been desperate to feel it again ever since.

He trails kisses down my chest until he reaches my other breast and begins to kiss me there. The way Marco cherishes my body makes feel so loved that I could almost cry. It just deepens my pain, worried he'll pull away again.

I can't continue until I have my answer.

I push on his chest until he leans back. "Marco, I need to know you're not

going to run from me again. I can't stand it."

"I'm tired of running." With that answer, he pulls the rest of my dress off. "I want you, Emilia. I want all of you." His fingers play with the edge of my panties.

"I want you, too."

His small smile melts my heart. "Let me show you how much I want you." He kisses down my stomach, making me suck in a breath. More goosebumps appear on my skin.

With a jerk, he rips my panties off, leaving me naked while he's still fully clothed. The sight of it turns me on and makes me desperate to tear the clothes off him.

He parts my legs and looks down at my most intimate area. My skin is on fire, and I feel like I might explode. "You're beautiful," he finally says.

When he places his hand on me, I almost break out in tears. The relief I feel to finally be touched is so strong.

Marco rubs his fingers against my folds and finds my bundle of nerves. Every swipe of his thumb sends a jolt of pleasure through me. Skin to skin contact is so much better than when he touched me through my bikini bottoms. This, right here, is real intimacy.

"Marco," I cry out as he rubs me harder, getting me closer to that perfect place of pleasure.

He smothers my cries as he kisses me. Between his lips and fingers, I don't last much longer. His thumb presses down onto my nub, and my hips jerk up on instinct. I don't feel an ounce of embarrassment. All I feel is desire.

I grip his shoulders, pulling him closer until he's right on top of me. His hand doesn't relent as he shows me pleasure. Our kiss is full of longing—longing for each other, for a better marriage, for a more hopeful future.

When his finger brushes my nub again, that's all it takes.

I cry against his mouth as I come, my body racked with shudders. Marco continues to touch me. I kiss him harder as my body relaxes into the bed.

Marco finally removes his hand from between my legs, and I could almost cry. He sits up and undoes his pants, pulling his erection out. I stare at him for a moment, drinking him in.

"Get undressed," I tell him.

"Not today." He leans over me, planting kisses on my face. "Is that all right?"

“Ok. Whatever you’re comfortable with.”

“Thank you.” I can tell he means the words, and I smile.

Marco settles himself over me, his length pressing against my opening. This is it. The moment I’ll finally be with my husband completely.

“Are you ready?” he whispers, pressing his head against mine.

“I’m ready.” I grip his back, pulling him closer to me.

With a shift of his hips, Marco enters me, slowly at first. I wince from the slight ache of it as my body adjusts. He continues pushing into me until he’s fully seated within me. We hold each other for the moment, our gazes locked, our bodies flushed together.

Then, Marco begins to move.

At first, it’s just a twist of his hips. The sensation pushes his erection against that perfect spot of pleasure within me. I gasp, grabbing the back of his neck. Marco pulls my knees higher against his hips, sliding in deeper. We moan together. The slight ache I felt is disappearing, replaced by pleasure.

He grips the back of my thighs, his fingers digging in, and I let my head drop back, allowing Marco to spread kisses over my throat. My legs are already trembling.

My heart may burst from the sudden love that hits me. Do I love Marco? I just know I can’t lose this, not after this breakthrough.

My hands glide over his back, wishing I could feel his skin instead of his suit jacket. I raise my hips to meet his pace, our bodies locked together in a perfect rhythm. Marco lets out a groan as he presses his face deeper against my neck. My eyes flutter shut as I let the pleasure wash over me.

I’m finally making love with my husband. It’s something I was prepared for before marrying Marco, but to finally have this moment happen ... It’s surreal. It’s exciting. It’s beautiful.

His erection continues to hit that spot of pleasure within me until it becomes too much. The pleasure builds and builds and builds ... until it breaks.

“Marco!” I cry out, clutching his arms with all my might as my orgasm hits me. He holds me tighter, his gaze meeting mine. From his eyes alone, it looks like Marco could eat me alive. He thrusts his length deeper into me, once, twice, and finally a third time, until he groans, his release washing over him.

I can feel him filling me up. The thought doesn’t bother me. In fact, the thought of a baby makes me happy. I always knew I’d make a good mom

after raising my own siblings.

Marco gently pulls out of me and slumps onto the bed, breathing heavily, his gaze locked onto the ceiling. He puts his length away, zipping his pants back up.

A flash of sadness passes through me. We've made a breakthrough tonight, but he still can't be fully vulnerable with me.

"Should I get dressed, too?" I ask.

His eyes flit to mine. "Emilia ..."

"Don't ask me to leave," I say quickly before I can stop myself. "I want to stay here with you tonight."

After a beat, he opens his arms. "Come here."

I lay my head against his chest and melt into his touch as his arms wrap around me. "Thank you."

His arms tighten around me before they relax.

"So, this is your room," I say to fill the silence.

"Yeah. What do you think?"

I look up at him and reach my hand to cup his cheek, my thumb brushing over his scar. He doesn't pull away. "I think it fits you."

He smiles as he kisses my hand.

We hold each other for a long time after that—him in his suit and me completely naked. It's not ideal, but it's a start.

And that's all I can hope for.

CHAPTER 16

Marco

Waking up next to Emilia makes me feel calmer than I've ever been in my entire life.

She's still asleep, dressed in a simple tank-top and lounge pants. Her hair is fanned out around her, giving her a golden halo from the sun coming through the window. In sleep, her face is at peace. She's beautiful, more than I deserve to even look at.

I changed into a more comfortable white t-shirt and sweats before I went to bed. Emilia had laughed at the sight, saying she'd never seen me in anything other than a suit. I laughed right along with her.

I'd changed in the bathroom, still not letting Emilia see all of me. The thing is, I don't just have a scar on my face. I have scars all over my body from the years of abuse. The most prominent is a deep gash across my chest from when my mother sliced me with a knife. I'm not ready to tell Emilia about my past. It's still too painful.

Gently, I place my hand on her cheek, feeling her smooth skin under my touch. She's too perfect. I'm not worthy of her. Not with my darkness entwined with every part of my being.

She's fully mine now, and I'm incapable of stopping it. I don't even want to stop it. It felt good to sleep next to someone. I'm already craving it again.

I've had sex before, but usually just with prostitutes who wouldn't judge me or drunk women who couldn't judge me because ... well, they were drunk. I still made it my mission to make sure those women enjoyed their time, but it would always leave me feeling hollow. I knew those women, if I wasn't paying them or if they saw me in the light of day, would run

screaming from me.

But Emilia didn't run screaming.

In fact, she's still right here.

She stirs as her eyes open, soft and groggy as they land on me. I hold my breath, waiting for her to realize the mistake of what we did yesterday and to leave.

Instead, she smiles at me, and I release my breath, relief washing through me.

"How are you feeling?" I ask, keeping my hand on her cheek. She leans into my touch.

"I'm great." She stretches her arms over her head. "A little sore, but otherwise, I feel amazing."

"I'm glad."

She leans over and gives me a peck on the lips. "You're still here."

"So are you."

"I am." She rests her head on my chest, gazing up at me with a smile. "I'm so happy you didn't leave. I don't think I could have taken it."

"I'm tired of leaving. I tried fighting it, but I couldn't any longer, and I realized I don't want to. I like holding you in my arms." I pull her in closer. "I like touching you." I kiss her gently. "Kissing you." Another kiss. "Making you call out my name as you come."

She blushes. "Marco."

"It's true. I love that you're mine now."

"I was always yours. You just had to wake up and see it."

"I see it now." I kiss her deeply, rolling her onto her back. Emilia sighs as she melts under me. I roam my hands down her body until I rest them on the sliver of skin peeking out between her top and pants.

She arches her body, letting me know she needs more.

"There's something I want to do to you that I've been wanting to do for a long time," I say in a dark voice.

Emilia shudders. "What is it?"

"Just lay back." I kiss down her body, pushing her shirt up to lick and nip the skin of her stomach.

I peel her pants off, taking my time to kiss down each of her legs. Emilia gives me a lusty look, which makes me hard. No woman has ever made me feel this unhinged. I could cherish her body forever, and it still wouldn't be enough.

Next, I slip her panties down her legs, smelling her natural musk. It's intoxicating. I part her legs and look up at her. "I'm going to make you come from my mouth."

She flushes and squirms on the bed.

"Are you ready?"

She nods tentatively, even though her eyes speak to how turned on she is. I can smell her arousal.

I lower my head between her legs and begin kissing her folds. Emilia's hips jerk up. I place an arm over her hips to keep her in place.

"Marco!" she cries out when my tongue laps over her sensitive nub. Her hands grab the back of my head, keeping me in place. I just smile.

I explore Emilia's pussy with my lips and tongue, enjoying every cry and sigh and moan she makes. She tastes delicious, her body made perfectly for mine.

I lick up her center, causing her to moan even louder. I love seeing how unhinged I can make her. Emilia shifts and squirms on the mattress as I kiss her pussy more deeply. I blow a little bit of air onto her nub and her reaction—a quick gasp and a jerk of the hips—tells me that she loves it.

I slip the tip of my tongue into her, and Emilia clamps her legs around my head, her thighs tense.

"Marco, it's too much," she says in a breathless voice. "It's too much."

I look up at her with her heaving chest and flushed face. I love that I have this effect on her. It's good for the ego. I resume pleasuring her with my mouth, which only makes her cry out even more.

Her hands grip my head tighter, splaying through my hair as I lick over her bundle of nerves. Emilia's breathes come out faster as her hips shift around faster. Every little noise she makes drives me more insane in the best way possible.

Until she reaches her climax.

Emilia's body tenses for a moment before she calls out my name, her release consuming her. I continue to kiss and lick her pussy, not ready to stop. Her entire body trembles so hard that I'm almost worried for her.

Only once she relaxes back onto the mattress do I sit up. "Did you enjoy it?"

Her legs flop to the side as she looks up at me with a dreamy smile on her face. "I think it's accurate to say I enjoyed it."

I chuckle as I lay back down beside her. "I'm glad."

She eyes me over. “Do—do you want me to do that for you?”

My cock perks up at the idea, but my brain is hesitant. “Do you even know how to do it?”

“No, but I can learn.”

I want nothing more than to see Emilia’s lips wrapped around my cock, but it feels too vulnerable. I want all of her. I’m just not sure I’m ready to show her all of me.

“I appreciate it, Emilia.” I stroke her cheek. “But ...”

“You have nothing to be ashamed of. You’ve seen all of me.”

“I don’t want to scare you.”

She sits up, swatting at my chest. “You’re not going to scare me. Besides, you’ve been inside me, Marco. I think we’re past a lot of things.”

“Only if you really want to.”

“Will you show me how?” She looks up at me with eyes that still manage to look innocent.

Fuck. “I’ll show you,” I say gruffly. “Sit there.” I nod at the edge of the bed. After standing up, I hesitate before slipping my pants and underwear down.

Emilia’s eyes widen a fraction as she looks at me.

“You don’t have to do this.”

“I know. I want to. Tell me what you like.” She grabs my cock, making me hiss. She drops her hands. “Are you ok?”

“I’m ok,” I grit out. “You can touch me.”

She does, and I feel like I might explode just from that alone. Emilia takes a moment to run her hand up and down my cock, exploring, even though it’s the best kind of torture.

Then she leans forward and slips the tip of my cock into her mouth. I have to resist coming at this moment. Emilia looks up at me with her gorgeous eyes as she plants kisses all over my cock. It’s sweet. Nothing like the blowjobs the prostitutes gave me. Emilia is taking her time, showing me she cares.

