



Ruthless
VOWS

TIL MAFIA DO US PART

VICTORIA ELLIS

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Warning

This book is for an adult audience. There are graphic themes that can sometimes be upsetting for some. Please proceed with care and caution if any of the following subjects may impact your mental health:

Kidnapping, Torture, Detailed Rape, Detailed Abuse, Murder, Graphic Sexual Situations, Guns/Weapons/Violence

The reader should also know there is a SMALL cliffhanger at the end of the book. This cliffhanger is NOT part of the main storyline or the love story between the two main characters.

That is wrapped up with a pretty little bow for you. <3

The
DeSantis
Mafia Family

DON/Boss: Romeo DeSantis

Underboss: Francesco Romano

Consigliere: Leonardo Gallo

Capo: Dante DeSantis

Capo: Lorenzo DeSantis

Capo: Santo Rossi

Capo: Enzo Greco

Capo: Giovanni Romano

Notable Soldier: Antonio DeSantis

The
DeSantis

Immediate Family

Mother: Vittoria DeSantis

Sons: Dante DeSantis, Lorenzo DeSantis, Rocco DeSantis

Daughter: Sofia DeSantis

Grandson: Antonio DeSantis (Dante's SON)

The
Amato
Mafia Family

Boss: Gabriel Amato

Underboss: Stefano Mancini

Consigliere: Pietro Vitale

Capo: Niccolò Amato

Capo: Matteo Amato

Capo: Ricardo Vitale

Notable Soldier: Parisi Monte

The Amato

Immediate Family

Mother: Elena Amato

Sons: Niccolò Amato, Matteo Amato, & Gabriel Amato Jr.

Daughter: Giana Amato

Timeline and **BACKGROUND** *Information*

The DeSantis Family and the Amato Family were once part of the same family, The Chicago Crime Syndicate.

Key players back in 2012 were Alessio Amato and Domenico DeSantis. Domenico was the boss of the two families, and Alessio was the Underboss.

2012: The families split up when Gabriel Amato (a capo at the time) and his father, Alessio, wanted to do business with the cartel. There's mostly just bad blood between the families, but no war or violence transpires between the two. It's an amicable split, and those that Alessio Amato brought in go with him and Gabriel. They form the Amato Mafia Family, and those left behind who do not wish to mingle with the cartel are known as the DeSantis Mafia Family.

HELPEFUL

Terminology

Boss: Also known as the “Don.” This is the undisputed leader of the family, gets a share of all the profits, makes all the decisions.

Underboss: The second-in-command in the family and heir to the throne. While the Boss is slightly relaxed and calm, the Underboss is brutal and straightforward since he is the man who gets the money to the Boss.

Consigliere: The third-in-command in the family and the Boss’s closest advisor.

Capo: The family is split up into crews, each one with a respective leader. These are called Capos and are likely candidates for the top three ranks. They run the show with their separate illegal organizations and act as regional/managerial bosses.

Soldier: Made men, official members of the family, earn the money to get to the Capos and also take part in physical interrogation and murders/assassination tasks.

Associate: The lowest rank, unofficial members, also have to carry out physical tasks, wannabe gangsters. Along with Soldiers, they make up crews.

Made: A man who has been formally inducted into the mafia life.

The Life: A term made members use to talk about the mafia life.

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PROLOGUE



Giana

The Amato Family

I DON'T RECOGNIZE the woman staring back at me. I haven't in a long time now. Her eyes scream in ways a voice could never match. It doesn't surprise me that no one notices.

They never do.

My reflection is less a mirror image and more a fucked-up two-way mirror with someone else on the other side.

“Giana, you are a vision, my darling.”

My mother's voice sounds as if it's a million miles away while my eyes trail down this body that's never felt like my own. But how could it when I've never been allowed to be anything other than *his*?

This is a beautiful dress, I remind myself.

My pulse quickens as the voices around me turn into nothing but droning echoes, and I use everything inside me to calm my racing heart before I'm too far gone.

I scan the intricate lace pattern that fits me like a second skin and roam my hands over the silky part of the fabric—but something is wrong. So, so wrong.

I move my hands slowly, but...it's too slow. My entire body suddenly shifts, almost as if the world has tilted, and now everything is moving fast. Everything around me, that is. From my mother chirping to the sweet seamstress nodding her head, it's all suddenly in fast motion while every move I make seems like it has taken an eternity. As if I'm here, but I'm not. I'm an outsider looking in.

Like I'm watching myself trying on this dress, but I'm not really in my body.

My body. This is *my* body.

I am my own, I am my own, I am my own.

I repeat the mantra, the broken record on repeat.

I am my own.

The little voice between my ears scolds me, curses my feeble attempt at positivity, and reminds me that I'm not.

I am *not* my own.

And no amount of self-help audiobooks will help me feel more *mine*.

Nearly ten thousand crystals adorn the bright-white fabric that's snug on my skin. The plunging neckline shows more than I know my father will be comfortable with.

My mother chose it. She wants the world to see what she *used* to look like. Now that she's middle-aged and has to visit a stylist monthly to cover her gray hairs and a cosmetic surgeon to pump her face full of filler and get rid of her wrinkles, the only thing she can do is show off her daughter's body and live vicariously through it.

I inhale a shaky breath as the world around me continues to buzz by, but my thoughts slow, and I do my best to let go of every single dream I once had about marriage.

A love story that would rival all the movies I was forbidden to watch.

Choosing the man I'd spend my forever with.

Falling in love on my own terms...

I have to let go of every single one of those dreams I once pinned on my secret vision board when I was a young girl. Pictures I printed off Google of a happy life, one I thought I could manifest into reality, despite the cards I always knew were laid out in front of me.

Cards that were dealt the moment I was conceived.

I knew this would be my reality despite the dreams I hoped would come true.

And maybe that's the saddest part of it all.

"I think we could take it in at the waist a bit more, don't you?"

There's my mother again. Her voice slightly closer as she comes up to me and gathers some fabric to show the seamstress.

"She's lost a bit of weight. Wedding nerves, I'm sure."

I'm sure.

I wait for her to ask me what I think, although I know I'm once again just being that naive little girl who thinks her mother wants or values her opinion.

I move my gaze to the seamstress, with her neatly placed gray hair and apron embellished with pins. She smiles at me in the mirror as she pulls measuring tape from her apron, and I force my red-stained lips to tilt up at the corners enough to pass for a smile.

"Oh, sweetheart, I'm glad you like it!" she says as she moves behind me to place more pins into the fabric.

I suppose most brides with watery eyes are holding back tears of pure happiness.

Not this bride, though.

The fuzziness grows even louder, loud enough that my ears pulsate with pain. A hand grips my waist, triggering the moment *his* palm made contact with my skin, and suddenly I'm no longer here at all.

“Shut the fuck up before I hurt you where everyone can see,” he says, his eyes glistening as he brandishes the sharp knife in his grasp.

I’m tied down, whimpering around the bandana he shoved into my mouth. As he slides the blade against the sole of my foot, I cry out, feeling the sticky warmth of my blood as it runs and drips onto the floor. In direct contrast to his violence, he runs his thumb delicately against my instep, his eyes fluttering with the ecstasy of his sadistic desire.

He cuts deeper every time, and I wonder if anyone will ever stop him. Or if I’m destined to be his victim for the rest of my life.

He won’t mark me where anyone will notice. But the shame still fills me, like everyone can see each scar he leaves behind.

The sound of a door opening and closing pulls me from the memory, and suddenly everything is moving normally again. Gone is the slow motion. My mother’s voice chirping away to the seamstress is close now, no longer far away and fuzzy.

I am my own, I am my own, I am my own.

Heavy footsteps thud against the floor in an all too familiar pattern. The thumping grows closer and closer until my eyes meet those of my father’s in the mirror while I stand here waiting for him to pick me apart.

I’m a sitting duck for him to shoot down, and there’s no doubt in my mind he’ll take aim. I’m already deep within his sights.

He clears his throat, knocking me out of my thoughts once again, and I quickly turn toward my father, accidentally bumping into both my mother and the seamstress.

“Father.”

I don’t know why I didn’t expect this, but I curse myself for not seeing it coming.

He eyes me from top to bottom, silently assessing. He squints with a look I know all too well. *Disapproval.*

I wait for the carefully constructed words I know will come as he places both hands on his hips and draws in a deep breath. His charcoal suit, one of his favorites, hangs against his tall frame without even one single crease, moving with his body as he takes a step toward me. Still judging. Still disapproving.

I have to physically force myself to not squint my own eyes in retaliation. A habit of his I've acquired over the years. I've picked up a few of his traits, one of them being my smart mouth, but he'll never see that side of me.

He can't. No matter how fucked up this life I lead is, I still want to survive.

My father's salt-and-pepper hair has one small strand out of place, no doubt from the strong Chicago wind, and I want to pick him apart for it the way he's picked me apart for the same exact thing.

But I don't.

I would never.

I know my place.

Father clears his throat again before speaking, and my heart beats an out-of-control staccato that I feel pounding all the way up in the middle of my throat. *Thump, thump-thump, thump, thump-thump-thump*. Everything spins as I force the small bit of air left in the room down into my lungs.

"This body is for your husband, *piccolo uccello*." He shakes his head and glances from me to my mother and back again. "Not for every man in the church."

"Gabriel, she looks beautiful. Don't you remember when we married? This reminds me of my gown." My mother places her palm on my father's chest with a smile, but he moves away.

I step off the bridal platform and place my own hand on the mirror to steady myself.

Thump-thump, thump, thump, thump-thump, thump.

He scoffs before a harsh laugh escapes his lips.

“If you would’ve had that much of your skin on display, I would have turned you away back to your father. It’s quite unfortunate that’s how you remember things, Elena.”

The poor seamstress has backed herself into a corner and is doing her best to not watch this family shitfest unfold, but there’s a reason reality television exists. Drama is hard to look away from. She casts her gaze onto the pins she’s still holding, rolling them between the pads of her fingers.

“Gabriel, please,” my mother whisper-shouts frantically, but he cuts off anything else she planned on saying by holding his palm up and turning toward me.

“I knew I wouldn’t be able to leave this up to your mother. Thankfully, I assumed as much and swung by on my way to my meeting. I can’t imagine what Roberto would think of seeing his new daughter-in-law walk down the aisle with her most intimate parts on full display,” he seethes, gesturing to the same neckline my mother was just admiring.

He points to the slits on both sides of the fabric, showing off my legs. “*Patetica.*” He turns to the seamstress, and with a snarl, walks over to her, pointing his finger in her face. “No more changes to this outfit made for a fucking whore.”

Spittle flies from his lips, his red cheeks burning with anger. “No more money spent on this. In fact, you can have it.”

He looks back at me as I walk toward the two of them, wanting desperately to pull him away from this kind woman who has nothing to do with any of this, knowing I can’t.

“Take it off, Giana. Take it off and give it to her.” He points to the seamstress. “She can give it to a piece of trash for her wedding day. By the looks of her, she knows plenty of scum.”

And with that, tears gather in my eyes for an entirely new reason.

My father leaves, slamming the door behind him, walking out into the cold winter that’s as bitter as his heart. I apologize to the seamstress while my mother tells me we have mere days

to find another dress; she's already on the phone with another boutique as I grab hold of the woman's hands and tell her how sorry I am.

Two weeks.

The reminder is a slap in the face.

Just when I thought my life couldn't be more fucked up...

I'm being married off to the heir of the Blood Syndicate Cartel.

CHAPTER ONE

Yante

The DeSantis Family

“YOU TOUCHED something that didn’t fucking belong to you.” I grit the words out from behind clenched teeth, my jaw aching from the tension.

Quickened heartbeats turn into full-on organ thrashing, thunderous jolts in my chest in anticipation for the blood I’m about to have on my hands. This bastard is only a mere pawn in this fucked up game of chess we’ve been playing for years.

But still. He’ll be one more piece out of my way.

My endorphins fucking spike from the thought of tearing the skin off this man’s bones, ripping every last limb from his body using nothing but my bare, calloused, spiteful hands.

Sweet fucking revenge. It’s a mouth-watering dish that’s long overdue.

But not yet.

He doesn’t deserve the peace death brings.

I wrap my fingers around the crystal rocks glass extended to me from one of my soldiers and yank the bourbon toward my lips so quickly some of it sloshes over the perimeter and runs down the sides. Rocking my head back, I let the liquid slide down my throat, willing it to numb me—just a little.

I do my best to lead my men. To teach them that if they want to rise in the ranks of this family, they need to face our obstacles head-fucking-on with a cool and calm demeanor—though that’s easier said than done for a man who was born and bred to react, and react quickly.

Still, we don’t let weakness show. Not ever.

But here I am letting this Amato fucker get the best of me.

I sink back down to eye level with the piece of shit sitting in front of me and force his gaze to mine, cracking each of my knuckles painstakingly slow. The rings on my fingers cool against my burning skin as I imagine, with each crack, that it’s a blow to his skull.

“Hai preso la decisione consapevole di mettere le mani su qualcosa che apparteneva a me!” *You made the conscious decision to put your hands on something that belonged to me!* Gone is the attempted calm demeanor as I shout, saliva particles flying into the shield that is his face.

His dull, dark eyes close, and I grip his throat until he’s forced to open them again. The pressure from my tightening hold builds, and his face discolors under the strength of my unyielding grasp.

“Apri gli occhi, fottuto codardo!” *Open your eyes, you fucking coward!* I yank him forward, using the hold I have on his neck, and our foreheads slam together.

“What kind of man puts his hands on a woman?” I ask the rhetorical question, but the dumbfuck answers, thinking he’s saying what I want to hear.

“I’m s-sorry. I was only—“

“Following orders?” I interrupt his insulting excuse, forcing myself down to his eye level once again as he sits on the cold concrete floor, his hands bound behind his back. “E chi ti ha dato quell’ordine?” *And who gave you that order?*

He doesn’t answer. Instead, he twists his face into a grimace and shakes his head back and forth.

“Chi cazzo ti ha ordinato di uccidere mia moglie?” *Who the fuck ordered you to murder my wife?*

“I don’t understand Italian, only a few phrases. Please, you —”

I connect my fist with the side of his jaw. His head forcefully falls to the side, blood spraying from his mouth and landing on the brick wall, trickling down into each and every crack. The moment he turns his face back to me, I punch him again, this time in the center of his chin, sending his head back against the bricks with pure, uncaged rage.

I deliver blow after blow until his face is nothing but a swollen purple mess of what it once was; his eye sockets are already swelling up over the bottoms of his eyes. Blood drips from every orifice on his face—his eyes, nose, and mouth—seeping with the cherry-red liquid.