“Am I doing ok?” she asks as she pulls back.

“You’re doing great. Just do what you’re comfortable with.”

She nods and resumes kissing my erection. I want nothing more than to come, but I’m holding back, giving Emilia the chance to explore. She slides her mouth around my tip again, and I can’t take it anymore.

“I need to come,” I growl.

She doesn't let me go.

"Emilia," I warn.

"I heard you." She slips her mouth back onto me.

Brave girl. When her tongue slides over my tip, my release is sudden. I groan, closing my eyes. Emilia still doesn't let go.

Once I'm done, I slip out of her mouth, looking at her cautiously. "Are you ok?"

"I am. I wanted to know what that was like, and now, I do."

"And ... what did you think of it?"

She stands and plants a kiss on my lips. "I like that you let me see more of you."

I can only smile.

"I WANT TO GO OUTSIDE," Emilia announces over breakfast after we both showered in our own room and changed into day wear. She's in a simple summer dress while I'm in my classic button-down and slacks.

"We've been over this." I take a bite of my omelet.

"I know, but it's so nice out."

"It's LA. Most days are nice out."

She gives me a look. "Marco, I know you're worried about Viktor coming after us, but we can't stop living our lives. I want to spend the day outside with my husband. Is that too much to ask for? I figured we could walk through the garden. Hold hands. Just be together." She blushes slightly but holds my gaze.

"Walk through the garden?" I can't hide the slight fear in my voice. I haven't spent much time in that garden since I got my scar. The only times I've really been out there were when I went after Emilia to convince her to come back inside.

"Yes." She looks at me more closely. "Are you ok?"

I clear my throat and take a sip of water. "I'm fine."

"It would make me really happy."

That clinches it.

After breakfast, Emilia and I hold hands as we enter the garden. The ease we have with each other is so different from the distance that used to be

between us. I'll admit, I prefer this over being behind a closed door and only hearing her voice. I'm starting to regret pushing Emilia away so much, but I don't go down that path. All I can do is focus on the here and now, and right now, Emilia and I are together.

And it feels right.

"I needed this." Emilia lifts her face to the sky, the sun shining down on her. "Fresh air. Holding hands with my husband. Life feels good."

"It didn't before?"

"I was lonely before. But as long as you stay right here, I don't think I'll be lonely again."

"You really like being around?" I can't hide the surprise in my voice.

She gently swats my arms as she laughs. "Yes, I like being around you, Marco. I wouldn't have pushed so hard for you to come out of your shell if I didn't. Why is that so surprising?"

"I guess I haven't met that many people who've genuinely enjoyed my company."

"What about Leo?"

"Leo works for me." We sit down on a bench. "He has to enjoy my company, or otherwise, I'd fire him."

She chuckles before tilting her head and giving me an inquisitive look. "But really? There's no one else who has ever said they like being around you? What about your parents?"

I snort. "Definitely not my parents."

"What were they like?"

"I'd rather not ruin a good day by talking about them."

"Ok." She rubs her hand over my back. "You do know you can tell me anything, right? I want you to share with me."

I sigh and grab her hand, planting a kiss on it. "I know. Just not that. Not today."

"All right. Well, I like you, Marco. You don't have to worry about that."

She really is lightness come to life. "I like you, too," I admit.

She smiles so brightly it's almost blinding. "Whew. Thank god for that."

I chuckle. "I don't really like most people. So, take the compliment."

She rests her head on my chin and looks at me with soft eyes. "Then, thank you. I think it's a good sign that we like each other."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. It speaks to a good marriage. For a while, I thought I wouldn't

have that.”

“Me, either,” I add softly.

“I know our marriage was a transaction, but I want us to work, Marco. I want it more than anything.”

“Why do you want it so bad?”

She looks away from me and out over the garden. “I think my uncle is beating my mom.”

Her words send a punch straight to my gut.

“I don’t have any proof,” she continues. “And my mom keeps denying it whenever I bring it up. But I think he’s hurting her, and there’s nothing she can do about it since she can’t kick him out. He’s taken over as the head of the Moretti family, at least until Antonio is old enough to take over. But something tells me Franco won’t let go of his new power any time soon.”

“I can stop working with him. That will strip him of power. Your mother would be able to get rid of him then.”

“No. That would only make Franco angry, and he’d come after you for breaking the alliance. He’d still be more powerful than my mother and twelve-year-old brother can be with or without power. And besides, if you break the alliance, you’d only end up hurting my family even more. My mom tells me that Franco’s been happier since working with you since it means more influence. If you stopped, I don’t know what he would do.”

A flash of my mother’s angry face as she slashes the garden shears down at me enters my mind. I sigh deeply as I wrap my arm around her. “I wish I could do something to make him stop. I think people who abuse other people deserve a special place in hell.”

She looks at me for a moment. “Who hurt you, Marco?” It comes out as a whisper.

I have to blink back the sudden tears that hit my eyes. “It’s nothing. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Ok. I understand. But I’m here.”

I take a moment to settle myself, and during that time, Emilia holds my hand like she’s trying to give me strength.

I turn to her and grab her face, pulling her in for a kiss.

“Marco,” she murmurs against my lips.

“I need you again,” I growl. I need to forget about the past. I need to be here in the present with my wife.

“Here?”

“Yes.” I pull her onto my lap, kissing her harder. Emilia doesn’t hesitate to throw her arms around my neck. She places her knees on either side of me, settling onto my lap, fitting into every crevice perfectly.

She gasps as I tear down the straps of her dress, exposing her bare chest, and kiss over her breasts. She tilts her head back, moaning my name. I capture one of her nipples in my mouth. Emilia grinds her hips down against mine.

“Take this off.” She tugs at the collar of my shirt. “I need to see you, Marco. You don’t have to hide from me.”

I hesitate a moment before nodding. Emilia undoes the buttons of my shirt and pushes it off me. She can see everything, scars and all. Her expression remains the same as she gently touches the biggest scar on my chest.

“You’re beautiful,” she says, leaning down to kiss the skin. I let out a sigh as I grip her hips tighter. “Oh, Marco.” She kisses up my chest to my neck and finally to my face. Her lips brush my scar, and I don’t pull away.

Our lips meet in a hungry kiss as we claw at each other. I shove her dress up and rip her panties down. Emilia kicks them away as she undoes my buckle before taking my cock out.

I wrap my arms around her as she does the same. Then I help her lower herself onto my cock. We both groan as our bodies meld together. Emilia circles her hips, making her inner walls clench around my cock. I hold her hips tightly as I help her find the right rhythm. We continue to kiss like we’re dying of thirst and the water is our lips.

I would give up everything in this world to be in this moment with Emilia forever. She accepts me, scars and all. But will she accept me for the one truth I haven’t revealed to her?

Emilia moans softly as her head tilts back, our pace increasing. Her hips grind harder against mine, making me growl. “Marco, Marco,” she says like a chant. “Marco.”

“Oh, Emilia,” I say into her neck, hugging her close.

My hands cup her breast as I kiss all over her throat. Her body shudders. She shifts her hips around, sinking deeper onto me. I grip her back, pulling her in closer, unable to stand any distance between us.

I kiss her again, our heavy breaths intermingling. As I jerk my hips up, Emilia cries out.

The air is full of the sounds of birds singing and our own moans of

pleasure.

The tension between us is growing and growing and growing ... until it finally snaps.

“Marco!” she gasps as she comes. I hold her tightly against myself as my orgasm hits me, and we groan together as we kiss sloppily. Emilia’s hair sticks to her sweaty face. She’s never looked more beautiful.

She slumps against me, resting her face in the crook of my neck. Her fingers glide over the scar on my chest, and it doesn’t bother me. Not at all.

We cling to each other like we might die without one another for a long time after. Emilia understands pain, just like I do. It binds us.

But can she accept all the pain I’ve been through and why I’ve made the choices I’ve made?

The thought that she might not terrifies me.

CHAPTER 17

Emilia

“I can’t believe it’s only been little over a month since we married,” I say, nuzzling my head into Marco’s chest. We’re lying in bed, naked. After our day in the garden, he’s been a lot more open with me. There’s a lightness to him that I’ve never seen.

He’s still keeping something from me; I know it. Marco hasn’t revealed how he got his scars, and I’m not sure he ever will. Honestly, I don’t really care anymore. Just having him be open to us and our marriage is good enough for me.

My fingertips glide over the scar on his chest, and he sighs deeply, melting into the mattress. “I know. It feels both like forever and like we just married yesterday.” His arm is behind his head, flexing his bicep. He’s so masculine that it almost intimidates me, but every piece that he unveils makes me like him more.

“What should we do today?” I plant a kiss on his chest.

“Hmmm, not today. I need to get work done. But tomorrow, I’m free.”

“All right.” I’m disappointed, but Marco needs to work, and I have to respect that. I just want him all to myself.

He gives me a kiss on the head before getting up and slipping on a button-down shirt. I watch as he changes into his suit, looking like the Mafia boss that he is.

“Why do you wear a suit every day when you work from home?”

He shrugs into his jacket. “Because it reminds me of how much power I wield, even if no one else sees me. I need to look the part.”

“I like it.”

“Yeah?” He gives me a peck on the lips.

I wrap my arm around his neck, keeping his lips planted to mine. After a moment, he pulls back with a groan. “I really do need to work.”

“I was just testing.”

He gives me that smile that I’m pretty sure no one else has seen before leaving the room. I look around Marco’s room once he’s gone, taking in the warm tones of the walls and floor mixed with the cool tones of his furniture. Just like the rest of the house, he has no pictures. In my bedroom in New York, every one of my walls is covered in photos of my family. I can respect that Marco has a different style than me, but I can’t help but wonder if it’s not a decorative choice that keeps him from putting photos up.

I eventually get out of bed and change into a simple blue summer dress. I text Gemma to see how she’s doing, and she responds with a quick message of how much she misses me and how she hates having to be the new parent in the family.

I frown as I read the text. *How’s Mom doing?* I ask. I wait impatiently as the three little dots as she types hover on my screen.

Weird.

I huff. *Give me something more Gemma,* I think. I call her, desperate for a better answer. “Weird how?” I ask after she answers.

“She’s been sick lately. Throwing up a lot.”

“She has a cold? How is that weird?”

“It’s not. What’s weird is that she’s barely left her room in a week. I remember, when I was younger and she’d have a cold, she wouldn’t even stop to rest. Now, she’s doing nothing but resting.”

“Are you making sure she’s ok?” I start pacing the room as anxiety settles in my chest.

“Yeah. I check on her, but she usually tells me to just leave her alone, so I do. I don’t need my head bitten off every few minutes.”

I let out a slow breath. “Ok. Just tell her I hope she gets better soon and that I love her.”

“I will, Em.”

“And how have you been? I know it isn’t easy becoming a second parent when you’ve never needed to.”

“It sucks. It made me realize just how much you did around here. I *might* have taken you for granted.”

“You realized that, did you?” I ask, smiling.

“Hey, I’m only sixteen. Cut me some slack.”

I was only a teenager myself when I had to become a second mom to my siblings. “How’s everyone else doing?”

“Antonio’s been more withdrawn lately. I try to get him to talk, but you know me. I’m not good at the mushy stuff like you are. He usually just yells at me to leave his room. Cecilia keeps talking about how she hopes Dad is in Heaven, and Mia is always saying how much she misses you. But otherwise, we’re getting on.”

“And Francesca?”

“Oh, right.”

I roll my eyes. Poor Francesca. Always the forgotten one in our family. If it weren’t for me, she could blow away on the wind and no one would notice.

“Just her normal, quiet self.”

“Ok, Gemma. Thanks.” I appreciate my sister helping out, but she’s not the most empathetic of people. After losing our dad, my siblings are probably struggling more than Gemma is letting on, and I can’t be there to help them. Now that things are improving between Marco and me, I’ll have to ask him if we can take a trip to New York soon so I can check on everyone.

“And Franco?” I ask.

“Still an ass, so there’s that.”

“Right. Just remember to be there for everyone, ok? Try for me.”

“I will, Em. I’m not a total idiot, you know.” At her words, tears prick at my eyes. Gemma is still so young and acts it, and now, she has to mature faster because I’m not there anymore. I wish she could just be a reckless teenager the rest of her life, but things change.

After we hang up, I pace around the house, feeling unsettled by Gemma’s words about our mom. I could call her, but Giulia would only tell me not to worry. There’s nothing I can do to help, and it’s driving me up the wall.

I walk outside to the garden, just to clear my head. It’s cloudy, with a call for rain. So much for sunny California. I make the most out of the weather by strolling along the path and soaking up the smell of the flowers. My eyes land on the bench where Marco and I made love, and I blush at the memory.

Things are finally looking up for us, and even though I’m still worried about my family, at least I don’t have to worry about my marriage any longer.

A loud crack in the air makes me jump. I look up just as rain begins to pelt down on me. I open my arms and let my head drop back, soaking it in, but it’s not quite as fun doing this by myself. Maybe I should convince him to

join me, skip work for the day, and have a dance in the rain.

I decide to head back inside when my eyes catch something on the ground. It's the garden shears. Marco took them from me when I found them in the shed and got cut. He must not have put them back. I don't want it to get rusty in the rain, so I pick it up and bring it back to the shed. The door creaks as it opens, and as I enter, that same musty smell from before hits me. I place the shears down on a shelf and take a moment to look around. The shed is full of boxes.

Curiosity gets the better of me, and I open one, peering inside. What I see makes me gasp.

It's photographs. Printed ones from a disposal camera. The eyes of the people in the photo are red, and I smile, remembering the pictures my mom took of me when I was a child. She preferred to use a camera rather than her phone because she liked to have the prints to put in scrapbooks.

I take a closer look at one photo, inspecting the young boy in it. He's probably around five, a huge smile on his face, his black hair falling into his eyes. I can recognize Marco, even as a child.

He didn't have a scar then, which makes me even more curious to learn how he got it.

I pick up another photo, one with a dark-haired woman holding a newborn baby. She's scowling at the camera, and the anger in her eyes makes me jerk back. This is an unhappy woman, but for what reason, I don't know.

I sit down and pull the box closer to me, digging through more photos. Pictures of young Marco appear throughout as he gets progressively older. As he gets older, there's one thing I notice: that smile I saw when he was five disappears, replaced with a frown. The woman makes more appearances in the photos as well. It becomes clear to me that she's Marco's mother.

There are none of his father \, I'm guessing because he's the one taking the pictures. I remember Marco telling me how he and his dad would go to his favorite Mexican restaurant when he was growing up. Whenever I tried to bring up his mother, Marco would always shut down.

Why does Marco not display these photos around his house? Why keep them in a dirty, musty shed, hidden away in boxes?

I grab the box and leave the shed, running through the rain back to the house. I settle at the dining table and finish going through the rest of it, looking at photos of Marco scowling on Christmas morning and Marco with his head down and Marco sticking his tongue at the camera.

The next photo I find is one of Marco and his mom. She's standing behind him with an expression that says she'd rather be anywhere else but there. Neither of them is looking at each other; it's as if they were forced to take the photo together. The sneer on his mom's face makes me shudder.

"What are you doing?"

Marco's voice makes me jump. For some reason, I stuff the photo back in the box, like I don't want to be caught with it in my hands.

"I found this ... out in the shed ..." I trail off as I see anger on Marco's face.

He storms forward and rips the box away from me, staring inside at it before tossing it to the side. "Why do you have that?" He points at the box.

"Uh ... as I said, I found it out in the shed. Nothing was locked away. I was just putting the shears back and decided to look."

"Those weren't yours to look at!" he shouts, startling me so much that I stand up and back away, almost tripping over my chair.

"I'm—I'm sorry, Marco. I didn't know."

"Why do you have to go digging into my life? Huh?" His eyes are flashing, and his nostrils are flared.

"Because you don't tell me anything," I snap back.

"I don't tell you anything? I've opened my heart to you!"

"Really? Then what are those photos about? Why didn't you ever tell me about them? Why do you have them in boxes left in your shed like some dirty secret?"

"You're just like the rest of them," he growls. "Too damn nosy. Why can't you just stop pushing for answers?"

"Why can't you just tell me?"

"Why can't you just stop being so fucking curious all the time? It's exhausting. Maybe I don't want to answer your every question. Maybe I don't trust you!"

I gasp, feeling my heart break at this very moment. Deep down, I know a part of me is in love with Marco. Now? It's shattering into pieces.

I slap him across the face before I can stop myself, and he stares at me with wide eyes. "You can push me away all you want, but you don't get to be mean to me."

He grabs my wrists, making me cry out in pain. "You don't get to hit me," he growls.

I struggle against his grip. "You're hurting me."

Marco immediately lets me go. His breathing is heavy, and he's looking at me like he wants to either kiss me or kill me. I hold still, waiting to see what he does next.

Marco growls low in his throat as he grabs my face and kisses me with so much passion, it almost hurts. Before I can react, he lifts me and sets me on the table. Our lips and tongues tangle together in a heady kiss. My hands scrabble at his shirt, ripping it open, the buttons scattering onto the ground.

Marco grunts as he shoves my dress up and rips my panties down. I don't stop him. His hands grip my waist so tightly, I know I'm going to bruise later. I reach between us and pull his erection out of his pants. Marco roughly touches me between my legs with his hand. I wince from the roughness, but the pleasure of his thumb on my nub feels too good to object. He grinds his hand against my folds, drawing a cry from me.

I grip his length tightly, squeezing it until Marco steps back. The look he gives me sends chills down my spine. With a growl, he grabs my hips and pulls me to the edge of the table, opening my legs wide. I gasp and lean back as he lines his erection up with my entrance before entering me with one forceful thrust.

Marco wraps his hand around my throat as I moan softly, not hurting me, but I can feel the weight of his hand there. He begins to thrust into me. I grab his wrist and dig my fingers into his skin, drawing blood. This spurs Marco on, and he increases his pace. I gasp with each thrust of his hips. Through the pain, there's intense pleasure, and the combination is an intoxicating mix.

I gasp as Marco nips at my neck, almost biting me. This rough, wild side to him is something I've never seen before. It's the side he usually reserves for his enemies. I know because I've seen the angry way he's spoken about Viktor. I'm Marco's enemy at this moment.

Every time his length pushes back inside me, I feel that tingle of pleasure, that sign that my orgasm is fast approaching. It scares me that I can come in a moment like this. What does that say about me?

Marco thrusts once more into me, sending me over the edge. My body trembles, but he continues the onslaught on my body and doesn't slow his pace. It's like he's using my body to teach me a lesson.

My body slumps onto the table, too tired to keep myself up. Marco's hands slam onto the table beside my head as he comes, growling deep within his throat. Our eyes meet in a heated gaze, both of us unsure what to do next.

The fight seems to leave Marco as he leans against me, burying his head

into my neck. I splay my fingers through his hair, feeling the need to comfort him despite his unwarranted anger toward me.

“Marco?” I whisper. “What was that?”

He stirs and pulls out of me, not looking at me as he rights his clothes. “Did I hurt you?” His voice is raspy and afraid.

“You scared me, but ...”

He huffs. “I really am the monster everyone thinks I am.”

I sit up, pushing my dress down, and reach out for him. “Marco, let’s talk about this.”

“There’s nothing to talk about.” The look he gives me is full of anguish. “I’m not worthy of you.” He leaves the room before I can stop him.

I get down on shaky legs, holding onto the table to keep myself from falling, before I walk over to the box still on the ground. It tipped over when Marco tossed it, and some of the photos are lying on the ground. The photo on top of the pile is the one I was looking at before Marco came in. I pick it up now, staring at Marco and his mom. Flipping it over, I see two names on the back.

Marco and Beatrice.

I stuff the photo back into the box, then pick the box up, walking back out to the shed to return it. For some reason, Marco reacts badly to these photos, and I’m pretty sure he wouldn’t want them around the house. I didn’t know they were off limits. It’s not like the shed was locked. But maybe I should have asked Marco about the photos before just taking the box inside like I owned it.

When I return inside, I’m almost crushed by how quiet the house is. The sounds of Camille humming to herself as she worked around the house is no longer there, and Marco has locked himself in his office again. I can’t bear the silence, so I hurry out the front door, stumbling down the steps, trying to catch my breath.

What was in those photos that would make Marco react like that?

The rain is still coming down strong, soaking my hair and dress, but the smell of the rain comforts me. It reminds me of home—my home in New York with the rest of my family. Not this mega-mansion in LA, where it’s cold and dark. I thought I could make this place my home, and for a moment, I saw it. I saw it all laid out in front of me—Marco and me having a baby, going to New York for Christmas, being a happy little family.

And now, that future is slipping away before I could really grasp it.

Marco is so determined to push me away. I don't know what to do. There's nothing for me to do if Marco refuses to let me in.

I bend over as a sob escapes me. I just need warmth. I need love. I need someone to take care of me for a change.

Footsteps slap on the wet pavement as someone approaches me. All I can see is their feet, wrapped in expensive-looking leather shoes. When I stand up, wiping away my tears. My eyes focus on the man standing before me.

Viktor Levin.

My heart skips a beat as I step back with a gasp. "What ..."

He smiles darkly at me, his handsome face made ugly by the danger lurking underneath the surface. "Hello, Emilia. Care to invite me in?"

CHAPTER 18

Marco

I was fourteen when I killed my mother.

After she tried killing me, I knew it was either her or me. Only one of us could survive. So, I waited until I was bigger and stronger than her. Puberty hit me, and it was just what I needed. I noticed the way Beatrice would eye me like I was a predator, someone she needed to keep a watch on. She kept her distance from me, in part because of my growing size and partly because of my father. After the drowning incident, he made a point of keeping us apart.

So, I waited for the day that I could seek justice.

Whenever Father had to go to work, he left a guard at home, mostly to prevent Beatrice from trying to hurt me again. Even though Father never asked me if I was ok afterward, he made an effort to ensure I wouldn't be hurt again like that. I think he finally woke up and realized how severe Beatrice's anger toward me was.

The guard was a much larger, more muscular man than even my father. His name was Garret. I'll always remember because I had to kill him, too.

Beatrice was in her room, doing god knew what. I never asked. I never cared. As long as she stayed away from me, she could be painting pictures of clowns or sucking on her own toes for all I cared. I just wanted her dead.

Garret was in the living room, smoking a cigarette, even though Father hated whenever someone smoked in his house. The lack of respect was evident, and I had to rectify that. I also needed to get rid of the one witness.

I held a weighted sculpture in my hand—one of my mother's favorites, the body of a headless woman. I never understood her obsession with sculptures. I didn't want creepy little people looking back at me, with or

without heads.