“Sai chi ha il sangue di mia moglie sulle mani. E sai chi ha il sangue di mia sorella sulle mani sporche del cazzo. Parlerai. La morte non verrà finché non lo farai.” *You know who has my wife’s blood on their hands. And you know who has my sister’s blood on their filthy fucking hands. You’ll talk. Death won’t come until you do.*

It doesn’t matter if he doesn’t speak the language. He isn’t fucking talking.

I yank his head backward by his sweat-drenched hair so the tiny slivers of his eyes can meet mine again before I spit in his face. His tears fall freely, and I find it absolutely disgusting that a made man can cower to such a pathetic fucking degree.

I bend forward and lick the trail of bloody tears as they cascade down his cheek and then slam my forehead into his as hard as I can, adrenaline pumping through my veins like I’m an addict who just got a hit.

And honestly, I am. And I did.

There’s nothing I want more than to channel every single fucking ounce of anger that’s been festering in my bones into beating this bastard to death, making him suffer the way I have for the past year.

The mother of my child, dead. My sister, dead. His family has taken two of the most valuable women in my life away, and he will pay with his life. They all will.

But only after I drain them of every ounce of blood in their bodies. Only after I've left no skin on their frames. After they are nothing but unrecognizable, broken cowards who have nothing else to live for.

I don't know exactly who is to blame for the deaths of my wife and sister. Who physically drained the life from their bodies. But one by one, I'm taking their men, and I'm destroying them. Gutting them. Ruthlessly ending each of their lives.

And eventually, one of them will talk. There's always a weak few behind the men on the front line. Always. Knowing it was the Amatos is enough. I've been on this warpath for a year now, and I'm not resting until we have concrete answers.

And a hell of a lot more bloodshed.

I land another blow to the fucker's chin and shake my fist out before pausing to catch my breath. My vision darkens, and a light ringing buzzes in my ears. Between beating this fuck to a pulp and dealing with a whole other issue with a few of my soldiers, I've been going nonstop since yesterday morning.

"Sir, I'm sorry to interrupt you right now. I know this is high priority"—one of my soldiers stands before me, and I'm half tempted to tell him to get fucked—"but it's almost ten, and we have guests arriving. Boss wants you upstairs." He pauses. "And honestly, I feel like you could use a minute. You only speak in Italian when you're about to murder someone, and I don't think you want him dead yet."

He's lucky I like him. Otherwise, I'd chop his head off for fucking telling me what to do.

Leave it to the boss to insist I run the club only to micro-fucking-manage me every goddamn day. I'm thirty-eight years old. I don't need the *boss* to tell me how to behave in my own damn club.

"Get out," I mutter to the soldier, unable to meet his eyes.

I turn away from the coward in front of me, not giving the bound and bloody Amato bastard one more second of my time for the night. He chokes and sputters on the blood rolling down his throat as he tries to plead with me, but his words are unintelligible.

I'm a bloody fucking mess, and I need to get ready to greet my guests. After all, some of the wealthiest politicians in Chicago who are not yet under our thumb will be in attendance at the party I'm hosting this evening.

And after all the bloodshed this past week, I need a fucking breather.

CHAPTER TWO

Giana

I AM A VIRGIN.

I am going to a sex club.

I am a virgin who is going to a sex club, and I can't help but focus on the complete anomaly of this situation.

“That’s it. I’m out,” I deadpan to my best and only friend, Remi, as a familiar flush crawls up my neck and settles onto the apples of my cheeks. “I Googled sex clubs, and those people will *eat...my ass...alive.*” I enunciate each word in an attempt to rectify this situation—to help my best friend understand that this is really not a good idea.

Upon my extensive internet search, I found a series of books that were banned from online retailers for being too explicit, a dating site for swingers, and hundreds of thousands of images of what I can only assume was sexual... equipment...used on willing participants at clubs just like the one I’ve agreed to go to.

Remi raises her eyebrows and winks. “They may eat your ass, but not in the way you were just implying, babe.”

I groan as she finishes my winged liner. I can do this. There is no reason my heart should be beating out of my damn chest because I’m going to a glorified strip club.

I look in the bathroom mirror as I sit perched on the vanity, and I have to swivel my ass around uncomfortably on the granite countertop to get a good look at what Remi's done to my face. When my eyes meet my reflection, I gasp.

"Holy shit. What type of magic is this?" I mutter under my breath just as I catch Remi giggling and shaking her head behind me.

"No magic, babe," Remi says while lighting a three-wick candle that supposedly smells like Fuck the Patriarchy; and while I'm all for that sentiment, I feel like we could get just about any scent from it.

I have exactly one goal for the immediate future: lose my virginity.

It's been two days since the wedding dress fiasco. Two days since I was hit with the reminder that in less than two weeks now, I'll be married off from one fucked-up situation to another.

I don't want to be the weak version of myself that I was in that shop—that I have to be around my family. A woman who doesn't even recognize herself. One who takes whatever she's dealt and doesn't stand up for herself.

I don't want to be her, but I have to be her.

Just not for the next two weeks.

For the next two weeks, I am living this life for myself because I know once I'm married off to the cartel, I will be even more fucked than I already am.

Step one: I'm choosing who I'm losing my virginity to.

I'm giving myself this one fucking thing that should be mine anyway.

I've never been one to have some magnificent idea about what my first time would be like—well, actually, that isn't the whole truth. I used to. I used to imagine it as some wholesome fairytale...but that was before I realized that the women in my family don't get happy endings. Then, I realized my first time

having sex would likely just be a means to an end...with a man I don't care about. One who's been chosen for me.

Now that time is ticking, everything is even more muddled in my brain. More than anything else, I just want this to be my choice.

If I had it my way, I'd like something *somewhat* meaningful, but I'm not naïve enough to believe I'm going to find my knight in shining armor like the little girl I once was used to believe.

I didn't intend on it happening this way, at a sex club. When I was younger, I hoped for some romantic, grand gesture straight out of a romance novel...not getting screwed on a sex swing.

But I digress. I need to lose my virginity.

It's life or death.

And not in a dramatic way.

If I don't lose my virginity to someone in the next two weeks, I'll become just another casualty of my family—just another pawn in my father's game. And my best friend is giving me the perfect opportunity to take what's mine.

Remi adjusts the black choker on her neck and flashes a devilish smile my way. "You're fucking hot, G. Makeup just enhances your universe-given beauty."

I roll my eyes, and it clearly sets her off, because she scoffs.

"How do you not know how hot you are? For one, I wouldn't be friends with you if you weren't hot. I'm a vain bitch. Also," she says, pointing one finger at me, a fire burning in her light-blue eyes, "you've got that Amato DNA, babe. I don't know if you've seen your dad and those beautiful brothers of yours, but I—"

"I will walk out of here, and you will be on your own if you even so much as imply your willingness to jump into bed with the men in my family," I interrupt her, a half smirk

stretching on my face to let her know I'm only kind of being serious.

Puberty granted me thick thighs, full boobs, and a peach-shaped ass—which has only been accentuated through my love of working out. The issue growing up was the fact that no one else looked like me, especially not in middle school. When my body bloomed, it fucking bloomed, and it made me feel like a freak.

I did everything I could to un-enhance my looks. I forwent makeup and saran wrapped my tits to my chest to make myself appear less...just...less. I hated the stares and the incessant catcalling when I walked down the street to and from school. The bodyguards trailing behind me only made things more awkward. Even being in the notable family I'm in didn't help. Actually, I think it made it worse.

Shortly after puberty and meeting Remi, my father pulled me from school, and I was homeschooled from then on out. His excuse was that no private school was good enough. But I know it was because he wanted the control. He thrived on having me in the bubble he created.

“Earth to Giiiiiaana...” Remi singsongs, snapping me out of my nostalgic haze.

“Sorry. What were you saying?” I ask as she sprays what seems like an entire can of designer hairspray on her exquisitely done hair.

Her long bright-pink hair is a sharp contrast to my dark-brown, never-before-colored hair. Remi likes to stand out, and I don't mind blending in—or trying to. I think that's what makes our friendship work so well. I don't mind allowing her to have the floor in most any scenario; I don't mind the way she eats up attention. I love her for it.

She thrives on energy, on being around people and bringing people happiness. I thrive on sweats, my family's cat, and a serial killer documentary after a gym session. I'm not allowed to do much else anyhow. I may be an adult, but in a family like mine, you're transferred from one man—your father—to another—your husband.

“I was *saying* that I wouldn’t be on my own. Have you forgotten *how* we scored an invite to the most prestigious sex club in Chicago’s masquerade event?” She grins, showing off her smiley piercing, which physically pains me to think about.

I’ve only pierced my ears, because there’s no way in hell my father would allow anything else, and those stung badly enough.

Contrary to her belief, I haven’t forgotten how Remi got us on the exclusive list. She’s been banging a member of the high-society club for a few weeks, and apparently, my girl has an extremely powerful pussy, because the dude has been showering her with gifts of gratitude ever since.

He was able to get us on the list as prospects for said club, allowing us in for the night. Apparently, if you aren’t vouched for by a member, there’s no way you’ll get in.

“I seriously appreciate you for going with me tonight. I need a change of pace. I promise I won’t leave you once we meet up with Tobias.” She smooths her hands over her dark-purple lingerie—one of the non-negotiables for tonight, lingerie for women and suit and tie for men—and looks in the mirror, licking her teeth free of the unintentional flakes of matching purple lip color. “I’m sick of dating apps, sick of vanilla boys who don’t know how to please me. Tobias is different, and I’m ready to try something new. There’s no one better to go on an adventure with than—”

“Than your *very* vanilla, *very* virginal best friend?” I interrupt her, and we laugh together as she elbows me.

“Listen!” She turns to me and grabs both of my hands, squeezing. “I owe you, okay? Plus, you cut me off before I got to the best part. There’s no one better to go on an adventure with than you. There’s no one I’d rather potentially die in a torture room with than you.”

“Wow, well, when you put it like that...” I let my head fall back and look up at the ceiling. “Maybe we should pregame a little. I’m going to need some liquid fucking courage.”



“Uh, Rem...” I start, unable to find meaningful enough words to express my current semi-overwhelmed and tipsy state of mind. “Is this the right place?”

She practically shoves me out of the Uber she ordered, and I stare at the underwhelming brick building. I was expecting some posh glass castle, but the place we’ve arrived at is anything but.

Tendrils of dead ivy crawl up and down the weathered structure, and I can’t help but allow a festering thought to permeate the forefront of my mind. The dark leaves are hiding secrets, trying to cover up the things that go on just beyond where the sidewalk ends.

“Trust me when I tell you that I’ve heard the stories about this place, babe. It looks discreet for a reason. Wait until we get in. I promise we are exactly where we’re supposed to be.” Remi quells my concern, but it doesn’t stop a shiver from running up and down my spine.

My gaze flutters to the strip of brick-and-mortar stores that also seem to shield this place, set just a bit more out toward the edge of the street than the club. This is the only stand-alone business on the block, the rest all joined together. Hair salons, nail salons, a phone store.

But then there’s this place, with the bricks and the creepy ivy and the wrought-iron bars over the windows. There’s no neon sign lighting this place up. No declaration of what lies beyond the bricks. No *Welcome, We’re Open* sign. No advertising at all.

Because the people inside want to stay hidden. And I’m about to be one of those people.

Without even realizing it, I’m now standing on the sidewalk as people walk hurriedly every which way,

surrounding Remi and me. She motions for me to follow her as my eyes trail to a woman in a Versace double-breasted trench coat.

I get lost for a moment, a sucker for both fashion and avoidance techniques. I admire the tonal jacquard rendition of the La Greca print of the jacket. Four beautiful gold medusa buttons are placed below the equally stunning gold embellished belt.

She glides into the club alongside a man in a black designer tuxedo, their arms looped together, and if I didn't know better, I'd think they were going to a wedding or some kind of fancy dinner event—not a sex club.

Remi grabs hold of my hand, and I'm forced to follow her, doing my best to keep up in my red-bottom heels, courtesy of dear Daddy à la my twenty-first birthday. Some twenty-one-year-olds get a box of chocolates or flowers from their fathers. I get hush money or upscale gifts—especially if I, God forbid, accidentally overhear any of my father's inner dealings.

A woman's place is not within the secrets of the mafia houses. I've always been kept in my gilded cage, far, far away from anything my father does. I'm lucky I even know as much as I do. I have my ways of finding out the things I need to, though.

We both have overcoats on to conceal our lingerie from onlookers who may see us walking into the club. Apparently, it's frowned upon to draw attention to the club by walking in practically nude. Who would've thought? It helps that it's freezing outside, so we look...semi-normal?

I reach down to adjust my white baby-doll lingerie, which is paired with a matching G-string my ass is currently in the process of eating. It bunched itself up under my coat.

Remi has always been thin; she can wear anything from anywhere. My curves make wearing tight clothing harder, but she was adamant I wear this, and I have to say, I think I look pretty damn good. Even if it feels extremely foreign to be out and about like this. The thrill of disobeying my father rivals

the apprehension I have about entering the building—each cause the incessant thrumming of my hummingbird heartbeat.

“I need to send a text to my father really quick,” I tell Remi, sliding my burner phone out of my purse as she lets go of the hand she was leading me by.

I’ve played this game way too long to not be damn good at it. Whenever I’m somewhere I shouldn’t be, my phone stays where my father thinks I am and is forwarded to my burner. He thinks I don’t know he’s placed tracking software in my phone, but I do. After the last time he caught me...and after the punishment that followed...I’ve taken it one step further.

Checkmate, Daddy.

“He’s probably sorting through another disgustingly expensive shipment of diamonds. I bet he isn’t even thinking about you right now. Don’t put yourself on his radar, G,” Remi says, flashing a pleading smile.

But she’s wrong.

She doesn’t know even the half of it. My father isn’t sorting through jewelry—one of his many cover-up businesses. He’s probably having his sidekicks “sort” as he plans his next revenge scheme against someone who has wronged him...or perhaps even innocent people who haven’t.

Remi has no idea that everything she thinks she knows is just an elaborate story my family has written and played out. A perfectly orchestrated façade to shield what really goes on behind our closed doors.

And my father most certainly has me on his radar. Anytime I’m outside the headquarters, aka our home, he’s waiting on pins and needles for my return.

I still haven’t figured out how to tell her I’m getting married in two weeks, and that’s pretty much the only reason I’ve agreed to come out with her tonight. I withheld her invitation so it wouldn’t catch her off guard before I could tell her. I can’t even imagine the shock that’ll be written all over her face when I’m like, *Surprise! I’m getting married in two*

weeks, bestie! I just want to pretend like this isn't happening for a little longer.

Plus, I'm a bit concerned Remi will bite my head off when I tell her everything I've been holding in for so long. But how exactly do you share that your father is a mob boss? Especially when you just want to be normal.

Me: I made it to Remi's house and Johnny brought us out to grab some snacks and drinks for tonight. We'll be watching sad girl movies for the next few hours to help her with her heartbreak.