Garret had his back to me as I tip-toed up to him. He was facing the staircase, so there was no way for me to sneak upstairs to get to my mother. I was almost upon him when a creak in the floorboard made him turn around. His eyes widened as he saw me.

I hesitated for only a second before bringing the sculpture down on his head. Garret didn't fall over like I'd expected. Instead, he stumbled, standing up, and reached out for me. I wasn't going to let him get in the way of my going after Beatrice.

So, I ran up to him and slammed the sculpture against the back of his head. That time, he fell to his knees. And I hit him again. And again. And again.

Until he finally slumped to the ground and stopped moving.

I breathed heavily, staring at the dead body. Garret had been a nice man, one to give me a kind smile and a pat on the back. But he had to die. He would have stopped me from going after my mother, and I couldn't allow that.

It was the first time I'd killed somebody, and it wouldn't be the last.

I caught my appearance in the mirror above the fireplace. I looked like a wild, unhinged boy, someone not of that world. My mother had always made me feel like a monster, so I guessed she finally got her wish.

I was becoming the monster she'd always claimed me to be.

Holding the sculpture close to my chest, I walked upstairs, taking my time. I wanted it to last. I wanted her to suffer. I wanted her to know it was me.

The door creaked as I pushed it open. I looked into the room to see my mother lying on her bed, her arm strewn across her face. While I was being trained to become my father's heir, working hard in my fight classes and gun lessons, Beatrice could sleep all day. One more thing that I resented her for.

I approached the side of her bed, staring down at her, imagining all the ways I wanted her to die.

She must have sensed my presence because she dropped her arm and looked up at me, a frown already on her face. "What do you want?" The venom in her voice hurt me even still.

"I hate you," I spat out.

She scoffed, rolling her eyes. "What's new? You're a vile little boy, you know that?" Her eyes flicked to the bloody sculpture in my hand. "What are

you doing with that?” She grabbed it from me, a gasp escaping her as her hand came back with blood. “What did you do? This is my favorite sculpture. What did you do?” she screamed, swatting my arm with her hand.

I stood still. “I’m going to kill you, Mother.”

She blinked before jerking away from me, scrambling over the bed. She wasn’t going to get far. I was already stronger than her.

I grabbed her legs and dragged her toward me. She kicked and screamed, clawing at the blanket. I picked up the nearest pillow and shoved it onto her face. The bloodlust flowing through me didn’t even scare me. It felt right. It was *my* moment.

Beatrice kicked and flailed her arms, but I didn’t relent. With a grit of my teeth, I pushed down harder. A fast death would have been too nice for her. But a slow death was perfect. She’d know in her final minutes of life that I was the one who killed her.

Her vile little son who became a monster because of her abuse.

Beatrice eventually stopped moving, and once she did, I pulled the pillow away, breathing calmly as I looked down at her. Her face finally looked peaceful, not a frown or sneer in sight. I checked her pulse.

There was none.

Her sculpture was still in her hand. At least she can take that with her when she went to Hell.

Then it hit me.

I killed her. I killed my mother. Before I knew it, I was kneeling on the ground as great sobs escaped my body. Tears streamed down my face, blurring the sight of her body on the bed.

I stayed like that for a long time after until my tears dried up and my strength returned. Then, I walked downstairs and sat on the lowest step and waited for my father to arrive home.

When he did, he wasn’t prepared for what I’d done. He saw my smile and realization broke across his face before he ran upstairs to find his dead wife. He didn’t make a sound. After a few minutes, he came back down and stared at me.

“What did you do?”

“When I found her, she was already dead,” I told him. “There was nothing I could do. I think she killed Garret.”

Father’s eyes widened before he ran into the living room and found Garret’s dead body. I remained calm even after Father approached me and

looked at me with pure hatred. I knew I'd have to kill him, too, someday if I ever wanted to take over. But that day could wait. I had enough death on my hands for that day.

“You will never speak of this,” he said to me. “Never. It’s the one mercy I’m granting you. After all she did to you ...” He shook his head, pity crossing his face. “You’re a man now, Marco. I expect you to act like it.” And with that, he went into the kitchen, probably to get a glass of bourbon and pretend that what had just happened never happened.

Turned out, I didn’t have to kill my father. He died of a heart attack when I was twenty, giving me the chance to finally become the leader I knew I could be—one who could be in charge and control of who hurt me.

Now, I storm into my office, feeling the blood rushing through me. I never should have been rough with Emilia. She didn’t deserve it. But she found the photos, and I snapped.

None of this is her fault. It’s all mine. I’m a fucked-up man and I just ruined any chances of having a good marriage with my wife.

I slump into my chair, cradling my head in my hands. How could I have done that to her? Emilia didn’t know. I never told her about the abuse I suffered. It could be so easy. I could just walk out there and tell her everything and beg for forgiveness.

I can’t stand the idea of living the rest of my life without her light. She’s the only good thing I have. I can’t lose her.

I stand up to go after her when my eyes land on my monitor. The screen is broken into four parts, one angled at the living room, another at the dining room, one in the kitchen, and one outside at the front of the house. I watch as Emilia runs from the dining room to out the front door. My heart pangs as I see her fold in on herself, like she’s having trouble breathing.

I need to fix this.

Then, I see someone walking up the driveway, a lone figure. Viktor. He approaches Emilia, and she looks up, freezing.

Fuck.

She shakes her head after he says something to her, and then, he pulls out a gun out, pointing it at her.

I grab my gun and run.

I never thought Viktor would be bold enough to just show up at my house. No one is. Most people are terrified of me and would never even think to cross me. Viktor is a different breed of man. He's fearless. That's what makes him so damn dangerous.

I reach the foyer as Viktor and Emilia walk inside. His gun is pressed to Emilia's head, and my heart clenches at the sight of her sheer terror.

I lift my gun. "Let her go."

Viktor looks back and forth between us. "Oh, that's cute. You care for your wife. You're actually worried I'm going to kill her."

My hand clenches around my gun. "Let her go, Viktor. It's me you want."

"See, the thing is, Marco. I don't want you dead. At least, I didn't. I told you before, I just want to work with you. That's all. Let's make an alliance and no one has to get hurt." He presses the gun harder against Emilia's head, and she whimpers.

"You're going to be ok," I tell her.

"Marco, please," she whispers. The fear in her voice hurts me. All I want is to wrap my arms around her and make sure she's ok.

I turn back to Viktor. "Why would I want to work with you when you threaten my wife? Let her go, and then, we can talk."

"Hmmm, I think you're just going to shoot me if I let dear Emilia go. So, she's staying right here." Viktor wraps his arm around Emilia's stomach, drawing her back against him. She gasps.

"Fine. You want a deal? Here's a deal. You let me wife go, and I'll let you walk out of here alive. I'm a man of my word. I don't care if you live or die, Viktor. I just want you to stop pestering me about working together. You want power in New York? That's fine. Then take it. You don't need me. Just let Emilia go."

Viktor scrunches up his face before he shakes his head. "I don't like it. You're the king of LA. You are without anyone even knowing what you look like. Now, *that's* real power. That's what I want. I want to be a boogeyman just like you. I need your backing to achieve that, though. So, either you agree to make a deal with me, or I kill your lovely wife here. And then, I'll kill you since you'll just be dead weight to me. But I'd rather work with you than kill you. So, do we have a deal?"

"Marco, don't."

Emilia's words make me flinch. She's asking me to sacrifice her so I can

kill Viktor.

“Emilia ...” I meet her gaze. “I can’t.”

“Yes, you can. It’s ok. I’ve done my duty. Just make sure my family’s taken care of.”

“Oh, how sweet,” Viktor cuts in. “But this is getting boring. Make up your mind, Marco. I’m getting impatient.”

Emilia has given so much to be my wife, and I’ve taken it for granted. She’s gotten me to open up. She’s brought lightness and laughter to my life. She’s given me love, even if she’s never said it.

Now, it’s my turn to make sure I give back to her, too.

I lower my gun.

“Marco, no!”

I can’t look at Emilia as Viktor grins. “A deal, Marco?”

I swallow hard. “A deal, Viktor.”

“Good.” He shoves Emilia away so hard she falls to her knees. “Let’s shake on it.”

We approach each other, Viktor’s hand outstretched. I could make this deal. It would save Emilia’s life, and that’s what’s important to me.

But I can’t let Viktor continue to live. He threatened my wife, after all.

I raise my gun and fire. Viktor’s eyes widen as he jumps out of the way, his groan echoing in the room as the bullet hits his arm.

“Marco!” Emilia shouts, running toward me. In that split second, I look at her, seeing the bravery on her face as she comes for me. She really is something.

But taking my eye off Viktor means he has the chance to fire his weapon.

Emilia runs in front of me as the bullet goes off.

And hits her in the stomach.

She screams as she stumbles back, and I catch her, breaking her fall. Blood is already pooling around her abdomen.

Viktor laughs, getting up and shaking himself as if he didn’t just get shot. “Looks like your wife is the braver one. You have two options, Marco. Either come after me or save your wife.”

“Emilia,” I cry, pressing my hand against her stomach to stop the bleeding. It’s not doing much.

“What’s it going to be, Marco?” Viktor taunts.

I shoot him a glare. “Why not just kill me?”

He shrugs. “Because this is more fun.” He winks before walking out the

door. I could follow him, shoot him, kill him. But that would mean leaving Emilia alone, to suffer, to hurt, to die.

I'm not letting my wife go.

"Emilia, Emilia." I tap her cheek as her eyes flutter and her skin grows white. "Stay with me. You're going to be ok." I grab my phone and call 9-1-1. I rattle off my address to the responder. "My wife has been shot. Send someone. Now. Hurry." My last word comes out cracked as tears spill from my eyes. I haven't cried since I was a boy.

"Marco." Emilia lifts her finger to my cheek, catching a tear. "Why are you crying?"

"Because I can't lose you. I'm so sorry. I'm so, so sorry. I never should have pushed you away. I—I love you, Emilia." The moment the words pass my lips, I know how true they are.

"Marco ..."

"Don't say anything. Just stay awake and stay with me. That's all. Just stay with me."

"My family ..."

"Don't. Don't talk like that. You're going to survive. Your siblings will get to see you again. Focus on that. Focus on them."

Her eyes soften as a smile spreads across her face. "Ok, Marco." Then her eyes flutter shut, and her head falls back, her breathing becoming more ragged.

"Emilia. No, no. Don't do this." I cling to her even as the sirens fill the air and two paramedics come running into my house. They take her from me and bring her into an ambulance. I get in beside her, holding her hand. No one is separating me from my wife.

No one.

I'M in the waiting room of the hospital. I've been here for the past hour, ever since they took Emilia into surgery. I've been practically comatose, just staring at my feet, hoping she'll be ok.

"Mr. Aldi?" A man asks.

I look up. The man in question is short with balding hair and a slight gut. "Yes?"

“I’m Detective Rogers. I need to ask you a few questions about the shooting involving your wife.”

“Why?”

He blinks as he pulls out a notepad. “Uh, because a crime has been committed. And I need to find out who shot your wife.” He eyes my scar. I know what he’s thinking. *I shot my wife.*

I stand up to my full height, dwarfing the detective. “Do you know who I am?”

“You’re the man involved in a shooting.”

“No. Do you know *who* I am?”

“No, I’m afraid not.”

“Then I suggest you call Detective Garcia. He knows me. He can vouch for me.” Detective Garcia is on my payroll, and he’s not the only one. I have many police in my pocket for a day like today. Too bad they sent this strait-laced fucker.