Remi may not know all the inner workings of my life, but she does know my father is overprotective—and that's a gross understatement. If my father knew I wasn't safely tucked away at Remi's house right now, I don't even want to know what would happen. I've been on the receiving end of my father's wrath before—and for much less.

And I know where Johnny would end up, even though he played no part in this deception.

Dead.

I shake my head as a text from my father immediately flashes across my screen. I have no doubt he's been waiting, phone in hand, for my text.

Dad: Let me know when you're ready for Johnny to come back and pick you up in the morning. Remember, no leaving without my knowledge, little bird. I have eyes everywhere.

His nickname for me churns my stomach. *Little bird, little bird, I'm so sorry I've caged you. It has to be this way.*

I'm sure he does have eyes all over this city, but we've taken every single precaution we can think of to not be caught

by my father. We always do when we go on our adventures.

Being an adult hasn't stopped my father from being overprotective. Apparently, he didn't think through the fact that his enemies would become my own one day. Or maybe the notoriety he's received over the years, paired with the billions in his bank accounts, has helped ease the knowledge.

My father has always had lofty goals and even bigger dreams. And he's acquired ruthless enemies along the way.

I suppose that's what one gets when they're the boss of one of the biggest mafia families in Chicago.

And I'm just the *lucky* one who was given the title of his daughter—the mafia princess of the Amato Family.

“One last thing, babe,” Remi says with a grin, shifting her focus from me and reaching into her oversized purse. She pulls two masks out, one that's a deep purple to match her lingerie, and one that's black and white to match mine. “Have to put on our masks for the party.”

She winks, and I put the lace material over my head. It's not bad—doesn't leave me feeling too claustrophobic, resting only over my eyes and leaving the rest of my face to breathe.

“Ready?” Remi tugs me, and I acquiesce, taking in a deep breath and locking my phone as the two of us make our way up the stairs to the door.

CHAPTER THREE

Giana

I'VE STEPPED into an otherworldly dimension.

Honestly, I didn't think I could be impressed any more. My family knows how to throw parties. I've been to some of the most beautiful places in the world on vacations—Seychelles, a private island frequented by celebrities, Laucala Island in Fiji, and my favorite, the Hotel Georges V in Paris, France, where we had a completely unobstructed view of the Eiffel Tower.

Our last family party had multiple private jets flying in and out, carrying some of the most notorious celebrities of my time. My father quite literally flew them to and from our home... My life has been nothing short of extravagant.

But here, in this sex club I never imagined myself setting foot in, I am stunned.

I ping-pong my gaze around the entryway of the club, unable to settle on just one thing. The walls are a deep shade of purple with a textured gothic wallpaper—some sort of intricate black design I can't quite make out. Frosted silver sconces on the walls illuminate risqué photos every few feet down the long hall.

Three women saunter out from behind a curtained partition, each dressed in the same uniform: skintight black lace lingerie with matching black masks.

“Welcome to Checkmate Enterprises, ladies,” the woman in the middle says.

She has her platinum-blond hair up in a high and tight ponytail; it’s so snug it looks like it’s stretching her skin upward, eliminating any potential frown lines and probably giving her a real banger of a headache.

I adjust my own mask, grateful for the barrier. My nose and mouth are totally exposed, but still, I feel shielded. The women take our coats, but I don’t feel as naked as I thought I would, despite my barely there outfit. Something about this mask protecting me... It makes it easier to not be the shy, inexperienced woman I am.

Once our coats are whisked away and the women have returned, all three stand shoulder to shoulder, their mouths upturned.

“Is this your first time with us?” the middle woman asks.

I nod as Remi speaks up.

“Yes. We should be on your list. I’m a close friend of Tobias Sanchez. I’m Remi Danvers, and this is my guest, Giana Carey.”

We each take out our proof of identification, as Tobias told Remi we’d need, and hand them over.

Thank God for our very-expensive-and-real-looking fake IDs. We don’t need them; we’re both in our early twenties. But her father is a politician and mine is a mafia boss. It’s easier when our real last names are far, far away from us.

The three blondes each look down at small tablets in their hands, and as they scroll, I admire their long black gloves, which extend from fingertip to elbow.

The middle blonde smiles again, handing us our cards, and I slip mine back into my clutch. “If you two can please fill out our questionnaires, we can then admit you into the party. You may decide to not become members after your visit with us, but we do require the questionnaire to be filled out anyway since you’ll be here tonight and may end up utilizing some of our facilities.”

She swipes something on her tablet, and the two blondes on either side of her simultaneously hand Remi and me their tablets.

“You can sit over there”—she motions to a sitting area with a leather sectional—“while you fill out your forms, and then just let us know when you’re all done. One of us will walk you into the main area.”

She dismisses us with a smile, and Remi and I make our way over to the designated space.

“So should we answer these things honestly or...” Remi glances at me before scanning the questions on the document, and I opt to look over her shoulder so we can read them together.

Remi swipes her finger down past the generic things, like blank fields to list name, age, sexual orientation, and preference, and finally stops on the question portion. “Do you have a sexual fetish or kink? If so, please list.”

“Well, they just go right for the jugular, don’t they?” I say with a laugh as Remi turns toward me, her head bowed a little to shield her suggestive brow raise from the women at the door and the people entering.

She turns back toward her tablet and starts typing.

“You already have an answer? What’s your kink, and why don’t I know it?”

She scoffs as I tap my leg against hers. “Don’t act like you don’t know, G. Dom and sub. You know I’m a control freak, and that doesn’t stop in the bedroom. I want to make a man my little bitch.”

She giggles, and I roll my eyes because I should have totally guessed that.

I focus back on my own screen and realize I’ve quite literally never thought about fetishes or kinks. Unless... I mean, it’s not like I’ve never been curious and found myself stumbling onto a porn site. I guess I always tend to look at the same couple of categories. Threesomes and age play. But are those even fetishes or kinks?

God, this is going to be difficult.

By the time I'm through the questions, I've realized there's a whole other world I've never even thought about exploring. Remi and I hand our tablets over to the blonde women and, as promised, we're about to be led down what looks like a long hallway when the blonde who originally explained the questionnaires to us resurfaces and grabs hold of my hand, stopping us.

"I just received word that my boss would like to meet with you," she says, and I'm immediately wondering how badly I fucked up that questionnaire.

"Do those answers go right to him?" I ask with a nervous laugh. "I admit I don't know half of what was asked, but I didn't think it was possible to screw up that bad."

She waves her hand as if she's batting away my words. "Oh my God, no. Sorry, let me clarify. He always picks a handful of women out of the crowd, and one lucky woman gets to spend the night with him."

She grins suggestively, and I fly my hand up to my mouth as I let out the air I was holding in.

"I'm sorry, what? Your boss is going to put me in a lineup and choose one woman like we're a herd of cattle and he's picking the best in show? No, thank you."

Remi turns toward me, yanks on my arm, and whispers, "G, I've heard stories about their boss. You sure you—"

She abruptly stops and looks past me just as I feel the air shift. Suddenly, half the oxygen of this room has been drained, and it's been replaced by a heavy, suffocating, all-encompassing black cloud.

I stiffen. Freezing in place, my instincts kick into overdrive, and just as I'm about to turn around, a deep, velvety-smooth voice echoes in the narrow hallway, forcing my stomach to clench with an insatiable—and rather foreign—need.

"Good evening, ladies."

Stepping around to stand in front of me is the most hauntingly beautiful man I've ever seen in all my life. The moment I look up and into the piercing dark eyes who own that soul-penetrating voice, my heart implodes in my chest, and I have no doubt in my mind that my jaw has dropped open.

His eyes flick between me and Remi before settling on me and then roving down my body and back up once more. His dark hair is cut close on the sides and sits longer on the top in a type of controlled chaos.

I can't help but allow my gaze to roam over his features; the darkest, most entrancing eyes I've ever seen, equally dark facial hair, and a small, almost unnoticeable scar on the highest point of his right cheekbone. He's got a chiseled, devastatingly perfect jawline, and just before I flutter my stare down to his impeccably tailored black suit, his tongue darts out to wet his plump lips.

Now I feel naked.

In front of this man as he unapologetically takes me in from head to toe, I feel like I'm on display. Cue my insecurities...

Guess the mask isn't as beneficial as I thought.

"I'm Giana Carey," I hear myself say, and I'm shocked at my feigned confidence in front of this man.

I've seen hundreds of handsome men come in and out of my house over the years, but this one in front of me... He's just as ethereal as this entire place.

Remi nudges me, and I find it hard to believe that she's at a loss for words. She's never one to shy away from a painstakingly beautiful man, but it seems as if she's just as affected as I am right now.

"And this is my friend Remi," I say, weaving my fingers through hers and giving her hand a small squeeze.

The man smiles as one of the blondes steps toward him and places a mask over his face—without him needing to even

lift a finger. It's all black and leaves his high cheekbones, nose, and mouth uncovered.

Just when I think he may not have heard me, the euphoria-inducing melody of his voice comes alive once more.

“I know who you are.”

Fuck.

He knows who I am? That's real fucking ominous, considering I'm doing my very best to make sure no one at this party has even a fraction of an idea who I am.

“Giana Carey,” he says, stepping closer. “Twenty-one, volunteer for Child Meets Book, an organization that helps get books into the hands of low-income children, guest of Tobias Sanchez.”

Shit. Why did I put down where I volunteer? He didn't mention my *actual* last name, which means he doesn't know who I truly am—but that doesn't stop my heart from clamoring around inside its gilded cage...or the shiver from crawling down my spine.

A smile spreads across his face, his dark-brown beard shifting as the corners of his mouth rise. “I've told my associate I'd like to spend time with you tonight.” He cocks his head toward the blonde. He adjusts the cuffs of his sleeves, peeling his eyes from mine, and looks up at me through his long eyelashes. “I usually go to extremes in order to investigate every single person who steps foot into my establishment”—he rights his posture and looks at me straight on—“but I've been rather busy this past week.” A small, deep chuckle escapes his lips. “Beheading people, murdering men who have done me wrong, jewelry heists. You know, normal, all-in-a-day's-work type of business.”

His smile grows wider, and he laughs, this time much louder. The aftershocks of the reverberation shake me to my core.

But he's teasing.

He's not my father.

“Kidding, ladies,” he chuckles out, and it’s somehow even deeper than his initial greeting, evaporating what was left of my equilibrium. “I’ve been watching you since you walked in.” He looks directly at me. “I’m aware my associate told you I’d be meeting with you and a few other women, but I’m willing to spend all my time with you.”

I let out a laugh that’s a bit harsher than I intended, and the man in front of me cocks a dark brow.

“You’re *willing* to spend your time with me?” I shake my head. “Am I supposed to be impressed because an attractive man decides I’m worthy of a few hours with him? I *choose* who I want to spend my time with.”

The words come out of my mouth with a vengeance, and although I really wasn’t all that offended, apparently the attitude I’ve been holding in wants to come out and play. My words are a surprise even to me, and I have to resist the urge to bring my hand to my mouth and shut myself up.

I feel like I’m battling with a push and pull here—I have the upper hand, he has the upper hand, repeat. I kind of like it... It feels so foreign to express myself to a man. At least, express my actual thoughts without fear of being reprimanded.

I let go of the version of myself I *have* to be and remind myself I don’t need to be her here. Away from my father, I can be myself.

I am my own.

The man cocks an eyebrow as if he’s considering something. He looks at me from under long, dark lashes, and my resolve crumbles.

“To be frank, Ms. Carey, all I got from that was you think I’m attractive.”

Remi’s hand is still glued to mine, and I suddenly become aware of just how sweaty my palm is as she lets mine go, apparently resurfacing with her own confidence back in place, because she flips her hair in my peripheral vision.

“Look, I admire your tenacity.” Another gorgeous smile. “What do you say I show you around, Ms. Carey? I would like

to, at the very least, give you the full experience of my business while you're here."

My heart stammers. I was practically begging Remi not to leave me tonight, and now I'm the one who's potentially being whisked away.

"Tobias Sanchez is already here, Ms. Danvers; I can show you to him, and he can give you a tour as well."

Damn. He really did read all of our stuff. He's quick on those questionnaires.

As if remembering something, he straightens. "Oh, how rude of me. I'm Dante, and I own Checkmate Enterprises. I was so enraptured by you, Ms. Carey, that I forgot to introduce myself."

Remi pipes up from the dead, but instead of siding with me, she only hangs me out to dry further.

"Lead the way, Dante."

Something unexpectedly feral inside me awakens as his name rolls off her tongue. I attempt to catch my breath while he turns away, my body feeling as if it's finally able to inhale a deep breath without his watchful eyes on me.

Fuck. Me.

CHAPTER FOUR

Giant

FUCK ME.

I'm in for trouble with this angelic little vixen. I adjust my black tie and gulp down my insatiable need as I turn away from the absolute goddess of a woman who stole my attention the moment I laid my eyes upon her through the security system.

I planned on finding a woman to bring to my suite only after doing some seducing of the politician husband/wife duo, the Carters. My plan was to lure the couple in, find them a woman to spend their time with, and be on my best behavior until they were drunk enough not to care about me anymore.

But then I saw her on the cameras while getting cleaned up and notified Tammy I'd need Giana Carey to be pulled aside.

Something about her both unsettled me and called out to me. I love beautiful women. Aside from exacting revenge, the only other thing I've been doing alongside working is fucking women and trying to fucking forget about what I've lost.

Usually, fucking isn't difficult. I find a willing partner who typically wants to skip the pleasantries.

But Giana is more of a challenge than I'm used to. Perhaps I should leave her alone and find someone a little less difficult.

But as I watch her, the way her eyes widen every time I look at or speak to her, I'm more fascinated by her.

What's a woman like her doing in a place like this? *Bellissima*.

I don't bother looking over my shoulder to be sure the women are following me. I know they are. Despite the mouth she has on her, I saw the way Ms. Carey eyed me, and I'm positive I could have both her and her friend in the suite with me by the end of the night—but that's not what I want.

There's something compelling about this Giana Carey woman.

The moment I looked into her eyes, I felt some kind of... familiarity. And I can't figure it out. Not for the life of me. That mask of hers can only hide so much, though.

I'm willing to bet neither Ms. Carey nor Ms. Danvers could ever imagine that, not even an hour ago, I was in the basement of this building beating the shit out of a hostage.

I smile as I see a few of the politicians eyeing me. I think I clean up pretty fucking nicely—I just need to remember to continue keeping my hands in my pockets as much as possible. My patrons don't need to start asking questions about my bloody knuckles.

Making my way through the throng of guests already walking around, sipping their cocktails, and forming connections, my eyes lock on those of Tobias Sanchez—one of my high rollers, and the man who is going to take Ms. Danvers off my hands so I can get her friend alone.

"Mr. Sanchez!" I call out as we approach.

The music roars loudly as we enter the main space of the club, and I wait for further conversation until we're closer.

"How are you tonight, sir?" I ask when I reach him, genuinely hoping he'll have a good time.

He's a decent man, trustworthy from my interactions with him. In all the digging I've done on him, I've found nothing he's neglected to inform us of.

He likes his women, and he likes his whiskey, and I'm honored to provide him with both.

For a price.

Tobias and I link hands, and I give his palm a firm shake as Ms. Danvers sidles up next to him and places a purple kiss on his olive cheek.

"Hey, sweetheart," Tobias says with a wink, looking down at his woman.

I can only hope he doesn't get all soft now that he has a woman in his life. Or maybe, after she sees what goes on here, she'll run far, far away from him, and he'll keep lining my pockets, and I'll keep making sure he has the consenting women to keep him satisfied.

I do my best to force my eyes to stay away from Giana for as long as humanly possible, not wanting to let on how much just the sight of her is ruining me. I'm thinking with my cock, and I've got a long night ahead of me, so I need to shake it off. But I swear to fucking God, when I first saw her, she had a goddamn halo above her head.

Shake it off, Dante. Fuck.

"Okay, so, you said you'll show Giana around, and Tobias will show me around?" Ms. Danvers glances at me and holds eye contact with Tobias, and I'm willing to bet she's looking for a way out. "Why don't we just all go together?"

A short, clipped laugh escapes her lips, and I'm just about to speak up when Tobias comes through.

"I was hoping to spend a little alone time with you, *cariña*." He kisses her hand and croons in her ear, but in order to be heard over the music, he says it loud enough that I can hear him.

I knew I liked Tobias. He flashes a cocky grin at his date as he runs a palm over his shaved head. A bodybuilder by day, Tobias is more than fit. He's pure muscle, and it's not hard to see how he landed a beautiful woman like Ms. Danvers.

The women exchange a look I almost miss, but unable to keep my focus away from Ms. Carey for even a goddamn second longer, I catch it.

“We’ll meet back up in a little while,” I tell the two of them, my eyes on Ms. Carey’s.

Finally, the women part after speaking a few words. While Giana is busy deadlocked on her friend walking away, I watch her. Her eyes travel past me as if she’ll never see her friend again, and I use these sacred moments to drink her in. Her white lingerie only accentuates just how fucking stunning that perfect, curvy body of hers is.

Carnal desire fills me when I take in her perfect hourglass figure. I swear I can practically feel the soft skin of her delicious hips as I wrap my fingers around her flesh, claiming her from behind...can almost see her long, dark hair cascading down her shoulders as she arches her back, writhing with pleasure and panting with need.

My cock hardens, and I adjust myself, clearing my throat.

“Ms. Carey.”

She looks at me, and I swear it’s borderline fucking cinematic the way she appears in slow motion in front of me, people dancing all around her, the lights in this great room dim and moody, but she remains stoic, unmoved. Her gaze flutters up to mine, our eyes meeting for the first time since we were in the entrance hall, and she sucks in a sharp breath, her collarbone catching my attention as her chest rises and falls back into place. *Breathtaking*.

“Please, call me Giana.”

An unforeseen anger flickers to life inside me. I’ve never been one to deny how beautiful women are. But the desire I feel for this one is guttural.

Women are the only wholesome part of this world we have left. Untouched, unmarked. *Innocent*. Their bodies, their minds, their fucking souls. Something to be worshipped. Something to be kept far away from bastards like me. But alas, fucking is my favorite pastime, followed closely only by

taking down greedy motherfuckers one at a time and building my family's empire.

My unexpected anger stems from this ravenous fucking need.

I have my pick of damn near any woman I could ever want, but it's never because I have the undeniable urge to connect our bodies in an intimate way, to feel her beneath me, to watch as she comes apart under me, *because* of me. It's nothing like this, and it builds and builds until a gentle annoyance morphs into the perfect storm.

I like fucking. Raw, animalistic, memory-numbing fucking.

But what my body is begging me to do right now is anything but. I want to take my time with her, watch her body react to mine. To fuck into pure exhaustion only to wake up and do it all over again.

Fucking traitor.

"Giana." Her name slips from my lips, and I don't miss how her flawless, heart-shaped lips part slightly. "Please," I say, offering my arm to her.

Without missing a beat, she links us together, and I lead her away into the night.

Al cuore non si comanda.

The heart wants what it wants.

CHAPTER FIVE

Giana

“THIS IS what we call the negotiation room,” Dante says as he leads me into a small, intimate room that shoots off from the ballroom.

I shamelessly take in his backside, the way his form-fitting jet-black suit clings to his muscular frame and his ungodly firm ass. Gulping down my previous reluctance as I follow him into the “negotiation room,” I remind my fight-or-flight instincts that I chose this...that I’m finally able to do something for me and experience life. The man in front of me is very clearly interested in spending time with me, and I’d be a complete moron to turn him away.

My mind flutters from the possibility of having sex with *him*.

On ruining all of my father’s carefully laid plans...

I latch my gaze onto his body again, unable to look away for long.

I certainly wouldn’t protest this man showing me a thing or two...

The four walls surrounding us help to muffle the thumping music from the party, and I take in the room as Dante motions for me to sit in a tufted high-back black chair while he closes the door.

The aesthetic in here is appealing, from the comfortable furniture to the glass table separating me from Dante. I'm grateful for the space it puts between us, having a hard time breathing normally around the man.

"Negotiation room?" I ask, desperate to break free from my own thoughts. "Like when a man approaches a woman and offers to pay her to sleep with him?"

Dante smirks, reaches out to grab the crystal decanter on the table, and pours us each a glass of dark liquid. "You're way out of your league, Ms. Carey."

"Giana."

He nods and takes a sip from his glass, and I'm helplessly entranced as his Adam's apple bobs. Even his throat is a turn-on.

"Giana," he says, taking time to enunciate each syllable.

My name on his tongue sounds like sin—a fucking melodic sin. Like it was written by Bach or Beethoven, perfectly composed into existence.

Dante adjusts his gold cuff links and rolls up his sleeves, showcasing his muscular tan forearms, and nestles himself backward in the chair, eyeing me. "It's not only men who approach women, and many of our clients pay no fees to each other for their discretions."

I hear his words, but that voice of his damn near physically impairs me. I can't get over it. I need it to not be so damn intoxicating. So deep and inviting.

I shake my head, wondering exactly how this man makes any money off his club if there isn't some kind of business transaction. My father has kept me out of the life, but he hasn't brought me up to be a brainless woman. Money is the reason for everything—even sex.

"How does this place continue running and throwing parties as lavish as ones like this without an exchange of money?" I ask, genuinely curious about the ins and outs.

Anything to keep my mind off the way he looks at me.

Dante crosses a leg over his knee, cradling his rocks glass in his hand and tapping his fingers against the arm of his chair with the other. “Well, not that you need to be concerned about how my club stays in business, but the clients who belong to this club pay for a membership. We do have women who work for us, who are here for an actual job, but many of the people you see here are paying members.” Dante adjusts in the chair and runs his fingers through his hair, his rings catching the overhead light and glimmering. “This room can be used for negotiating rates, but it’s also used for consensual terms. What people’s hard limits are, their desires, and their obsessions. This room has heard a lot of dirty little secrets.”

I smirk and eye the drink he’s poured for me, but resist picking it up despite knowing liquid courage is a real thing. Dante lets out a low chuckle, and I immediately right myself, the smirk falling from my face.

“You can drink that, you know. I poured it for you...just in case you thought someone else was coming.”

“Oh, I know it’s for me,” I tell him, his complete focus and attention on me giving me the surge in confidence to speak so frankly. I glance at the drink again and then back to him. “I didn’t see that liquor poured from the bottle, and I don’t drink anything that someone could have fucked with.”

“You’re sexy when you curse.”

His words crash into me, and I try to evade the feeling they give me by laughing. When I compose myself, I bat away his compliment.

“You’re just trying to fuck me. Men don’t like women who curse. It’s unbecoming.”

You’re just trying to fuck me? I really just said that. To the hottest man I’ve ever seen. My big mouth, which my father has always insisted I control, has once again made me look like an ass.

I expect him to put me in my place like the men I’m used to would. But instead, he sets his glass down on the table,

uncrosses his leg, and leans forward, resting his elbows on his thighs. “I *do* want to fuck you.”

God, this man and his mouth.

Why does everything he says go straight to my ovaries?

He narrows his dark eyes at me, and my heart thunders in my chest. I try to force down the growing lump in my throat, but it only swells in size with the way he’s looking at me like he wants to devour me whole.

“Cat got your tongue, kitten?”

I clench my eyes shut and shake my head, willing myself to snap out from under his spell.

“We’re in a sex club, after all. I think we can be open about things like this, no?” he asks, and heat rises to my cheeks. “I’m willing to bet you’ve never been properly fucked. You’re young. Men your age have no idea what they’re doing. You probably fuck drunken frat boys who pound into you like gorillas until they’ve gotten their rocks off.”

Men my age? How old is he? He doesn’t look much older than me, with his dark hair and dark facial hair—not a gray hair in sight.

Dante stands up and circles the table until he’s standing alongside where I’m sitting. His crotch is inches from the side of my face. I stare straight ahead with my hands in my lap, avoiding what’s just beyond those pants like the fucking plague, aware my breathing is intensifying but knowing that if I avert my gaze even in the slightest, my eyes will land directly on his cock.

He reaches out and takes a few strands of my hair between his fingers, and I let him, unable to move.

“Giana, when was the last time someone touched you in a way that made your knees go weak?”

Never.

“When was the last time a man devoured that pussy like you were his last meal?”

Never.

“When was the last time”—he bends down until he’s level with my ear, tucking the strand behind it—“you were *properly* fucked?” He whispers the last few words, and goose bumps line my arms.

“Never.”

CHAPTER SIX

Giant

“YOU’VE *NEVER* BEEN PROPERLY FUCKED?”

Giana sucks in a deep breath, her chest rising and then falling as she closes her eyes and rolls her head backward, exposing her long neck. A thin vein pulsates just below her skin and beats in a rigorous rhythm.

Everything about her is poetic. She’s all long, curvy, flowing lines and perfect, creamy skin. Swear to fuck, she was taken straight from some of the most beautiful sonnets in literature and patched together piece by tantalizing piece until she was an unfathomable piece of artwork. I’ve been with a lot of women...

But no one has ever made me feel feral.

No one has given me the carnal desire to fuck with just a look in their eyes.

Not until her.

“Use your words, kitten.”

I bet Giana is the type to hate pet names, but something about her made the word slip from my mouth effortlessly. And it fits. She’s just this small little thing, but I bet if I get under her skin enough, she’s got some fucking claws on her.

“I’ve never been fucked at all.”

The words hang in the air, and I stand and step backward, putting distance between us—between the growing need inside my fucking pants.

She's a goddamn virgin.

The temperamental beast inside me flames to life, and I immediately want to sink my own claws into her, ravage her until she's screaming my name at the top of her lungs, scratches down my back, her body writhing with desperation underneath mine as I claim every single inch of her.

I flick my gaze to her perfectly polished manicure, and I can't help but imagine those red nails gripping my cock, pumping my shaft as she milks me for all I'm worth.

"Why?" I ask, because it's the only word I can currently think to ask.

A woman like her is clearly actively trying *not* to fuck. It's not like someone as gorgeous as she is isn't getting offers. And probably often.

I travel my gaze to her chest, to the plump swell of her breasts, and I do my best to force my gaze back up, but fail.

Temptress. Fucking temptress.

"Sheltered?" She stands.

We're now both standing in this small room, and I completely undo my tie and toss it toward the chair I was sitting in.

"I'm not a religious freak or anything. I just... I've never wanted it to be something meaningless."

"Well, you know there are plenty of ways you can be pleased without the act of sex. That's just a common way. Men your age base their sexual encounters around porn—because that's what they watch. They spend more time taking mental notes about what they see happening in low-budget porn scripted by men instead of reading the romance novels women write. Literature that practically acts as a guidebook to what women want from men.

“Because, after all, women know what they want, don’t they? They know their bodies. Know what will make them come completely undone. But men your age? They couldn’t be bothered to spend their time reading a book written by a woman. They don’t listen to what women want. They think they have it all figured out because they’re young and fucking stupid.”

I sigh and tuck more hair behind her ear. I’d like to see it up and out of her face. I’d like to be fucking pulling on it.

“And you’d know because...”

“Because I’m not a Neanderthal that can’t read a fucking book.”

“Teach me, then,” she says, and I can sense that as soon as she says those three words, she almost wishes she could take them back.

Almost. Like if she could reach out and grab the words and swallow them, she would at least think about it.

I know what she’s getting at, but she’s fucking beautiful when she’s flustered, so I want to make her squirm.

Just a little.

“Teach you what, exactly?” I question as her cheeks grow rosy yet again.

“What men my age can’t, according to such a well-read man like yourself.” Her confidence is back, and it’s fucking sexy.

She lets out another laugh, and I smile, forgetting about everything else. It’s dangerous, but it’s needed. It’s been so long since I had moments that were just for me. Moments not spent seeking vengeance, not vying for approval, not scheming and plotting and planning the deaths of an entire mafia family.

“This is going to sound juvenile, but I came here with one goal in mind: to let go of who I’m supposed to be, even if just for a little while.”

I grip her chin in my hand, this woman I know nothing about but feel like she’s somehow so familiar. Those eyes still

strike me as the most memorable piece of a puzzle I can't quite put together.

My end goal is to fuck her brains out. Despite how intriguing she is, despite how differently my brain reacts to her, even annoyingly so. By the end of the night, I want her in bed with me. Whatever it takes.

But since I don't want to scare her off, I smile.

Tilting her chin up so she's looking into my eyes, I say, "I just so happen to have the next few hours free."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Giana

I'M SURROUNDED by people in scantily clad outfits doing things I've only seen in BB Easton's novel turned Netflix show, *Sex/Life*. My arm is now linked with Dante's as we move through the crowd, and I'm trying to not fall apart from the warmth of his touch.

He pulls me closer into his frame as we walk, a silent threat to anyone in our vicinity. I scan the crowd, and we walk into what appears to be a large ballroom.

Being so close to Dante, I can smell his cologne, and damn me if it isn't as intoxicating as a glass of my father's Macallan that he keeps in his study. I inhale him, and a sweet cognac scent swirled with tobacco and pine envelops me. Heat rushes to my center, pooling inside me as my lower stomach tightens.

The physical reaction I have just to breathing in the way this man smells is enough to make me question everything about myself. Is this from being so isolated my whole life?

Forcing my mind to latch on to something else, I glance around at a few small, circular stages that are set up throughout the room, each with a different person entertaining the swarm of partygoers. Apparently, the only attire for the entertainment was *no* attire. All of the people on the stages are completely nude.