Rogers frowns. “What does Detective Garcia have to do with anything?”

“He’ll tell you who I am.”

He sighs, muttering under his breath as he pulls out his phone. “Hey. Carlos. I have a Mr. Aldi here. He told me to call you.” Rogers is silent as Carlos talks on the other line. He keeps glancing over at me until his eyes widen, and he backs away from me. I smirk. “Thanks, Carlos.” He hangs up, giving me a wide berth. “Uh, no more questions. Mr. Aldi. I hope your wife is ok.” I give him a nod, watching as he practically runs away from me.

That’s real power, as Viktor said. I didn’t even have to lift a finger.

After the incident with the detective, it wakes me up, making me realize I should give Emilia’s a family a call. I know they’ll want to be here when she’s out of surgery.

My heart is pounding as I dial Giulia Moretti’s number. I’ve only ever spoken with her husband or Franco. I know how much she means to Emilia.

“Hello, Giulia?”

She sucks in a deep breath. “Yes. Who is this?”

“It’s Marco, Emilia’s husband. Emilia has been shot and is now in surgery. I know she’ll want to see you and everyone else once she’s out.”

“Oh my god. Yes. Ok. Ok. Um, I need to buy tickets. And find a place to stay. And ... uh. You said shot? Oh my god.”

“Giulia, I’ll pay for the tickets. And you can stay at my house. Just start heading for the airport. I’ll make sure you’re on the next flight out.”

“Oh, thank you. Thank you.” She hangs up.

And I’m left alone again.

Emilia is in surgery for hours. Long enough for her mom and siblings to get to LA and to the hospital. I recognize them from the wedding as they all pour into the waiting room. Giulia runs to the front desk, asking about her daughter. I stand up, waiting until it dawns on me—they don’t know what I look like.

I approach Giulia. “Hi, Mrs. Moretti.”

She eyes me suspiciously. “Yes?”

“I’m Marco.” I hold out my hand for her.

She blinks before blushing. “Yes. Right. I’m sorry. How is she?”

“She’s still in surgery. I don’t know anything else.”

“Right.” She pushes her purse strap higher up her shoulder. “Right. How did she get shot?”

“A man wanted to hurt me, so he used Emilia.”

The look of pure anguish on Giulia’s face makes my gut wrench. “You’re supposed to keep her safe. That’s what a husband does. She’s not supposed to be in surgery right now because she was shot.”

“I know. I know. I’m sorry.” It’s all I can say. Giulia’s eyes rake over my face, searching for something.

A young girl with brown hair approaches me, cutting off Giulia’s retort. “Why do you have a scar?”

“Mia!” Giulia scolds, turning away from me. “You can’t ask people that. You’re nine, now. You know better.”

“Sorry,” she squeaks, running back to her siblings, who are all looking at me with fascination. Especially the oldest one, Gemma. She looks so much like Emilia, it almost hurts.

“So, you’re Marco,” she says, walking up to me as Giulia sits beside Antonio. She runs a hand through his hair, pointedly not looking at me.

“I am.”

She nods slowly, eyeing me over. “I don’t care what you look like as long as you treat my sister well. Have you been treating her well?”

I smile lightly. I can see that Emilia’s bravery runs in the family. “I hope so. She means everything to me.”

Gemma grunts. “Good.” She points a finger at me, giving me a deadly glare. “Don’t break her heart.” She goes back to her family, sitting down by Mia.

I take a moment to observe Emilia's family. Her five younger siblings and mom, all of whom look exhausted and worried. The love they have for Emilia is clear. They're a real family.

Something I've never had.

Giulia glances down the hallway and tenses. I turn to look and see Franco, smiling at the family as he stops near me. I've only met Franco in person once before, on one of the meetings I had with Emilia's father, Riccardo. Knowing what Emilia told me about how he might be abusing her mom makes me see the fucker in a whole new light. Before, I thought he was just some weaselly guy, looking to take over his brother's job. Now, I see him for the bastard he is.

"Marco," Franco greets me, shaking my hand. His eyes flit to my scar and back to my eyes. He's a few inches shorter than me. "It's nice seeing you. All our business meetings over the phone just aren't the same compared to meeting in person."

"Hmmm, Franco, come here for a second." I motion him away from Emilia's family. He frowns but follows me. I lean in close to him, using my height to my advantage. "If you ever lay a hand on Giulia again, I'm going to personally kill you myself." I don't shout it. I don't hiss it. I just say it, calmly, like the fact it is.

Franco's eyes widen before he frowns. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You've upset my wife, and that doesn't make me happy. Just something to consider." I clap his back, making him jump before I walk back to Emilia's family. Franco is a new leader with men who were loyal to his brother, not him. I'm a leader with men loyal to me. Franco knows if he upsets me, it won't end well for him.

I remain standing and keep a slight distance from Emilia's family. I don't quite belong with them. I probably never will. I'm a man who's lived my life as a monster, ashamed and hidden away. I doubt anyone would want me in their family.

But as long as I have Emilia, that will be more than enough.

Now, I just need her to survive surgery. I don't think I'll survive if she doesn't.

My phone beeps with an incoming text message from an unknown sender.

Your housekeeper's body is buried in her own backyard. Maybe this will

make you consider another deal?

I blink before I bring the phone closer to me. Fucking Viktor. The gal. I try to kill him, he tries to kill me, and he thinks we can still make a truce.

He did one thing right, though. I was wondering where he put Camille's body. Now, I know. I'll send out some of my guys to retrieve her without John seeing, so he can finally have closure and bury all of her together.

I look up as someone walks in. The lead surgeon on Emilia's surgery approaches me. I stand as Giulia comes running over.

"I'm her mom," she explains.

The surgeon smiles. He's a middle-aged man with laugh lines around his eyes. "Your daughter is alive and doing well." Both Giulia and I let out a breath at the same time. "She hasn't woken up yet, but you can visit her if you want. Just one person for right now."

Both Giulia and I take a step before we stop.

"You go," I tell her, even though all I want is to see my wife. "If she wakes up, she'll be happy to see you."

Giulia barely spares me a glance before taking off down the hallway with the doctor. Emilia loves her family. The least I can do is make sure she gets to be with them when she wakes up.

CHAPTER 19

Emilia

I feel at peace. No pain, no fear, no anguish. Just the stillness of blackness. But I can't reside in blackness forever. Sooner or later, I have to wake up.

My eyes blink open. A multicolored tile ceiling is above me with dimmed lights, a beeping sound is ringing in my ears, and the smell of disinfectant is strong in my nostrils. A pressure on my hand makes me look over to see my mom sitting in a chair next to me, a huge smile on her face.

"Emilia?" she says in her soft voice.

I immediately want to cry.

"Oh, honey." Nothing else compares to the feeling of my mom's hug. "Honey, it's ok. You're ok. You just came out of surgery. You're all right."

"Mom?"

"Yeah, honey."

"You're really here?" I touch her arm to make sure, noticing the tub stuck into the vein of my hand.

She pulls back, cupping my cheek. "I'm really here." She wipes away my tears. "I came as soon as Marco called me. He made sure we got on the first flight to LA."

"He did?" Then I remember. Viktor, his gun, Marco's gun, the loud bang of a gunshot, and the pain of a bullet. "Is Marco ok?"

She looks confused. "Yes, he's ok." I let out a rough breath. "He's the reason you got hurt in the first place. A husband is supposed to protect his wife. Not get her shot. This wasn't what your dad wanted for you."

"Mom, Marco was trying to protect me. Viktor is a crazy man."

Mom tenses, her eyes widening. "Viktor? As in Viktor Levin?"

“Yes. Do you know him?”

“Your father had some run-ins with him in the past. He’s a bad man. I don’t like that Marco is caught up with him.”

“Marco didn’t ask for it. He’s tried to keep Viktor away. Don’t blame him for this.”

She inhales deeply, nodding. “You’re right. I’m just worried for you, that’s all.”

“I know. But I feel fine right now.”

“It’s probably the morphine they gave you.”

My eyes flit to the IV bag off to the side of the bed. “Huh. Yeah, that’s probably it.”

She smiles ruefully. “I’m sorry, hon.”

“Sorry for what?”

“For not being there for you when you needed it.” Her voice chokes and she drops her head. “I know I put a lot of responsibility on you, and it wasn’t fair. I just can’t lose you. I can’t.”

“Hey, Mom. Come here.” I pull her in close and kiss the top of her head. “You don’t need to worry. I’ll be fine.”

A choked laugh escapes her. “You’re not supposed to be comforting me right now.” She pulls back, giving me a kiss on my head this time. “I’m supposed to be comforting you.”

She’s right. I’m just so used to giving my all to everyone else that I don’t know how to accept it from other people.

“I would like to be comforted,” I admit.

She squeezes my hand. “You got it.” A startled look crosses her face, and she stands up so fast the chair behind her topples over as she runs into the bathroom. I can hear her throw up.

“Mom?” I can barely move right now to get up. “Mom?”

The toilet flushes, the faucet turns on, and then she’s coming back out, a look of chagrin on her face. “Sorry about that.”

“Are you still sick? Gemma told me you have a cold.”

She picks the chair back up and sits down on it with a slump. “Honey, I don’t have a cold.” She just looks at me.

Then I realize.

“You’re pregnant,” I whisper.

Tears hit her eyes before she nods. My mom is still young, only in her late thirties. It’s completely possible, yet I never even considered it.

I'm quiet as I let my mom compose herself, processing what I just found out. "Is it ..."

"It's your father's," she says quickly.

"Oh."

"It has to be. It's only been a little over a month since he passed. We were still intimate even in his final days." She nods like she's trying to convince herself. "Yes, it has to be your father's."

I slowly reach out to take her hand. "I believe you. But ... did Franco ..."

A look of fear passes her face before she looks away. "I'm fine. It's your father's. That's what matters."

"But Dad was sick before he passed."

"It can't be Franco's," she whispers angrily. "It can't be."

"Mom, you need to tell me. Did he ..." I swallow hard. "Did he hurt you?" I can't say the word. God, I can't say it.

She leans against me, breathing heavily as she starts to cry.

Her tears tell me everything I need to know. "Oh, Mom."

"You can't tell anyone," she whispers into my ear. When I start to object, she cuts me off. "You can't, Emilia. It would ruin my reputation. It could ruin the kids' reputation. Your sisters will all have to marry when they get older, and I don't want to ruin their chances. Don't even say it. This baby inside me is your father's. I have to believe it. Say you believe it, too."

"I believe it," I say sadly. "Whatever you want, Mom. I just need you to be safe."

She sits back, giving me a small smile. "That's what I need from you, too."

"Then, it's a promise. We both have to stay safe from now on."

The door opens, startling both of us. The next thing I know, I'm surrounded by my siblings.

"Em," Gemma says, hugging me. "Thank god, you're ok."

"I am, too. Now, let me get a hug from everyone else." Gemma steps back and lets Mia rush into my arms. "My little bean," I say into her brown hair, so much like our father's. "I'm ok." She snuffles before stepping back, nodding.

Cecilia hugs me next, telling me that she didn't stop praying for me.

"You didn't, huh?"

She shakes her head, holding up the cross around her neck. "No. I never stopped. I prayed that Dad would help you get through it." Her words make

Mom cry all over again.

Antonio puts on a brave face as he hugs me, but the minute I wrap my arms around him, he begins to cry, too. “It’s ok,” I tell him. “It’s ok, Antonio.” When he steps back, I notice a bruise on his neck. “What happened there?”