One woman is playing with fire with what looks like baton sticks, twirling the flames around and around, behind her head and through her long legs. I'm not sure if it's an optical illusion or if those flames seriously just almost caught the small dusting of light blonde hair between her legs on fire; all I know is I can't watch her sing her pussy hair.

I turn my attention to another stage and realize there are two women taking up space on the platform—two very naked and unbelievably enticing women. A slow, sexy song plays throughout the large room, and the two women dancing on the stage are grinding against each other, having found the perfect beat as they move together, their hands exploring each other's bare bodies as they connect at their centers. One is a fiery redhead, and the other has chin-length chestnut-brown hair, both equally stunning in their own ways.

“Those two are a staple at every event,” Dante leans down to whisper in my ear, and for the first time I realize just how much taller he is by how much he's forced to bend. “We're going to go somewhere a bit quieter.”

He unlinks our arms and grabs my hand to single file, leading us through the swarm of people and out a different exit.

Our palms are pressed together, his a mixture of both smooth and calloused skin. I move my fingers slightly and feel an even bumpier section of skin. Looking down, I realize his hand and fingers are swollen—as if he punched something... or someone.

I decide not to ask right now; chances are I won't be able to hear over the loud music, and honestly, in my experience, men don't typically tell the truth anyway. Still, I want to know why the man leading me around has busted-up knuckles.

We go through a clearing that leads us into a hallway that is identical to the entrance hall of the building, with the same black and purple walls and beautifully framed artwork with minimal lighting. The hallway is cold, such a drastic dip in temperature from the heat in the crowded ballroom.

Dante leads us to step through a black lace curtain and into an offshoot from the hallway, and my skin prickles as an unexplainable menacing feeling washes over me.

We're met with a large glass window that overlooks a large bedroom.

With three people inside it.

Each of them stripping off one another's clothes.

"Sh-should we be here?" I sputter the words out, and Dante lets go of my hand, his eyes on the three people in front of us.

I immediately sense his absence, and a daunting pit grows in my stomach.

He lets out a deep, carefree laugh, and I shrink backward. "What do you think this viewing area is for, Ms. Car—"

"Giana," I correct him, but he doesn't acknowledge his error; he doesn't reply at all.

He just continues staring straight ahead. The few times our eyes have met tonight felt inexpressible, like we're two magnetic forces unable to *not* attract each other. Like, by design, we're just meant to be near each other. But right now, he isn't giving me even a sliver of his attention.

"Do you see the way he's watching the two of them?" Dante nods his head toward a blond man with long hair tied back away from his face. "His eyes full of lust, his chest heaving. He isn't afraid to look at both of them. He's unashamed of his sexuality and the fact that he loves seeing his wife get *fucked* by other men. It doesn't make him feel like less of a man. And it shouldn't."

My breath hitches as I gulp down the shock. I figured we were going down a road like this, but I didn't realize there was a married couple inside those four walls. I just assumed they all met here and were experimenting. I could never even imagine a potential husband sharing me.

There are two men—the blond man, and a man with dark, graying hair. There's one woman who separates them, and

she's gorgeous and captivating, with a jet-black pixie cut and flawless skin. Tattoos line the length of her arms, and she looks between her men as if she's sizing them up, deciding which one she wants to touch first.

I feel Dante's eyes on me, his stare heating me from the inside out and twisting my stomach.

"Talk to me, Giana. What are you feeling right now?"

The woman finishes pulling down her husband's pants, freeing his very large, very hard cock from the fabric. It springs to life, and I let out a gasp as he wraps his fingers around himself and pumps, his eyes glued to his wife as she struts over to the dark-haired man and runs her palms down his chest until she has a firm grip on his erection.

"I'm..." My pulse quickens to the point of a steady galloping, my temples throbbing in anticipation.

I jump as Dante's touch catapults me back to the here and now. He places two fingers under my jaw and guides my face to the side until I'm facing him.

A playful smile spreads across his handsome face, one side of his mouth tilting up just a bit farther than the other, his eyes gleaming. "You're *what*, Giana?"

He moves to stand behind me, and he's so close, his body heat is radiating off him and onto my back. He runs his fingers through my hair before taking it all and putting it over one of my bare shoulders. His face finds its way to the side of my neck, and his breath against my ear causes goose bumps to break out all along my skin.

"I'm—I've... I've never seen anything like this," I admit, looking down at my feet.

"And what do you *feel*?" He gently bites down on my ear after he asks, and I swear lightning strikes through my body from his lips on my naked skin.

The cadence of his words is haunting, hitting me somewhere deep within that I don't think I've ever been aware of.

I can't inhale a deep breath, not with him this close to me. He moves his mouth next to my ear again, and his hot breath makes me shiver.

"Use your words, Giana."

"I feel like...like my body is on fire."

I look at them. And I try to make sense of the thoughts ricocheting in my mind. But words fail me in such a detrimental way that I feel lost inside my own head.

He's so...big. She's so beautiful. They are *all* beautiful. Wetness pools at my center, and I feel almost...*dirty*. Dirty for being so turned on by people who don't even know I'm watching them. For being turned on in the presence of this beautiful man in this beautiful place.

"Use that pretty little mouth of yours, Giana."

His breath against my ear is warm and wicked, and I shudder with an uninvited want.

"I feel like I shouldn't be here."

Dante *tsks* in my ear, and then I lose his warmth all over again. My gaze stays laser-focused on the three people in front of us, because as filthy as I feel, I can't look away.

The woman has gone from sucking off her conquest to getting on all fours on the larger-than-life four-poster bed taking up a majority of the room. The white duvet under her knees is a sharp contrast against her sun-kissed skin, and I trail my gaze over her body as the dark-haired man lowers behind her and presses his mouth to her slit, his tongue slowly, tantalizingly licking from her clit to her entrance.

"What about now?" Dante interrupts as I look at the woman's husband, who is now slowly stroking his length, standing a few feet away from his wife. "What about now, as Mr. Henry tongue fucks Mr. Bell's wife in front of him? Do you still feel like you shouldn't be here?"

His hands trail down my back and land on my hips, giving them a squeeze before he pulls me back against him, and I feel

how turned on he is. He shifts, and I realize just how large he is. I stifle a moan that my double-crossing body lets escape.

Lowering his head back to my ear again, he whispers, “If you’re as turned on as I think you are, you’re exactly where you should be.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Giana

I GULP DOWN MY DISCOMFORT. Dante knows every single thought before I have it. It's almost as if he's just a bystander inside my mind, thinking and feeling all of the emotions rippling through me.

My heart races as his hot breath leaves my ear, and he spins me until I'm facing him.

“Do you want to go into one of these rooms with me?”

My breath hitches, and I swear, a small explosion detonates inside my lower abdomen. Do I *want* to go into one of those rooms? With him? How could I not?

This man in front of me does things to my body that no one else ever has. And he does these things with nothing but his words—although his sexy-as-sin face and unbelievable body probably have something to do with it, too.

“Time's ticking, kitten.”

His words pair so well with the devilish look in those dark eyes of his.

He runs one finger down my chin, then down my neck tormentingly slow. I try to swallow down the mixture of pure fear and sadistic seduction running through my veins, but it's

no use. I can't swallow it down. It's here, and it's not going anywhere.

But there's the smallest, tiniest, littlest voice in the back of my head that's somehow piercing through the incessant shouting of *yes, of course I want to go into a room with you!*

And that small voice is telling me I want more than some open-door kinky sex room where onlookers are watching me. I want more. I want my first time to be something I can look back on when I'm lying in bed at night, next to a man who doesn't give a fuck about me. Is it wrong to want my first time to be more than this? I'm an idiot for thinking I could just give my virginity away with zero connection.

"I'm not some stupid, young, naïve girl who thinks this is a fairy tale, Dante. I don't believe in happily ever afters, not anymore. I know the little girl dreams I used to have in my head are never going to happen for me. But can't my first time at least be somewhat meaningful?" I sigh and take a step backward, noticing how tightly his jaw clenches.

I know there's never been a woman who has turned this man down. It isn't fathomable. Am *I* turning him down right now? No. I just want this to mean something.

Dante crosses his arms and peers down at me, and his stubborn Adam's apple bobs while I silently beg him to try to talk me out of this.

"Who's to say I can't make this meaningful for you?"

I'm staring into the eyes of a man who has never lost.

And each second that passes is wearing me down.

Still, I know my worth.

And I'm painfully aware of the trajectory of my life moving forward, forever under dear Daddy's clutches.

I decide to be bolder than I usually am and act like tonight truly is my last night of freedom.

"Get lost with me for the next few hours. I have until the sun comes up before I have to answer to anyone." I lick my

lips, and I take note of how he seems to hang on my every word the same way I do when he speaks.

He eyes my lips before his stare finds mine again. “Okay then, Cinderella. What did you have in mind?”

“Well, for starters,” I tell him, “I’m going to need to borrow something a bit warmer. It’s cold out there, and this lingerie and a coat won’t be enough for where I want to take you.”



Fifteen minutes later, he’s given me a hoodie that’s much too big, and we’re in the back of a blacked-out luxury car. It’s an indulgence I’m used to, but I can’t help but feel the familiar sting—as if it’s the salt to my deepest wounds.

I almost wish Dante drove a fucking Jeep. A Volvo. A freaking Ford Focus. *Normalcy*. It’s a foreign word I won’t be escaping tonight.

One I’ll probably never escape—at least not until I’m six feet underground, rotting away.

A driver pulls us into the parking lot of the destination I gave him the address to, and Dante’s eyes, two narrowed slits in the moonlight, slowly make their way to mine.

“And this will make your first time more majestic, kitten?”

I can’t help but laugh. As much as I want to control myself around him, it was funny, and a big part of me needed that.

I nod and look out the window at the dingy parking garage.

“Navy *fucking* Pier? What are you, a tourist?”

I shake my head, get out of the car, and shut the door quietly as Dante does the same. The driver makes a move to get out of the vehicle as well, but Dante stops him with the flick of his wrist and a subtle shake of his head. Obeying, the

driver gets back into the car, but not without passing a knowing look to Dante.

“It’s”—I look at my phone—“two in the morning. Navy Pier isn’t open.” I grin at him as he quirks a dark brow. “Are you against doing something illegal?”

He chokes on his own laughter and lets out an expletive as he runs his fingers through his hair. He’s still donning the expensive-looking suit, and I’ve thrown my coat back on in anticipation of the Windy City chill.

“You have no idea, Ms. Carey.”

“Giaanaa,” I singsong as I lead him around the side of a parking garage, and we sneak inside in a way I’m certain only a handful of people know about. “Are you afraid of heights, big, bad rule breaker?”

I smirk to myself as I lead him up the stairs to the highest point of the building.

Dante doesn’t say anything, so when we finally reach the top and I swing the door open, I turn my back to the rooftop and look at my shiny devil. There’s something in his stare. Not necessarily fear, but maybe...trepidation, at the very least?

“You are afraid of heights!” I snicker, and he follows me, rolling his sleeves up and no doubt putting on a front.

I can sense it. If there’s something that’s been properly ingrained into my bloodline, it’s reading people. It’s knowing a move before it’s made.

“Not afraid of heights,” he mumbles, stepping around me to walk farther out onto the rooftop.

I don’t miss how his steps are less confident, more careful, as he takes in our surroundings.

“Just unsure as to why going to the top of a parking garage in the winter is going to make me fucking you more meaningful. Please don’t tell me a shitty rooftop garage is where you’ve pictured the first fuck of your life?”

The wind picks up, and I wrap my arms around myself, amused at his awful observation. I’m still cold, despite the

oversized hoodie and my coat, but I knew I wanted to bring him here.

“Yes, Dante, I’ve always blissfully imagined my first time being with a man who apparently wears nothing but designer suits and insults my favorite spot in the city,” I say with a roll of my eyes. “It’s cold, but it’s not snowing.” I shrug. “Let’s look on the bright side.”

He steps toward me, placing his hands around my waist.

“Tell me what we’re doing here,” he demands, ignoring everything else I’ve just said.

Something in his façade shifts as he looks around before his eyes latch back onto mine—something I can’t quite place.

“I just told you. This is my favorite spot. I’ve brought you here, and you have exactly...” I look at my phone again to calculate properly. “You have exactly four and a half hours to make something meaningful out of this night for me.”

CHAPTER NINE

Giant

WELL, if I haven't met my fucking match made in hell...

Giana Carey is a force to be reckoned with.

She knows I don't play games to get the things I want, and she's turned it around on me. She's legitimately making me get to know her before I take her sweet little cherry and claim it as mine.

Under normal circumstances, I'd be fucking irritated. Most of the women I come into contact with aren't the type I'd like to get to know.

Ever since Julissa...

No. My mind isn't going to my wife right now.

She's gone.

Dead.

And I'm not about to compare some random young girl to her.

Fucking idiot. What the fuck is wrong with me?

Giana moves to sit along the edge of the rooftop, dangling her feet over the edge as if she's not about to fall to her fucking death. I lied to her when I said I wasn't afraid of heights. It's the only fucking thing I'm afraid of.

Anymore, anyway.

I walk over to where she sits and refuse to look at the ground. I'll send myself spiraling into a panic attack if I even so much as glance down there. Not exactly the meaningful impression I want to make on this woman.

Something inside me recognizes something inside her. I can't explain it, but I want to know her better.

"So why is this your favorite spot in the city?" I ask, sitting down and dangling my feet over the edge.

I lean backward onto my elbows so I'm as far away as humanly possible from seeing the death trap on the other side of this building. I peel my mask off and run my fingers over the spot where it dug in a little too much on my cheeks, noticing Giana has yet to take hers off. I'd like to rip it off her so there's nothing left for her to hide behind, but I decide to let her keep it on. For now.

She fingers the delicate chain around her neck and subtly shakes her head. "It's really the only place I like, I guess."

I think about her words, unsure what she's getting at.

"This is the best place to watch a sunrise. You can't find a better spot. And I like sunrises. Do-overs. New beginnings." She mimics me, resting back on her elbows.

I want the coat and extra layer I gave her off immediately. Want to see the goose bumps prickle against her flesh.

"Everything ends, but not everything begins again. Did you know that? Everything begins. Everything ends. But not everything begins again. Like us. Once we're gone, we're gone. There will never be another breath inside our lungs after the last one we take. But sunrises?" She inhales deeply, pausing before letting the air go. "There's always another sunrise. And this is the spot to go if you want to see it."

"True." I nod. "But one day, when the world ends, when all the atoms finally realign or whatever...no more sunrises. Where does your theory go then?"

She turns to me and smiles, and she's beautiful.

I wish she wasn't.

I wish she was just another nameless stranger.

“Doesn't matter.” She shrugs. “I won't be around to think about it.”

I let my head roll back a bit, glancing out at the darkness that lies in front of us as I think about this woman who somehow got me out of my lair to do something other than business. I want to tell myself that she's just a hot piece of ass I want to fuck. Want to tell myself that I get the things I want, and that's why I'm doing this.

But in some fucked up reality, I just know I care about her first time for some reason. Call it a penance for all the fucked up things I've done. I wonder, does this make up for the blood on my hands, the lives I've mercilessly taken?

Doubtful.

It's just sex.

“Do you have a family?”

Her words twist into my skin like a knife.

I used to.

“Yeah,” I say. “Yeah. A kid. Parents. Siblings. I've got a family.”

I used to have a wife. Her name was Julissa. She was my best friend. The best fucking partner and mother to our child. I used to have her, but I got her killed, and now I'm haunted by her memory because I'll never fucking forgive myself.

“Why?”

She shrugs. “Just wondered. Are you going to ask me if I have a family?” She looks up at me. “That's kind of how this is supposed to go. A conversation entails two sides: speaking, conversing, questioning, learning...”

“Do you have a family?” I appease her.

Would Julissa want this for me? Would she want me to ask another woman about her family? Care about another woman's

family? We never talked about what would happen if one of us died young.

“I have a big family. Typical stuff. Overbearing father who thinks he knows what’s best. Shell of a mother who goes along with anything her husband says and just wants me around to use as a show pony.”

She rolls her eyes, and I have to admit, if I had a daughter who looked anything like Giana, she would never leave the fucking house. Even as an adult.

I’m a man. I know what we’re capable of.

“What are you thinking right now?” Her words give me pause, and I don’t know whether to tell her the truth or make something up.

I don’t want her to know she’s getting under my skin. At least not until I can decipher exactly why she’s able to do it.

“If I were your father, I wouldn’t let you out of my sight either.”

“You can hardly say that. You may have a child, but you and my father are on totally different wavelengths.”

“You’re twenty-one, according to your profile. I’m quite a bit older than you.”

She pauses for a moment before asking the inevitable. “How old are you?”

“Thirty-eight and counting, kitten. I’ve got a son close to your age. Had him young and grew up fast.”

Her jaw literally drops open.

I’ve been told I look good for thirty-eight.

“Damn. You really are an old man.” She pauses but laughs, and this time, she’s the one earning an eye roll.

“Is your father older than me?” I ask, unsure why I’m asking about her father when I should be utilizing this time to my advantage.

“He’s in his fifties. He’s got an old-school mentality, you know? I swear, sometimes...” She turns away from me, and her gaze focuses in on the star-filled sky blanketing the world in front of us.

I decide not to interrupt her, instead using these silent moments to really study her, take her in. Analyze just why she’s got me under a spell.

Her dark hair falls over her shoulders, loose curls I want to get my hands on. They move back and forth as she shakes her head.

“Sometimes I think he wishes he could just lock me away in a gilded cage. Throw away the key. Never let me out again. It feels like I am, anyway. I’m just sitting around in this man-made cage waiting until I die for the thousandth time.”

“What are you, a vampire?” I try to make light of a conversation that’s going back out to the deep end.

At the beginning of this night, I just wanted her pussy, and now, I’ve been let in on more than I bargained for. I want to know these things, though. These small, private things she’s telling me? I want to know more.

And that’s fucking terrifying.

“Not a vampire. I’d have already drained you by now. Under the cover of night, alone on a rooftop? That’s like a J. R. Ward novel waiting to happen.” She exhales and scoots closer to me, and I don’t know if it’s just something she’s done on instinct for warmth or if she meant to.

I don’t want to say anything. Don’t want her to pull away.

“You wouldn’t get it,” she tells me.

I wouldn’t get it. As if she’d have a fucking clue.

“Try me?” I ask, wishing it sounded like more of a demand.

I want to know how her mind works.

Without warning, Giana turns toward me, tucks her knees up to her chest, and folds her arms over her kneecaps. She’s

gorgeous in a way that's timeless. High cheekbones, sharp angles, piercing eyes. There's nothing soft about the woman in front of me.

"My life isn't mine. Not really. My parents... They've had everything planned out for as long as I can remember. Probably since before I was born. So the gilded cage? It's real, no matter how fictional it seems. Yeah, maybe I have four walls and anything I could ask for, but it feels so...suffocating. Like each day, those walls close in a little more. My life becomes less mine, if that's even possible." Her voice shakes, and I pull her into me, an urge to tell her I fully understand what she's saying.

I may be an "old man"—*un signore anziano*—to her, but I was in my early twenties once, too. Our lives sound parallel in a strange way.

But I can't deny that being a man has allowed me more options and a greater say than the women in my family. I can only imagine, if her father truly is as old-school as she says, just how little of a say she probably really does have.

"Why does it feel like you're the female version of me?" The words fucking fall from my lips like she actually has put a spell on me, and I curse myself for allowing this woman to become a weapon against me.

She shouldn't be privy to any of these thoughts. No one should. So why am I letting her into my mind?

"Maybe I am?" She smiles as she adjusts her mask. "Much prettier. Probably smarter. Definitely wiser."

I chuckle and pull her closer to me. Turning toward her, I sit with my legs open and yank her close to my chest. "I'll give you prettier. By a long shot. But I'm an old man, remember? I've been around much longer, and I guarantee you I've seen more than you ever will."

Our faces are inches apart when she finally touches me. Her palms lay flat against my thighs, burning holes into the fabric of my pants. Her touch is like a flame.

“Women mature years beyond men. But this isn’t a competition. Plus, there’s no fair judge, is there?”

I can’t control myself for a second longer. I bring my hand up to her cheek and cup it before sliding it down to her chin, taking it between my fingers and tilting it up until she can see the warmth in my eyes. My need boils over, spills out of every single pore as I claim her mouth.

I was wrong before. Her lips are the softest thing I’ve ever touched. I hungrily slip my tongue inside her mouth, each nerve ending in my body tingling with need. Want. Desire.

She moans into my mouth, and I groan in return, picking up the intensity of the kiss. She climbs into my lap as I tangle my fingers in her hair, wrapping it around my bruised and swollen knuckles and holding her at the nape of her neck.

Fucking cherries and mints and wine.

She tastes like a heaven I’ve never known.

Giana tries to take control as she bucks against me, and I’m fucking worthless against her touch. My cock springs to life, and I don’t even attempt to control it. I want her to feel what she’s doing to me. Need her to feel the effect she’s having.

“God, Dante...” she pants out, and my name sounds purely sinful from those perfect, pouty lips of hers.

How can heaven and sin pair so well together?

If I didn’t give a shit about Giana, I’d take off this belt and have my way with her right here. I’d claim every single inch of her perfect pussy. Drive my hard cock inside her until she’s screaming that she can’t take it anymore.

And most of the time, I’m not the better man.

But for her, right now, I’m going to be. I’ll pretend to be a good man for her. Because something tells me she deserves good and right and pure. Three things I’ll never hold up to, but I can do my best to try until I’ve given her what she wants from me. If her life really is as similar to mine as it seems, giving the girl a memorable first time is something I can do.

Regardless of if I'm a fucking monster, a failure, a fucking terrible, no-good excuse for a man.

You're a good man, Dante.

What the fuck?!

Julissa's voice is inside my fucking head. I pull away from Giana as I try to make sense of what just happened.

Because what the fuck just happened?

That was Julissa's voice telling me I'm a good man as I was throwing myself a pity party of epic proportions while my tongue was down another woman's throat.

"Sorry, did I do something?" Confusion bleeds across Giana's features, and I want to make it go away.

Make all of this go the fuck away.

"No." I'm honest. "No. You didn't."

Fuck it. She wants memorable. I'll give her memorable. The man she picked to take her virginity is fucking nuts.

"My wife is dead."

She shakes her head, the confusion not wavering. Not even a little bit.

"I don't know how to do this, Ms. Carey." I revert to formalities, but she quickly brings a hand up and shoves my chest.

Surprisingly hard.

"Don't you dare do that. You don't get to *Ms. Carey* me when your tongue was just down my throat. Don't ruin what we're sharing."

Well, fuck me, then.

"A year ago. That's when it happened. I've had sexual encounters in the club since... Mostly just trying to get my mind off everything that's happened. Get my mind off the fact that I couldn't protect two people I should've been able to protect." I sigh, deciding to just come out with it. "My wife is

dead, and I swear to fucking God, when I was just kissing you, I could hear her voice, and it fucked me up.”

She adjusts herself, climbing out of my lap and sitting in front of me. She’s still facing me, but there’s a clear divide and definitive distance between us now.

I look at her, and she looks away. I fucked this up royally. That’s what I get for being honest with a woman I’m not meant to let in, isn’t it?

Her hands hesitantly find mine, and she traces circles over the backs of my hands, her touch as light as a whisper as it floats over my skin. This woman can make even the simplest of things sexy, and it feels so impossible—otherworldly.

“What happened to your hands?” she asks, and I try not to react to how close she is to finding out that I’m probably not worthy enough to take her virginity.

“I play rough” is all I can muster in response, wishing I’d known she was coming.

Wishing I could pretend to be someone of worth, even if it *is* just sex.

We’re quiet as she continues to caress my hands, mesmerizing me, calming me.

“A circle,” she says, looking at my hand, the scars on my knuckles. “We can pretend circles go on forever, too. No end and no beginning. Just this constant repetition. An innumerable distance.” She pauses, stops making circles, and instead, takes both of my hands in her own. “I’m not a godly woman, but I still like to believe in things. That both endings and beginnings have meanings. That each person serves a purpose, no matter how small. And I’m still looking for mine. Can I ask you a question?”

I nod.

“Your wife...” She places my hands on her thighs and begins drawing tiny circles again.

It’s somehow soothing. A simple touch, a pattern with no end. Just as she said. It’s as if this mystery woman is

engraving me, leaving her mark on my skin. Invisible but burning.

“Do you think she would want you to be happy? To continue living? To form real, genuine, raw connections? Or do you think she would want you to drown your sorrows in as many women as you can while trying to escape her ghost?”

I knew she was made out of poems from the moment I laid my eyes on her.

Knew she was poetry in human form.

Even her words are laced with a magnetism beyond compare.

I fucking hate it.

How can I be so drawn to something—*someone*—I don't know?

“You make words beautiful.” I tell her a truth because I feel like she needs one.

But I ignore her question because I'd like to continue running from that very ghost she's talking about.

She looks at me. Really, honest to fucking God looks at me, and I swear she peels away a layer of my carefully crafted disguise with only her gaze. Giana's eyes are fucking hypnotic, the kind of blue you want to swim in. So vastly different from Julissa's.

I can feel myself trying to pull away from this moment, but she doesn't let me, keeping her gaze on mine. I hate her power, hate that I was just supposed to fuck her, and here I am, comparing her to the only other woman I've ever let in.

Giana ignores my compliment and instead asks, “Do you ever feel like you're cursed?” Her cheeks bloom with color once again. “You know, like...you're damned if you do and damned if you don't. I just... I feel like I must've really been a bitch in a past life. Committed a murder or two. Killed a kitten —”

“What you said earlier about your father,” I interrupt without even meaning to. I just can't get her words off my

mind. “You need to remember that women are the most powerful fucking people in the world. The things you can do with your minds? Your bodies?”

Something about her makes me want to console her. It’s a gnawing feeling that I’m so fucking unaccustomed to.

“You just need to remember that you’ve got one life. You should do anything you can to live it for yourself and not him.”

I sigh as she looks at me with wide eyes, as if it’s all clicking into place for her. But surely this isn’t the first time she’s realized how remarkable she is.

“I feel like that got much deeper than I intended. I’m sorry. Wow. I have no place...” Redness blooms across the apples of her cheeks, and she covers her face with both of her hands.

I don’t think I can go another second without feeling her skin on mine again. Despite the way her words just opened me like a knife, there’s a calmness about her that I need. I take her palm the way she took mine.

And I draw circles.

I’m man enough to admit I’m broken as fuck and just learning to live with these broken parts, claim them as my own, try not to let the weight of them fucking kill me before my enemies can.

But this woman just showed me I may have at least a shred of humanity left in my bones.

I just don’t know if that’s a good thing or a bad thing.

CHAPTER TEN

Giana

AFTER THE WORD vomit I spewed about Dante's deceased wife, the two of us have been sitting together in comfortable silence. He didn't go off on me or even try to make me feel like shit for speaking of his dead wife like I knew her.

If I were him, I'd probably be long gone. I can't even imagine...

"The sun is rising, kitten."

He's still using the little nickname he's coined for me. He can't be that mad at me.

"How is it already after six in the morning? I feel like Remi and I just walked into the club," I tell him, shaking my head.

This entire night feels like it didn't actually happen. Like I'll wake up in a few hours back in my all-too-familiar bed, under my father's watchful eye. Either the wind has died way down, or being here with him has warmed me up, because I swear I don't even feel the bite in the air anymore.

I look at Dante as he watches the pinks and purples swirl together. He's not the type of man who watches a sunrise, if his bruised knuckles and choice of career are any indication.

He's filthy. Rugged. Damned. I feel it in his words, his actions.

The way he kissed me...

But he's here with me, and I'm afraid if I question it, he'll disappear.

"Your necklace is beautiful," he says as his eyes linger on my neck at the blue pendant that's a staple in my life.

"It was my grandmother's. I never take it off... I mean, maybe to shower or something, but I even wear it in there sometimes. She was the only one in my family who ever made me feel like a person."

I pause for a moment, thinking about her. Wondering what she'd think of all this.

"I'm sorry we didn't get to...you know. I know I probably led you to believe you'd get your virgin tonight and—"

"Seriously?" He scoffs. "You didn't think I was going to take your virginity on a dirty rooftop, did you? Talk about fucking memorable."

He laughs and leans into me, our shoulders brushing.

"You stayed willingly even after you knew I wasn't going to put out?"

He widens his eyes and nods sarcastically. "It appears so, Giana." He pauses, almost like he's thinking about his words. "I like to fuck. Love it, actually. Would probably be fucking someone right now if I weren't here with you. But I'm here with you because I want to be. I left my own fucking party because you intrigued me. Everything about you. You're a very peculiar woman, Giana Carey."

I flinch at his use of my fake last name.

I should tell him.

Be honest.

I feel like he's done nothing but give me his raw self, even though it seems difficult for him, and here I am, hiding behind a mask. A façade. A disguise.

“I’d still like for you to be my first. I feel like we’re kind of connected now, in a fucked-up way.”

“Sharing dark secrets on a city rooftop will do that to you, I guess.” Dante chuckles, but there’s not an ounce of playfulness in his tone.

“The gilded cage,” I say. “Your club did pique my interest.” I clear my throat. “I don’t know that I’d be down to be with multiple people or anything, but the more I think about people watching *us*...the more I kind of like it.”