He shrugs, not quite meeting my eyes. “Franco has me training. It’s no big deal.”

God, I could kill Franco. I’ve never felt the urge to hurt someone as much as I’ve wanted to hurt him. But I take in a deep breath and try to remain calm. There’s no way I can help my siblings if I throw a fit.

“Just tell Franco to be more careful when training you, ok?”

“Em, I’m twelve. I need to learn how to fight for when I’m the boss. It’s just how it is. Franco’s teaching me to be a man.”

His words pierce my heart with sadness. “Just don’t grow up too fast, ok?”

Francesca hangs back, her head down.

“Fran?” I hold my hand out to her, and to my surprise, she lets out a cry and runs to me, hugging me tightly. She usually never shows much emotion. “Are you ok?”

I can feel her nod against my neck. “I’m ok. Are you?”

I give her a smile only she can see. “Yeah. I will be. Now that you guys are here. How are you holding up?”

“I asked Mom if we could go to the Museum of Contemporary Art here once you’re better, but she said no.”

“Well, I say you can go. I’ll go with you once I’m healed. It’s a date.”

The smile that spreads across Francesca’s face warms my heart. She steps back. I look over all my siblings, from children to teenagers. We’ve all had to grow up so fast. While I have no clue what any of their futures hold, I know I’ll always be there for them. My eyes land on Mom and flit down to her stomach. I’ll even be there for the baby that hasn’t been born yet, no matter how it was conceived.

A knock on the door makes my heart skip a beat. I look over, hoping to see Marco. Instead, I see Franco’s face on the other side of the glass. He comes in without my permission, and the moment he steps inside, it’s like all the joy in the room is zapped into nothingness.

“Nice to see you’re awake, Emilia. I don’t know what your mom and siblings were going to do if you died.”

I smile tightly. “Then, it’s a good thing I didn’t.”

“Of course. I had a chance to talk to your husband in the waiting room. Tell him to be careful.”

I frown. What does he mean by that?

Franco gives me one more nod before turning to my mom. “We should be heading to the hotel.”

“No. I’m staying with my daughter.”

Franco’s jaw tenses. “Giulia, come with me.”

“She’s not going anywhere with you.” Marco’s voice fills the room. I gasp as he enters, looking strong and handsome. “My wife’s family will be staying at our house for the next few weeks, at least until Emilia is healed. I suggest you go to your hotel room tonight, Franco, and stay there.”

Franco looks around the room, like he’s expecting us to come to his aid. But no one does. He squares off with Marco. “I’m not a man you want to mess with, Marco.”

“No, Franco. *I’m* not a man you want to mess with.”

My breath catches as I watch this showdown. I’ve never seen Marco in complete Mafia boss action before. His stance, his voice, and his dark expression, all of it speaks to the power he has. He doesn’t need to show it off like Franco does. Marco just is.

Franco scoffs, but Marco just stares him down until Franco decides to leave without another word.

The room is filled with awkwardness as my siblings look at Marco with awe and uncomfortableness. The tension is finally broken by Mia. “Your husband has a funny scar. I told him so.”

“Mia,” I say, looking between my nine-year-old sister and my husband. “That’s not nice.”

“No, I think a funny scar is cool. It’s pretty, in a way.”

“I think it looks badass,” Antonio adds, making everyone in the room laugh.

“Language, young man,” Mom reminds him, not quite scolding. She could never scold her favorite child.

I look at Marco. “Well, I think Marco’s scar is beautiful.” His eyes widen a fraction before softening, and he gives me a small smile.

Mom clears her throat. “Guys, let’s give Emilia some time with Marco.” She turns to me. “We’ll be in the waiting room if you need us.” With Gemma’s help, they usher the rest of the kids out of the room, leaving just

Marco and me behind.

We stare at each other for a moment before Marco rushes to my side, grabbing my hand and cupping my face. “You’re alive.”

I lean into his hand. “I am. I don’t think I’d be talking right now if I weren’t.”

He chuckles before wrapping his sturdy, big arms around me. “I thought you were going to die there for a moment, and it would be because of me.”

“No,” I say into his neck. “It’s not your fault. It’s Viktor’s. You saved me, Marco. You tried to sacrifice yourself for me by making a deal with Viktor. No one has ever put me first like that before.”

“No one’s ever took a bullet for me before.”

I plant a kiss on his cheek, which makes him suck in a breath. “Then, I guess we’re even.” He pulls back, still keeping his hands on me.

“Emilia—”

“Did you mean it?” I ask before I can stop myself, cutting him off.

He frowns. “Mean what?”

“That you love me.”

He inhales sharply before looking away. “Emilia, there’s something I need to tell you. Before anything else can happen, there’s something I’ve never told you, never told anyone. You need to know. You have a right to know who you’re married to.”

“What is it?” My heart begins beating faster, and it feels like a weight has dropped right onto my stomach.

“My mother abused me,” he says in one breath like he needs to get it out before he can convince himself to stop. “She’s the one ... who gave me my scars.”

“Marco ...”

He holds up a hand. “Just—just let me say this. She hated me my entire life. Nothing I could do would ever be good enough. She’d tell me that I was ... unlovable.” My heart is breaking for him. I can see the struggle on his face as he continues to talk. “When she started abusing me, I was ten. She took the garden shears, and ...” He motions toward his scar as I gasp and cover my mouth with my hand. “There was nothing I could do to stop it. My father never stepped in. He’d usually tell me to suck it up and learn how to be a man. I was on my own.”

“And then,” he continues, “Beatrice, my mother, tried to drown me in the pool.”

“Marco,” I say. “Oh my god.”

He shakes his head like he’s trying to rid himself of the memories. “I remember her holding me down, and I knew I was going to die. And then my father stopped her. That was something, at least. But he didn’t do it because he loved me. He saved my life because he didn’t want his heir dying.” His voice becomes bitter. “I put up with the abuse for *years*.” He lowers his head to the bed, his shoulders shaking from silent tears. I rest my hand on the back of his head, hoping he senses my comfort.

“Marco, you know I would never judge you for any of this. You never have to hide things like this from me.”

“That’s not only it, Emilia.” He lifts his head, staring at me with those intense dark eyes of his. “That’s not the part I’m worried about.”

I stay silent, waiting for him to continue.

“I—I couldn’t take it any longer. So, one day, I ... killed her.”

I swallow hard, still not saying anything.

“I don’t regret it, Emilia. I don’t regret it at all. But the darkness inside me scares me. I don’t want you to hate me for it.”

It takes me a few moments to find my voice again. “I don’t hate you.”

He lets out a sound, a mix between a cry and sob of relief as he bows his head again.

“Marco, I don’t hate you at all. You were just a kid. What your mother did to you was horrible. You can’t be blamed for pushing back. I don’t blame you.”

“You don’t?” He meets my gaze again.

“No. I understand how you feel. If I could kill Franco, I would get him out of our lives in a heartbeat.”

“I told him to leave your mom alone. Otherwise, I’d kill him myself.”

“You did?” He nods, almost shyly. “But you hate violence.”

“Only against innocent people.”

Everything Marco just told me explains so much about him—from his aversion to violence to the lack of pictures in his house.

I press my forehead to his. “Marco, your mom was wrong. You’re not unlovable because ...” I inhale deeply. “I love you.”

The surprise on his face almost saddens me. “I meant it when I said it. I love you, Emilia. You’re my light.”

Our lips meet in a simple kiss that grows deeper by the second. When we part, I give him a large smile. “Let’s just be happy, ok?”

He chuckles. “You make it sound easy.”

“I have an idea. Let’s make new memories, together. We can put pictures of us on our walls. Pictures of my family. You’re a part of it now. We should surround ourselves in love, not hide in the darkness. And when we start a family of our own someday, we can add the pictures of our children to the walls.”

Marco grabs my face and kisses me until I’m breathless. “It sounds like a plan.”

CHAPTER 20

Emilia

“Welcome home,” Marco says as he helps me walk over the threshold. Days later, I’ve finally been released from the hospital. My mom and siblings are waiting in the foyer, clapping and cheering as I enter. “Thanks everyone,” I say, smiling so much my cheeks hurt.

“Here, let me help you to the couch.” Marco keeps his hand on my back as we head for the living room.

“I’m not a complete invalid,” I tell him as I sit down, the rest of my family crowding around. “But I appreciate the help.”

Mom is already fluffing a pillow for me and placing it under my feet. “We’re all here to help while you heal. You need anything, just ask.”

“But I am not getting you food, just so you know,” Gemma says, pointing her finger at me. “I have some standards.”

I laugh as Mia snuggles in next to me. “Duly noted.”

“What was it like to get shot?”

“Antonio,” Mom warns. “Behave, young man.”

He looks sheepish for just a moment before a gleeful expression crosses his face. “So, what was it like?”

I swat at his arm as I reply, “Not fun. I don’t want you to ever have to experience that.”

“I won’t. I have Dad protecting me.” He holds up the pendant around his neck. “I haven’t taken it off once.”

Cecilia scrunches up her nose. “Not even to shower?”

“Nope.” Antonio looks too pleased with himself.

“Eww,” Mia squeals, making everyone laugh. I pull her in closer to me, rubbing her arm. Being surrounded by my family is the best way for me to heal, though I can’t help the slight bitterness at knowing they’ll have to return to New York in a few weeks. Their home is there, and my home is ... here, in LA, with Marco.

My eyes land on him as he stands in the corner, away from my family. His discomfort is clear. He’s never experienced a warm and loving family before. Well, that’s going to change.

“Marco,” I call out, patting the seat next to me. “Come join me. I want you at my side.”

It’s almost funny seeing the big bad boogeyman himself look embarrassed as he crosses the living room to sit beside me. “I didn’t want to intrude,” he says softly to me.

“You’re not intruding. Not one bit. You’re my family, which means everyone in this room is your family, too. Hey, guys. What do you think of your brother-in-law?”

“I think he’s cool,” Antonio says while poking Cecilia in the arm, annoying her. She swats at him.

Gemma wedges herself between Marco and me. “He saved your life, which makes him cool in my book.” She looks straight at Marco, and he looks back, a wary expression on his face. “I guess you can be my new brother.”

He nods. “I appreciate that, Gemma. I know how much you mean to Emilia.” He turns to the room. “How much you all mean to her. I’m happy she has you.”

“I’m happy she has *you*,” Mom says. “Emilia needs someone to care for her. I expect you to do that.”

“Every damn day, trust me.”

Cecilia gasps. “He said a bad word.”

“You said a bad word,” Antonio fires back.

She shoves him. “You said a bad word.”

He nudges her back. “No, *you* said a bad word.” And on and on they go.

“They’ll be at it for a while,” I tell Marco, making him chuckle. Francesca sits on the floor by me, silently offering me her strength. I squeeze her shoulder, and she smiles back.

The look of pure contentment on Marco’s face warms my heart. I reach around Gemma to grab his hand, holding on tight with all my strength. I

never want this happiness to end.

Mom stands up so fast that I blink in surprise. “I have an announcement to make.” She gives me a look, and I realize what she’s about to say. “I’m pregnant.”

Silence.

Then, “Wait. *What?*” Of course, it’s Gemma.

“I’m pregnant. I’m about a month along, which means I got pregnant right before your father passed away. But I’m having a baby. You guys will soon have another brother or sister running around.”

I stay silent, knowing Mom would want me to. She doesn’t want the possible truth to come out—that this baby may very well be Franco’s child.