Thinking back to last night, watching those people in that room and being as turned on as I was... I want to experience that. I trust this man. I don’t know why. Because everything in my bones, everything I’ve grown to know, tells me men are not trustworthy opponents.

And that’s exactly what they are—opponents.

He grabs my cold hand with his swollen one and kisses the back of it. A gesture a man like him should be incapable of, but he does it with ease. Like it’s just muscle memory.

And I wonder if he used to kiss the back of his wife’s hand.

“I’ll take you in any way you’ll let me, kitten. Occupy your time until you go back to that gilded cage of yours.”



Johnny walks me safely into the house only a few hours later. My father is clearly none the wiser. If he had thought I was up to something, he would have sent one of his minions out for me last night. I’ve learned how to work around his games.

Although that doesn’t mean I don’t nearly stop breathing each time his name flashes across the burner phone.

“Princess.” My father sits in a high-back chair in his office, a smile on his face.

He's getting older. One day, he'll pass the throne down, and I'll be under less scrutiny.

Maybe.

Somehow, I think this is just meant to be my destiny.

I shudder to think about who'll be perched on his throne, no doubt flicking his switchblade with a sinister grin adorning his face. My palms ache with the phantom sting of my flesh being sliced.

But I'll be safe by then.

Safe from *him*, anyway.

After all, by the time he passes the torch, I'll be married off and probably popping out little heathens left and right.

Just more children who will grow up in this life.

More children who will grow up around bloodshed and violence.

"How was your night with Remi? Has her family received their wedding invitation yet?"

My father doesn't think I know this, but his bribes in the politician underworld are something I'm privy to. He's inviting her family for a reason, for an in with Remi's father. But little does he know, Remi still has no idea about the wedding because I didn't exactly have a chance to come clean to her last night.

Dread settles in my bones as the wedding slaps me in the face once more. The reality is something I know I can't keep hiding from.

I just want to continue pretending for a little longer.

The devil I know will always be a better alternative than the one I don't.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Janet

GABRIEL FUCKING AMATO'S DAUGHTER.

Fanculo!

I fucking *knew* I'd seen her before. *Come potrei essere così fottutamente idiota? Fottuto idiota.* How could this have slipped by me? A fake fucking last name. Rookie games.

Rookie games that she got past me as if I'm a goddamn moron.

That fucking lingerie and those fucking eyes. Those mesmerizing fucking words of hers. That poetic fucking body and her motherfucking ability to get under my skin like I was nothing but a damn fool.

She's a fucking siren who drained me of every ounce of my control.

And the worst part of the whole goddamn thing is I fucking loved every second I spent with her.

As soon as I got home this morning, I knew I needed more of her. I put her photo from her profile into Google and did a reverse image search, and who was she smiling in a picture with? None other than her fucking *father*, Gabriel Amato, the boss of the Amato family.

We used to be allies with the Amatos. Two Italian families with one common goal. But everything changed when Gabriel Amato decided to start mixing with the cartel. My father and the rest of our family wanted nothing to do with drugs, so we split up. And it's been a fucking war ever since. Ten years of fighting against the people who used to be working *with* us, and all because Gabriel saw dollar signs.

My mind flashes back to Giana. It's those eyes. I knew I'd seen her before. I do my due diligence as a capo for my family. I make it my business to know my enemies, to know their weaknesses.

And Giana Amato is her father's weakness. His only daughter. His *poca* princess.

Red-hot, blinding rage settles over my entire body for the second time in the past twenty minutes since realizing the woman I was falling all over last night is an Amato. From my head down to my toes, a heat I've only felt one other time in my life flows through my body, warming my skin to a damn near impossible degree. I clear my throat, but there's a fucking basketball-sized lump clogging my airway.

I don't know if I'm more pissed that she pulled one over on me or the fact that my body felt things for her that I haven't felt in a long time.

My heart pangs with guilt as I think of my wife again. Dead because she got wrapped up in me, because of me. Because of this life I live.

I let myself feel for those few hours I was with Giana fucking Amato, of all people. The enemy. The fucking enemy. Of all goddamn people. I let her suck me in and tempt me with her salacious curves and her intriguing mind. Those motherfucking pouty lips and that sultry stare. What a fucking mistake.

I don't make mistakes.

And she's thrown me off my game.

My entire body shakes with anger, and I throw my glass as hard as I possibly can. It shatters into an infinite amount of

pieces that fall like confetti around my office, the amber liquid once inside running down the dark wall.

Did Gabriel send his daughter in here to try to get intel on us? To see if she could stake the place out? No. There's no fucking way even an Amato would subject his own to something like that. Would he? Even a man like him has to draw the line somewhere.

I clench my fists as my temples throb. *Ci sono cascato, cazzo!*

Pacing the perimeter of the room, I try to figure out my next move. Nothing feels right. There's a number of next steps I could take. The Amato Family's princess just fell into my lap. What a coincidence, seeing as one of her own is down in the cellar being tortured right now.

I could very easily do what they've done to me and mine. I could take their precious little fucking princess and gut her like a fish. Leave her on their doorstep like they did with Julissa. Send a message.

But that would be too easy, wouldn't it?

That would let them all off much too fucking easily.

Plus, my family has never put their hands on women. I've never had the urge to, either. Even with Giana, I know I don't want to touch her. Not in that way. I'd never really place a hand on her in anger. But the memory of Julissa when I opened the door that morning makes pure, unfiltered rage flash through my mind.

I see my wife's lifeless body stiff and cold on my doorstep. The images appear like Polaroids behind my eyelids, and I rip my eyes open so I don't have to see her discolored skin. Her open mouth. Her beautiful blonde hair bloodied and matted against her scalp. The way her palm was open, as if once outstretched, begging for mercy.

Begging for me to find her.

To save her.

But the one job that mattered most was a job I fucking failed.

I don't want to hurt Giana. I want to hurt her fucking father.

I want to rip him to shreds, starting by slicing and dicing that smirk off his smug fucking face.

His men are just as bad as he is and no doubt do the majority of his dirty work.

I want them all to die painful, horrible, slow deaths by my own merciless hand.

Because even though we don't have concrete proof that the Amatos are behind the death of my wife and sister, I know it was them. It was cold, hard, brutal retaliation. And they're the only enemies we have who would ever bring harm to women.

It's the reason my father refuses to bring the wrath down on the Amatos yet. No proof, no vengeance. If I were the boss, things would be real fucking different. Every single Amato would be gutted by now—proof be damned.

Managing a deep breath, I thumb a text to my family. To my father, our Underboss, the consigliere, and our capos, telling them to get here and get here now before I lose my mind and go to Amato's house and gut him like the pig he is in broad daylight.

My wife. My sister, Sofia. Both dead at the hands of *Giana's* family.

The Amato fuckers will pay.

And it will be in the form of their sweet, naïve little princess.

Not with her blood...but...in some way.

I just need to bide my time and figure out how.



Twenty minutes later, the last of my family has rolled into the office, and I can finally explain what we have on our hands. I tell them about Giana, how she waltzed into my club as if she wasn't a member of our biggest rival's family.

Immediately, the men around me start to lose their cool, standing and shouting that payback is finally within reach.

"Quiet," my father, Romeo DeSantis, the boss, calmly says. Loud enough to be heard over the incessant shouts from our capos, me included, but calm enough to strike an eerie chill throughout the room.

I look at him, the man I'm a near spitting image of, only younger and much less levelheaded, although I'll never admit it. His black hair is graying. Fifty-nine years old, and he's finally starting to look more his age. He sits in the head chair in my office, reminding me I'm a capo in this family. I'm not one of the highest-ranked men. Not yet. I'll be taking orders from my father for a long time to come.

I just wish he would drop the cool demeanor sometimes. I wish he'd want to get his hands a little dirty, like he did when I was a kid. Wish he'd want our enemies to pay as much as I do. You'd think he would, after his only daughter, my sister, Sofia, was taken by the Amato fucks. That he would want those pieces of shit to burn for what they've done.

Instead, he remains stoic. And that feels like both a blessing and a fucked-up curse.

"You're all fucking thinking with your balls instead of your brain," Romeo says, his voice so low in the room you could hear a pin drop. "Payback." He lets the word linger in the air, looking around the room with his dark stare, focusing on each of us one by one. "Payback is an art form, boys. It's not something we rush; it is something we carefully construct until we have every single piece in place. Like a game of

chess, it's a well-thought-out war. A war we don't have *solid* evidence to wage yet."

He glances toward me while he sits forward in the maroon chair, lacing his fingers together as he places his arms on the desk in front of him.

"I'm well aware that some of you"—he makes a point to look directly at me, as if he can read my every thought—"think I haven't done enough in the aftermath of Sofia and Julissa. This war the Amatos have waged on us is one I am confident we will win.

"We will get our vengeance. I am a man of my word, but you need to stand down and let me continue to do what I do best and lead. I, too, believe they were behind this. But I can't allow more bloodshed before I am one hundred percent certain it was them. I refuse."

I shake my head, pissed off at the same old answer.

"We have Gabriel Amato's daughter in the palms of our hands." I grit the words out, each one stinging the tip of my tongue as they fall from my lips. "Do you expect me to give that up? This is the exact scenario we can use against them. How do we just let this go?"

"I expect you to stand down until myself, Francesco, and Leonardo have time to think about this. We've been forming a plan of retaliation for months, and once we have all of the pieces in place, we will strike. Now, if you can bring me some of this proof that you don't seem to care about, nor think it important, things will move much more quickly. But this is new information—having Giana Amato so close—and acting quickly on a whim like your suggestion is a childish game. I hope you aren't leading your soldiers like this, son."

I want to tell him to fuck off. This is my wife and my sister—his fucking daughter—we're talking about. This isn't a childish game; this is the revenge we've been salivating over since Julissa was left on my doorstep and since Sofia went missing.

I don't tell him to fuck off, though—a mafia hierarchy has its ranks, and I know better than to overstep.

I'll sit back and allow him to come up with his beloved little plan, but in reality, I'm moving forward with the Amato woman. As the meeting goes on, their words droning on in the background, I concoct my own plan.

And when I'm done, my revenge is going to taste as sweet as fucking candy.

Ride bene chi ride ultimo.

Who laughs last, laughs longest.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Giana

VOLUNTEERING for the Child Meets Book program at my local used bookshop is just one of the few things I'll miss about my current life when I'm married off. I highly doubt I'll be allowed to do this anymore. It was hell trying to get my father to allow it in the first place.

But I love it.

It makes me happy.

And happiness is hard to come by in this world.

“Okay, you guys!” I say to the group of ten kids sitting crisscross applesauce on the alphabet carpet in front of me. “You can all go pick out three books to bring home this week, and Ms. Evelina will get you all checked out before your advocate comes back to pick you up.”

I smile as they all run around the little used bookstore, and Evelina, the owner, gives me a warm smile of her own just as my brother, Niccolò, comes up and pulls me into his side.

“That was a good one, sis. It felt familiar. You think our parents read that to us before bedtime when we were kids?”

He raises his dark eyebrows, and I roll my eyes, laughing at his joke that should be sad but is just part of life.

Our parents weren't read-the-kids-bedtime-stories kind of parents.

"Fat chance, big brother," I say as I shake my head, and we watch the group of elementary school kids run around the shop.

My brother eyes up my boss, something I've noticed him do many times before.

Evelina starts writing down each child's choices, flipping her long blonde hair over her shoulder and kneeling down to each of them, just as a bus driver and employee from their group home pull up. It's more of an honor system than a real checkout process. She does it out of the kindness of her own heart and doesn't mention any kind of repercussions when a book doesn't make it back.

The program has been up and running for two years, and I actually found it through Niccolò, who stopped in here on a whim to grab a coffee. It's a bookshop, but it also has a small coffee bar, and he saw a flyer about the program needing extra help, told me about it, and I reached out to see if I could volunteer in any capacity the next day.

"You know, you could just ask for her number. You wouldn't have to keep coming to my volunteer sessions every time if you just did your damn thing and used those boyish good looks of yours." I poke at Nico, and he frowns, running his fingers through his dark hair. "What?! Anyone can tell you're practically obsessed with the woman, Nico."

"Can't a guy just come hang out with his favorite sis—"

"Only. Only sister."

"Ms. Giana!" one of the kids calls out, and motions me over to help her pick out a book when the bus driver announces they only have five more minutes.

"You're getting off easy this time, Niccolò." I smile and go to the little girl, leaving Nico alone to obsess over my boss.



Niccolò was called away a little bit before my shift ended, and I promised him I'd call a driver to get home. My father will be pissed that Nico didn't drop me off before going to handle whatever he's handling, but I insisted.

Whatever he needed to go do seemed serious. His expression and demeanor totally changed when he got the phone call.

Plus, he never leaves my shifts early. He's too obsessed with Evelina.

I decide to walk down the block a bit as I call for an Uber, wanting to get some fresh air—I hate being cooped up all winter long. I just wish I wouldn't have forgotten my coat. I was in a hurry to get to the bookshop in time and somehow rushed out without it, not even noticing. Our heated garage makes it feel like an endless summer.

The air whips at my skin, and I start to regret my decision because of the cold, paired with the fact that this city gets so damn dark in the winter, despite all of the high-rises and buildings doing their best to light up the streets.

I take my phone out to thumb a text to Remi, desperately needing to talk to her about our night at the club, when I'm tightly gripped around the waist and pulled into a dark alley. I do my best to kick and scream and thrash in the arms of my captor—but it's to no avail.

I'm thrown to the ground, and I immediately curl up into a ball, searching which way is the quickest escape from the narrow passageway. All too quickly, though, the bright light that was shining from a streetlamp is put out by a shadow.

I let out a guttural scream as I realize there are two men now. One has some kind of Halloween mask over his face, and is surely the one who grabbed me. He's standing only feet

from me, wearing all-black clothing and holding what I can tell is a glimmering blade.

Each time the other man moves closer to us, a fraction of light spills back into the alley and bounces off the knife.

“You even think about touching her again, you’re dead, motherfucker.”

The words give me pause, stopping me from trying to crawl away and forcing me to try to get a good look at the second man.

But it doesn’t matter. I don’t have to see him because I’d know that voice anywhere.

Deep. Foreboding. Gritty.

The sexiest sound I’ve ever heard.

“Dante.”

It isn’t a question; it’s the truest statement I’ve ever spoken.

“Find your own whore, dickwad.” The first man steps toward Dante, and I know that was the wrong move.

Dante’s eyes flick from where I am on the ground back to the man who threw me here in the first place. I freeze, an endless amount of conflicting emotions surging through me as I watch Dante step up to the stranger and pull a gun from his side.

“Woah, woah, woah. Cool it, m-man. Take the whore, then. There’s plenty of rich bitches coming out of that party happening down the street tonight. Coulda f-found your own...” he stammers and holds his palms up toward Dante. The knife is still gripped tightly with his thumb as his fingers shake.