Mia starts clapping and smiling, and soon, everyone else is, too, even though Gemma looks skeptical, Antonio looks like he’d rather be anywhere else, and Marco looks like he’s not sure if he should join in on the merriment.

Mom looks at me, seeking reassurance. I give her a small smile, and it seems to soothe her. Even in my tired, sore state, I still need to offer comfort where I can.

Some things will never change. But now, I have a husband who can be there for me, one who has saved my life and loves me, and that makes all the difference in the world.

“THERE.” I step back, admiring the photo on the wall. “What do you think?”

Marco wraps his arms around me, resting his chin on my shoulder. “I think it looks like it belongs. Right at home.”

The photo is one we took of all of us—Marco, my mom and siblings, and me before they left for New York. I wanted a way to always remember how they helped me while I was still healing. It was a bittersweet day as we said goodbye, but I suggested the photo, and that cheered everyone’s spirits up.

The photo now resides in the foyer entrance, so it’s the first thing you see when you step inside and the last thing you see before you leave. A family.

I lean against Marco. “I already miss them.”

“I know. I miss them, too.”

“You do, huh?”

“Yeah. I’ve never been welcomed like that before. You have an amazing

family, Emilia.”

“We have an amazing family.”

A knock on the door makes us break apart. Leo saunters in after Marco opens the door, giving me a respectable nod now that he knows he can't flirt with me without getting into trouble with Marco. Leo's eyes land on the photo.

“Huh, nice. I've never seen any photos up anywhere. It's a good look.” He inches closer to the photo and points at Gemma. “Good looking sister you have there, Emilia.”

“She's sixteen.”

Leo jerks back. “Right. Never mind. I take that back. I might love seducing a woman, but I don't go for that minor shit.”

“That's something,” I mutter.

Leo just laughs before turning to Marco. “So, I have some news on Viktor.”

“What?” Marco crosses his arms, his warm expression turning cold.

“He's back in New York. Other than that, I don't know what his plan is going forward. He's a crazy motherfucker. Who knows what he'll do next.”

“As long as he stays away, I don't care. But he's not going to terrorize my family.” Marco pulls me against him, and I rest my head on his arm.

“Ok. Then, we'll just leave him be. If he starts anything, we can go after him.” Leo cracks his knuckles. “I'd love a shot at that psycho.”

“Is that all, Leo?”

“Yep. Just wanted to deliver the good news in person and see how Emilia was doing.” Leo turns to me. “I know you don't like me.”

“Whatever gave you that idea?”

“Har-har. But I'm glad you're ok.”

“Thanks,” I say warily.

“And if you ever get tired of this guy, I'm always available.” And there it is.

“Goodbye, Leo.” I nudge him toward the door.

“I'm just saying,” he calls out as I shut the door on him.

“Your second in command is going to be a problem,” I tell Marco.

“Leo's a good employee. He's just a playboy when it comes to women.”

“That's what has me worried.”

Marco chuckles as he pulls me in close, giving me a peck on the lips. “Don't even think about him. From now on, it's just us.”

“No more hiding?”

“No more hiding,” he promises. “You know all my secrets. You’ve seen all of me. You have *me*, Emilia.”

“And that’s all I need.”

I TAKE a deep breath as I smooth my hands down the silky red dress that hugs my body like a dream. Tonight is the night. Marco and I haven’t been intimate since I got hurt since he wanted my body to be completely healed. The last time we had sex, it was rough and violent. We’ve been through so much since then, but I’m still a little nervous.

I want tonight to be perfect.

I enter the ballroom where Marco and I got married. I haven’t been inside here since. It’s just as glorious and beautiful as I remember, and it’s even more so now that my husband is standing in the middle of it, looking handsome in a black suit, not hiding behind some privacy screen any longer. I see him, scars and all.

Soft music floats out of the speakers.

Marco holds out his hand to me as I approach. “Can I have this dance?”

“Of course.”

He pulls me into his arms, and we dance around the ballroom, moving in tandem to the music. “I know we never got a first dance, and I wanted to rectify that,” As he speaks, I rest my head on his chest, feeling his heartbeat. “I also know you love a good dance party.”

“I *do* love a good dance party.”

Marco looks down at me with so much love in his eyes, it almost hurts. The man behind the monster. My husband.

We’re silent as we dance, content to just be in each other’s arms. But when Marco begins to roam his hands up and down my back, dancing is the last thing on my mind.

The moment I lift my head from his chest, Marco encompasses my lips with his. The kiss starts off sweet and gentle before filling with passion and heat. We stop dancing, and I wrap my arms around his neck, drawing him in closer while Marco tightens his hands on my hips. A flash of arousal washes through me. I just want to be with my husband.

Marco lifts me into his arms and carries me to our bedroom, bridal style. He lays me on the bed, roaming his eyes over me, making me feel loved and beautiful. This isn't just about sex. It's about complete and utter love.

With his eyes still on me, Marco shrugs out of his jacket before unbuttoning his shirt and letting it drop to the ground. He's no longer hiding from me.

I gasp when he grabs my legs and pulls me to the edge of the bed and takes my shoes off so slowly that I begin to tremble. He roams his hands up my legs, clutching my thighs, and letting out a soft sigh, I melt into the mattress.

Marco helps me take off my dress, carefully laying it on the ground before coming back to me. His eyes darken as he sweeps them over my body. "Emilia," he growls before kissing me again as he lays himself on top of me. I dig my hands into his back, drawing him closer.

The feeling of Marco's skin against my skin is intoxicating and sublime. I could trace every inch of him and still discover more.

I arch my back as he kisses down my throat, taking my bra off in the process. He spends time pleasuring my breasts, making me squirm and sigh. "Oh, Marco." My hands grip the back of his head. "Marco."

He gives my breasts one last kiss each before kissing down my stomach. His lips hover over the spot where my surgery scar remains before he moves farther down. When he rips my panties off, I moan. Parting my legs, Marco lowers his head and wraps his lips around my sensitive nub. I cry out, clenching my legs around his head. Marco is relentless in his pleasure of my body. He licks and kisses me all over from my folds to my nub. I can barely take the sensation of it all.

"Marco, please." My body aches for him. Everything inside me aches for him.

He shows me mercy and pulls back, standing up to take his pants off. He's naked before me, looking more handsome than I've ever seen him. Marco is all muscle and body hair and masculinity. A throb pulses through my core.

Marco lowers himself back on top of me, and I wrap my legs around his waist. We kiss deeply as he lines his erection up to my entrance. "Are you ready?"

"I'm ready."

He enters me so slowly that I could almost cry. I clutch at his body while

he encircles my body with his arms.

And then, we begin to move.

This isn't the rough thrusting of an aggressive act of fucking. This is a circle of the hips of sweet lovemaking.

I can tell Marco is being extra careful after I got hurt and possibly because of what we did last time. But I need him to know that I'm not a fragile flower that can be so easily broken.

Using my legs, I draw him closer and kiss him harder. "Don't hold back."

This spurs Marco on as he gives me more intensity from his kiss to his hips. The feeling of him deep inside me makes me shiver. I'm already so close to orgasming from his mouth on me that every time his length brushes that sweet spot within me, I gasp.

We cling to each other, our bodies moving in perfect rhythm. I bury my head in his neck, nipping at his skin. He growls and picks up his pace.

Every thrust of his hips against mine brings me closer. "Marco," I begin to chant over and over. He clutches me tighter, roaming his hands up and down the side of my body.

"Emilia, I love you," he growls, pressing his head to mine.

"I love you, too," I gasp out. "Oh!"

With one more thrust, I come. Marco holds me close as I ride out my orgasm, my body shuddering and shivering. Marco soon follows me, his release filling me.

He rests his head against mine, still inside me, as we catch our breath. Our skin is sweaty, and the room is filled with our musk. It's intimate.

Marco finally pulls out of me and slumps onto the mattress, looking up at the ceiling with awe written over his face.

"That good, huh?" I tease, resting my head on his chest.

He chuckles. "It was. I was just thinking how did I ever get so lucky as to have you in my life?"

"Funny. I was just thinking the same thing."

Marco pulls me closer against him as he leans down and runs his thumb over my new scar.

"We're matching now," I tell him. "We both have scars."

"Yours is a badge of honor."

"So are yours."

Marco looks away from me. "I'm not sure about that."

"Well, I am." I grip his chin and turn him back to me. "Marco, I know

that the pain you have from your mother won't go away overnight. But you don't need to feel ashamed. You are so strong to survive what you went through. Your scars *are* badges of honor. Remember that."

He nods, looking uncertain but hopeful. "With you by my side, it'll be easier to remember that."

"Good. Then let's look to the future. No more hiding in the past."

"I agree." A sneaky smile spreads across his lips. "And I have an idea of how we can look to the future."

"Oh? And what's that?"

"This." Marco pulls me on top of him, making me laugh as he peppers kisses all over my face and neck.

And we spend the rest of the night, lost in each other's arms, working on the future—a future child, a future with love, and a future as a family.

The End

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His duty was to choose me but his desire claimed me...

I am married off to the head of the Bratva, Maxim Petrov.

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I'm thrust into an entirely new world:

One filled without mercy.

My new husband is a cold, ruthless man.

My body is consumed by him,

While my heart knows he could break it.

I want to love him,

But he's made it difficult.

I try to break through the ice surrounding his heart.

Can I do it in time to save our marriage?

If I can't,

Both me and my husband will be bound together forever...

Stuck in a marriage without love.

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SNEAK PEEK
Chapter One

MAXIM

I watch as my father's body is lowered into the ground, listening to the cries around me. My hands clench at my sides. Most of those cries are fake. My father wasn't the most loved man—in fact, more people hated than loved him. But it's a mafia funeral.

Everything is for show.

I glance around at the guests attending my father's funeral. Over a hundred people showed, probably to get in my good graces. With my father gone, I'm head of the Bratva now.

The men who used to work for my father now work for me. I see some of them nod at me, offering pitying looks. Others exchange secretive glances as if I can't see. We all know what's about to happen.

A bloodbath.

Even though I'm the rightful heir to the Bratva in New York, many of my father's men will want to contest it. The majority of them will fall in line the minute I'm officially made the boss, but I know—and they know—some of them will try to take over.

A few might even try to kill me.

I have to be on my guard and take ownership of the Bratva as soon as this funeral is over, claiming my rightful place.

I won't get killed because my father unexpectedly died at fifty-eight. He should have had many more years left. But drinking and sleeping around will take a toll on the body. He died in the arms of one of his many mistresses, much to my mother's shame, Vasilisa.

She's standing beside me, her head held high, no tears in her eyes. With her cool blonde hair and startling blue eyes, my mother is a fierce-looking woman. She won't cry for anyone, which I learned growing up. She especially won't cry for the man who left her with unsteady leadership and fucked another woman in her bedroom.

I'm proud of her, but I know my mother—she's never needed anyone's approval. She'll make it clear how she feels about you, whether you like it or not.

A smaller hand grips my own. I glance down at my baby sister, Kira. She

has our mother's looks while I take after my father with his dark hair and deep blue eyes.

At only fifteen, Kira will feel the death of our father the hardest. She looks up at me, tears leaking from her eyes, and I offer her a small smile. I can't show any affection to my siblings in public, not in front of the men who expect me to be a ruthless leader. But Kira needs my support as best as I can offer it.

I squeeze her hand, hoping she finds some comfort in it.

Elena, my other sister, sighs as she watches the casket disappear. She's the spitting image of our mother and a lot like her, too—cold and reserved. The Ice Princess of the Bratva, as she's nicknamed.

At her side is our brother, Alexei. He wipes at his eyes, trying to look tough. Good. He needs to learn that Bratva men don't show their emotion in public. If something were to ever happen to me, Alexei would be next in line to take over. I can't have him breaking down, even though it's our father's funeral. There's no mercy within the mafia.

It's something I had to learn the hard way growing up.

Quick, hard fists from my father. I had bruises throughout most of my childhood. Eventually, I got used to them, though my father stopped trying to hurt me after I got bigger and stronger. I was no longer weak. Now, at thirty, I haven't let anyone hit me in over ten years. It's a good feeling. A strong feeling.

Once the casket is fully lowered into the ground and everyone is dispersing to head to the reception, I take one last look around at everyone who showed up. I recognize many of the men since they've attended meetings with my father for years. Though, I don't recognize their families. Now that I'll be the leader of the Bratva, I need to start memorizing faces and names. I need to know who's on my side and who'll cause trouble.

A flash of red catches my eye.

A younger woman is standing next to an older man, her eyes downcast. Her features are stunning, elegant, and refined. There's a poise to her I find intriguing. Red hair frames her face so perfectly, and I feel the urge to wrap my hands in it.

The older man, George Smirnoff, one of my father's most trusted employees, nudges her. She opens her eyes and nods, following George as he walks away.

Still gripping Kira's hand, I turn away to lead my family to our car. Once

inside, Elena says, "I'm glad that's over with."

Alexei shoots her a glare. "He was our father. Show some respect."

Elena doesn't dignify Alexei's comment. Instead, she looks out the window, silent and icy as always.

"Don't snap at your sister," our mother scolds as the driver starts the car and takes off. We're all in the backseat, Kira, our mother, and me on one seat, with Elena and Alexei across from us. "You're a Petrov. We don't show our emotions, and we certainly don't show it in front of others."

Alexei scowls, crossing his arms. "So sue me for crying at our dad's funeral."

"You'll learn in time," I say. Kira rests her head on my shoulder, sniffing. I can feel my jacket shoulder grow wet.

Alexei nods at Kira. "She gets to cry."

"She's fifteen," I remind him. "You're twenty-three. And you might have to rule someday. You can't ever show weakness."

"It's not fucking fair," he mutters,

Our mother snaps, "Language." Alexei fixes his jacket, not responding to her.

I look down at Kira. "How are you doing?"

She wipes her eyes, not meeting my gaze. "I'll be fine."

I put a finger under her chin, lifting her face. My thumb wipes one of her tears away, and she makes a face. "It's all right to be sad."

"Is it?" she asks.

I smile softly at her. "For you, it is."

Alexei mutters under his breath, rolling his eyes. "You baby her."

I ignore him, focusing on Kira. "Everything will be all right. I'll take care of you."

"You've already been taking care of me," she says, lowering her voice so Mother can't hear. "More than father ever did."

Our father hit Alexei and me but never laid a hand on Elena or Kira. He had other ways to control them growing up, like never letting them leave the house unsupervised. They've been kept on tight leashes their entire lives. I know that's why Elena isn't upset about our father's death. At twenty-five, she's never been allowed to get married, while most girls in the Bratva are married off by the time they're twenty. She's never seen freedom. I was too young to protect her growing up.

But for Kira, I made sure to take the brunt of our father's attention, so he

couldn't hurt her in the same way. It also helped that Kira was my parents' miracle baby, which explains why she's so much younger than the rest of us.

I had the strength to take care of her, and I've made sure to do so ever since she was born.

Alexei thinks I spoil her, but she's my baby sister. I can't help it.

The rest of the car ride is filled with strained tension. It's like a bubble popping when we reach the reception hall. Alexei scrambles out of the car while I help my mother and sisters out. A Bratva man is ruthless and cold but also respectful when it comes to the women in his life.

Alexei doesn't head inside. Instead, he walks away from the reception hall, going down the street.

"I'll meet you inside," I murmur to my mother. She glances at Alexei, pursing her lips before nodding, then ushers Elena and Kira to follow her inside.

I walk fast to catch up to Alexei and grab his arm to stop him. "Where do you think you're going?"

He rips his arm out of my hold. "Does it matter?" His blue eyes flash in anger. He also got out father's looks—dark and menacing. Everyone commented on the Petrov children growing up. Half of them are dark, the other half are light. It got old, real fast whenever someone said so at a party or function.

"Yes, it matters," I growl, grabbing his arm again. "I know what you're doing."

Alexei smirks. "Yeah? And what am I doing, Maxim? Hmm?"

"You're going to get into trouble. This isn't the first time you've pulled a stunt when you're upset. Don't be stupid."

He jerks his arm away again. I don't try to grab him this time. "I'm not stupid," he seethes. "And I can do whatever the hell I want."

I glance around, noticing that as the guests arrive, they're glancing at the scene Alexei and I are making. "Keep your fucking voice down. I want you to go in there and be on your best behavior. No chaos."

He shakes his head, chuckling darkly. "Are you commanding this as my brother or my leader?"

"As your brother. But that can quickly change if you want to play it that way."

Alexei looks at me as if I'm the enemy. "Then, as my brother, you don't get to boss me around." He looks toward the reception hall. "I'm going to

grieve Dad in my own way.”

“If you do this,” I say, stepping in front of him, “it won’t look good for the family. It won’t look good for me that I can’t even get my brother to attend our father’s funeral. You’re going to make it harder for me to gain the trust of our father’s men. Think about your actions, Alexei.”

He scoffs. “You don’t think I do? You guys don’t need me in there. I’ll just fucking mess it up like I do everything else.” He gives me another disappointed look, then walks away.

I could try dragging him into the reception, but that wouldn’t be a good look either.

So, instead, I straighten my shoulders, fix my tie, and head off into the reception. I need to be present. Alexei can be the fuckup all he wants, but I need to do my duty for my family.

I rejoin my family as our guests offer condolences. The reception hall is decked out in the finest furnishings, fanciest foods, and most elegant décor imaginable. My mother went all out planning everything. Nothing but the best for my father, even in death.

Kira takes my hand again, and I give it another squeeze.

“So sorry for your loss,” one of my father’s men says as he approaches—I guess I’ll have to start thinking of them as my men. It’ll be an adjustment. This one is named Stepan Pasternack. He laundered money for the bratva, using his bar, casino, and strip club as lucrative businesses to hide the income from our drug shipments.

A small, hairy little man, Stepan has a glint in his eye I dislike as I shake his hand.

“Thank you,” I murmur.

Stepan’s eyes glide over to Kira. “I’ve never seen you out of your castle before.”

Kira doesn’t reply, ducking her head instead. While Elena chooses to be reserved to retain her ice princess status, Kira is genuinely shy. It’s another reason why I feel the need to protect her.

“Our father preferred her safe,” I cut in. “Nowhere safer than at home. I’m sure you can understand that, having daughters of your own.”

Stepan chuckles, making the skin crawl on the back of my neck. “Oh, I do. I hope you enjoy your time out of your castle, Princess.” His eyes slide over to Elena, who’s giving him a look of disgust. “Ah, the Ice Princess herself.” He extends his hand to her. Elena looks down at it as if his hand is

covered in poison.

“No,” she says simply, turning her nose up to him.

Stepan’s face falls before he turns his smile on my mother. “Vasilisa, my condolences.”

She smiles tightly. “Thank you.”

“And Maxim,” he says, turning back to me. “I hope you have a long and eventful reign.”

I nod, then watch as he walks away. This job is going to be tougher than I thought.

The next guest to approach is George Smirnoff. Following him is the beautiful woman from earlier—the one with the red hair.

“Maxim, you know I’m here for you if you need anything,” George says, shaking my hand. Even at my father’s funeral, he’s already trying to get in good with me. I don’t mind. At least I know I can trust George. I can’t speak the same for a lot of the men here.

“Of course.” I pat his shoulder. “I appreciate that.”

George gestures for the woman to step forward. “This is my daughter, Arina.”

I offer her my hand, and she gently takes it. The handshake only lasts a second, but I can still feel her hand in mine long after it’s gone.

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Petrov,” she says in a sweet, twinkling voice.

I nod, keeping my face composed in a cool manner.

“Keep in mind what I said,” George comments before he guides his daughter away.

Kira squeezes my hand. “She was pretty,” she whispers.

“Where are you going with that comment?” I murmur out of the corner of my mouth.

She shrugs. “Just commentating.”

“Maxim,” a deep voice says as Nikolay Volkov approaches and shakes my hand. “Terrible loss. Your father will be missed.”

“Thanks, Nik,” I say dryly. Nikolay, or as I call him, Nik, has been my best friend ever since we were children. He’s the only one here I can completely trust. I also know he hated my father just as much as I did.

Nik glances over at Elena, but she turns her head away, sniffing as if he were a dog. With dark hair and a scruffy demeanor, I’ve seen women fall at Nik’s feet over the years. He always told me that women couldn’t resist his tattoos. I’m sure it’s a surprise to him that my sister has never swooned over

him. I'm proud of her for that.

Nik smirks and looks back at me. I raise an eyebrow, but his smile just grows wider.

Glancing around, I lean in closer to him. "Listen, Nik. I'd like to talk to you about something. Come with me." I start to walk away when Kira grips my hand tighter. I give her a small smile. "I'll be back in a few minutes. I promise."

She nods, letting my hand go.

I gesture for Nik to follow me, and we find a more secluded, quiet room away from the main reception hall. It's a small library, with thick leather chairs all over the room for reading.

"What did you want to talk about?" Nik asks, entering the room.

I shut the door firmly behind me. "I want you to be my second in command."

Nik's eyes widen before a smile breaks out on his face. "I would be honored."

"Good. That's settled."

Nik chuckles. "Just like that?"

I shrug. "Just like that. When I'm sworn in as leader tomorrow, I want you by my side. Everyone will know to follow you after me."

"Thank you so much for this opportunity. I won't let you down." He rubs his hands together, a glint in his eye. "So, what's first on the agenda for us?"

An idea pops into my mind. "Marriage."

Nik frowns, dropping his hands. "Not what I was expecting."

"I need to get married. I can already sense the rumblings of shifting power. I know a lot of those men out there would love the chance to be in charge of the Bratva and get me out of the way for good. They would also come after my family, and I can't have that."

"Of course not."

I sigh. "So, I think marriage is my best bet to keep some of these men in line."

Nik leans against a chair. "True. A strong marriage alliance could help enact goodwill. Did you have anyone in mind?"

"I do. George Smirnoff."

Nik smirks. "You're going to marry George Smirnoff?"

I give him a look. "No. His daughter. George has a lot of sway over the others. He's been with my father for years, one of his most trusted

employees. If people see that George likes me, more will give me their vote of confidence.”

“And,” he says slowly, “the best way to get George completely on your side is to marry his daughter.”

“Exactly.”

“What’s her name?”

“Her name?”

Nik sighs, shaking his head. “You don’t even know her name.”

“I know her name. Arina.” Her billowy red hair and elegant features come to mind. “Her name’s Arina.”

“Well, does *Arina* know what she’s getting herself into?”

“No. But she’ll soon learn. Then she’ll be mine.”

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I was meant to protect her... instead I consumed her.

Sofia Di Luca is spoiled and innocent.
A mafia princess I was chosen to keep safe.
I wasn't supposed to desire her.
To press my mouth against her soft, plump lips.
To show her pleasure she's never known before.
Her body was off limits.
Until evil men threatened to take her away.
So I made a choice.
I claimed her instead...
Even if it means my death

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