I latch my eyes back onto Dante’s as he cocks his gun, the sound echoing through the alleyway. People walk by but don’t even bother to glance in our direction.

“You have no manners,” Dante says, and tsks. “Who taught you to talk that way about women?”

Before the man can answer, Dante delivers a hard blow to his face, and on impact, his nose makes a sickening crack. Blood flows freely down his face. He makes an attempt to run, but Dante grabs ahold of him and slams him against the brick wall, forcing a loud grunt from the man.

“Come on. I’ll go! I’ll go. Didn’t mean anything by it.”

Something tells me that doesn’t matter to Dante. The look in his eyes is one I’ve seen plenty of times before, just not from him. This is an entirely new side of him—one I had no idea existed...one that chills me to the bone.

Darkness swirls in his amber eyes. His chest puffs in and out rapidly as the man struggles to break free. Struggles but doesn’t succeed.

“You’re lucky I don’t want to make a big mess,” Dante grits out. “But make no mistake, I will come for you. You can watch over your fucking shoulder, but you’ll never see me coming. But when I do”—he rips the man’s wallet from the back of his jeans and pulls out his identification card—“it’ll be your fucking death sentence.”

Dante takes the knife from the man and pats him down before letting him run—and he does. He sprints in the opposite direction down the alleyway as Dante shakes his head, glancing down at the ID and stuffing it into his own pocket.

“He can run, but tomorrow, he’ll be a fucking dead man. I quite like a good game of cat and mouse.” He turns to me. “Giana, are you okay?”

I’m still frozen on the ground when Dante comes closer and bends down. He pushes the hair out of my face and pulls me up to stand.

My mind spins, trying to decipher how the hell he just appeared out of nowhere. How it’s even possible that he’s here right now.

“Dante...how are you here?” I ask, struggling to make sense of everything.

Too much has happened in such a short amount of time. Leaving the bookshop, being pulled into the alley, Dante just

seemingly showing up out of thin air.

His hand in mine is warmth and safety, and part of me wishes it wasn't. The logical side of my brain knows this is ending before it can even begin, and I need to protect my heart from any further damage being in this man's presence can do to it.

"I'll explain. I need to get you out of here, though." He starts pulling me behind him and then asks, "Have you eaten?" But he then immediately follows up with, "Fuck it. Doesn't matter. Let's go. It's my turn to show you one of my favorite spots."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Giant

I'M no one's hero. Certainly not a fucking Amato's. But if I'm not her hero, what am I?

Her fucking stalker, that's for certain. Still, I reason that had I not been watching her, she'd either be hurt or dead. I clench my fist, relishing in the soreness of it, knowing that the motherfucker who tried to hurt her will be gone in the next twenty-four hours.

I place my hand on the small of Giana's back and lead her into Vinny's, my favorite diner in the city. It's on DeSantis territory, obviously, and the owner and my father go way back. I've been coming here since I was a toddler, and I've got some beautiful memories here with Sofia.

The familiar sound of the old bells hanging from the door chime, and I follow in behind Giana before calling out, "Evening, Nonna!" when I see the elderly woman who has been a staple in my life since I was young.

She wipes down the counter that the old cash register rests on and immediately lights up when she sets her sights on me.

"*Ciao, Nipote!*" she calls before making her way over to us just as Giana and I find a booth to sit in.

Nonna cups my face, her palms warm against my cheeks. She brings my head down, causing me to bend toward her, and

kisses my right cheek, then my left, and my right once more.

I envelop her once she's done with her necessary greeting and breathe in the scent I've come to associate with her—marinara and spices. This is a diner with American food, but there's a small Taste of Italy corner on the menu, too.

The old woman is barely five feet tall and pushing eighty years old. Vinny is my father's best friend and also Nonna's son. Her apron is a wreck from her long day of work, and I want to tell her that she needs to go rest her feet, but I know she'd just scold me.

Nonna customarily greets Giana with a double kiss and the smile I've come to love. Then, she turns to me.

"I know what you're thinking, Dante," she says, her voice shaky from age. She's worked hard her whole life, and it shows on her face, in her walk, and even in her voice. "Shush, boy. I'll rest when I'm dead."

I just chuckle as one of the waitresses comes over and takes our drink order, and Nonna goes back to cleaning up.

"That's your grandmother?" Giana whispers, smoothing down her hair. "My family isn't traditional Italian by any means, and I don't know much of the language, but I know what Nonna means."

"No, just a close family friend," I tell her as we settle into the booth.

She slips the jacket off that I forced her to put on during the walk to my car, and I marvel at how beautiful her warm olive skin is, even in the cold Chicago winter. She's got a glow to her that makes her even more alluring. I trail my eyes down to her collarbone and to the off-the-shoulder top she's wearing.

And then she briefly flits her hand up to her ear, pushing her hair back, and I notice the engagement ring on her finger. She quickly moves her hands to her lap, but I saw it before she had a chance.

Fucking Blood Syndicate.

It's just one of the many things I've found out about her since I learned who she is. She's been sold off to the fucking cartel, of all people. Leave it to Amato to give his daughter away to fucks like them. He's essentially handing her a death sentence. A ticket to be sold into a trafficking ring or be used and abused until she's dead.

It's not going to happen.

Fuck.

I can't let that happen. The voice in my head is becoming more persistent as my subconscious becomes more protective over the woman I'm meant to be destroying. Still, I don't know how I'll stop it, but I can't let her family do that to her.

But is what I'm planning any better?

Yes. Of fucking course it is. I want to use her against her father, not sell her into a sex ring. Jesus Christ.

When her hands come back up to the table, the ring is no longer on her finger, and I marvel at her wit. She was almost a step ahead.

Almost.

"Dante, I—" She stops abruptly and smiles at the waitress who sets down our drinks.

She must be new, a redhead I've never seen before. One I probably would've eye fucked before inevitably tipping my chin at her for her to come here. We would've flirted, she would've leaned in close, and after the rigmarole of lust and anticipation, we would've fucked. And then anytime I saw her, I'd watch her blush as she remembered what my cum felt like dripping down her leg. But that was before.

Before *her*.

Fucking hell.

I tell her we'll need a few moments, and when she walks away, Giana starts again.

"Dante, thank you for what you did back there. I just don't understand—"

“Right place, right time, angel.”

She looks at me with narrowed eyes, and for some reason, I find myself giving her a piece of the truth.

“I wanted to see you,” I tell her. I did want to see her. I can’t stop fucking thinking about her, and I’m driving myself crazy. “I remembered that you put your volunteering down on your questionnaire at the club, and I decided to come by. I was in the neighborhood.”

And I also forced one of my men, one of my very tech-savvy men, to hack into their low-budget system and find the schedule so I’d know when she’d be arriving and leaving, too.

I decide to keep that bit of information just for myself.

“I thought we agreed to see what happened? If I could make it back, I would, and—”

“Yeah, well, that’s not working for me anymore, Giana.”

Another true statement.

She stares at me with those ice-blue eyes of hers for a moment. Unsaid words linger between us as I wait for her to tell me I’m a fucking psychopath so I can agree with her.

She glances down at her hands before meeting my eyes again.

“I’ve never had anyone care enough to seek me out,” she says, and I want to tell her that she’s dead wrong.

I’m willing to bet many of her father’s enemies are planning something right now that involves her, but the thought makes me fucking ill.

Instead, I just say, “Well, now that we got that out of the way.”

“What makes this spot one of your favorite places?” she quickly asks, and it’s apparent she wants to move on from this conversation as much as I do.

Memories. My sister. Even my wife. My dead wife.

The list goes on and on.

“Well, I was pretty much raised here. My family and I ate dinners here every Wednesday after mass and most Saturdays for lunch. My father is good friends with Nonna’s son, Vinny.”

“That’s really sweet.” She smiles, and I have to force myself to peel my eyes away from her, from the way she wears me down, extinguishing my resolve.

She is the enemy. And she doesn’t even know it. Doesn’t even feel like it.

“You must really miss them,” she says, her voice taking on a somber tone that I hate hearing from her.

The sadness. It’s deep within her. I feel it, and it tells me the comment was meant for me, but that maybe she’s got her own ghosts, too.

“Well, Julissa wasn’t here often. She would sometimes come on Saturdays, but by the time she came into my life, we didn’t come quite as much. Most of us were grown or almost grown and had other things to do. But my sister...”

I can’t enter these doors without thinking of Sofia, and sometimes I think I’m a fucking masochist.

Sometimes I think I just need to feel close to her again.

Most times...I don’t have a fucking clue.

“What was your sister like?” Giana asks, and I immediately don’t want to tell her a fucking thing.

I hate that I’ve already talked about my wife to her, uttered her fucking name to an Amato. The sole reason she’s no longer here.

I steel my spine and force the flash of anger to dissipate. I need to keep up my façade for as long as I can.

“You remind me of her,” I say, and I shouldn’t. “Not in a weird, fucked-up way,” I add before she can get the wrong idea.

But it’s the truth. And every once in a while, I think she could use it.

“Why?” Giana takes a sip of her water and glances down at the menu before flitting her eyes back to mine.

I admire those blue eyes of hers. I swear they’re fucking hypnotizing, pulling me in and dragging me under. Making me confess things like a fucking sinner at church.

“She felt similar to you about our father. He doesn’t sound like yours, but he was strict. He was always afraid of something happening to her. And I guess...parent’s intuition, right? It’s like he knew. And he did everything in his power to keep her safe—we all did—but it wasn’t enough.”

There’s something new in her eyes. An understanding, maybe. I can’t pinpoint it, but she looks at me like she’s seeing me for the first time, and it’s fucking terrifying but also somehow...a really fucking good feeling.

One I need to forget about.

Not latch onto.

I am not a soft man.

And I need to remember that when I’m around this beautiful woman who could very well be my fucking demise.

“We should order,” I tell her. Shutting off the part of my brain that continues to defy me despite my greatest efforts to not allow this woman to penetrate my carefully constructed walls.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Giana

WHO AM I, and what have I done with the Giana I was before Dante?

The question reverberates in my mind as we walk into Dante's sex club. When he asked where he could take me after we ate, I didn't hesitate before telling him I wanted to come back here—to the place I can't stop thinking about.

The things happening inside these walls are beyond compare. So intriguing...enthralling. I can't stop obsessing over it.

Things almost went too smoothly. I sent a text to Niccolò, told him he needed to cover for me, and he agreed to stay out until I'm ready to go home. I conveniently left out the part about the almost mugging, and I'd never tell him where I really am, but he thinks I'm with Remi and that we'll meet up in a couple of hours. It's his job to tell our father, and since it's coming from one of his prized sons, I'm sure there will be zero pushback.

Oh, to be a man in this world.

I forward things over from my actual phone to my burner phone and power down my real phone, thankful I have the burner with me so I can continue communicating with Nico when need be.

Dante leads me around the dimly lit club as we weave through to a hallway that's much quieter. I didn't see this part of the club during my original tour, but it's very similar to the other hallway with the viewing rooms, doors on either side of the hall, the dark purple and black walls, and the same sconces throughout the club.

"This way, Giana," he says, continuing to lead me.

Adrenaline pumps throughout my body, still coursing through my veins from everything that's transpired. I linger my eyes on his backside, the suit coat around his shoulders, the most dressed man in this entire building. It fits him like a damn glove, causing my stare to loiter on his broad shoulders until he stops us in front of an ornate door, complete with Renaissance carvings that add texture and gorgeous detailing.

"You want me to teach you, but I need to know what your limits are first," he says. "We're not fucking tonight."

My face falls, although I don't think I'm quite ready anyway. Still, the timeline we're working with doesn't leave much room for simply getting to know each other either.

"Soon. But tonight, I want to learn more about what you want, what you're interested in, how I can please you." He narrows his eyes at me as he opens the door and motions me inside.

The second I cross over the threshold, that adrenaline that was surging through me moments ago spikes to an all new level. My eyes can't decide where to focus. It's all so fucking beautiful—sultry and enticing.

A mixture of votives, tea lights, tapers, and pillar candles are arranged throughout the room. From the floor to hanging shelves and tables, the room is illuminated strictly by candlelight. The flames flicker on floating shelves to my right, and I finally break away from the awe of the candles and to the beautiful burgundy color of the walls and a strikingly gorgeous black chandelier with crystals cascading from it in the center of the room.

“Dante,” I whisper...I think. “Dante, this room is beautiful.”

I can't formulate words because I have never seen such a beautifully decorated space in all my life.

“Welcome.” A voice sounds from the far corner of the room, one that's dim with shadows and low light.

I jump and shift my attention to the corner and realize a man and woman are both standing there. They step forward, each wearing barely there lingerie; the woman in thin, see-through fabric that shows off her bombshell physique. She's gorgeous, with an hourglass figure, a large chest that fits her frame perfectly, and hips and curves for days.

The man towers over her. His blond hair is long and unruly, his facial hair a medium length, as if he's growing it out, making him appear rugged but still very handsome. I glance down to the fabric shielding his groin area from view.

“Giana, this is Naomi,”—Dante gestures to the woman—“and this is Christopher.”

We all close the distance between us and exchange handshakes and pleasantries, and somehow, even though I feel out of place, I don't feel uncomfortable.

I swear it's the atmosphere.

There's something about it.

“These two help new members, and even members who are looking to delve into other areas of kink and fetish fantasies, decide where and what they are most interested in.” Dante looks from me to Naomi and Christopher before meeting my eyes again.

The dark brown and golden hues pull me in and refuse to allow me to look anywhere else. Refuse to give up their hold on me, and this moment.

Naomi smiles, shadows flickering over her beautiful dark skin. “We'd love to start off by figuring out which areas of play you'd like to start with, set limits, and then allow you to try something out tonight, if you're willing. We can work with

you on an ongoing basis to make sure your voice is heard and your limits and expectations are being met.”

I agree, and the four of us sit on the oversized bed together.

My brain still refuses to comprehend this is where I am.

But I lean into the unknown and allow it to consume me, realizing how badly I want this. How much it excites me. The possibility. The danger. The ecstasy I’ve seen radiating off other people in this club.

Naomi and Christopher go through lists of different fetishes and kinks and sexual acts. Their lists are much more detailed than the original questionnaire that Remi and I filled out together. Things I’ve never heard of—not shocking, I suppose—are thrown out at me: role playing, nylon fetishes, exhibitionism, breath play, piss play, edge play, cuckolding, and temperature play.

I have a strong feeling this isn’t even close to the half of it, and perhaps these are the most popular acts happening in the club...? I’m not completely sure, but some of the things I’m hearing sound like hard nos to me. Some of them, though...

Both Naomi and Christopher give me the rundown on some of the different kinks and fetishes they’ve brought up, giving me insight as to what exactly happens or what the parties are looking for when seeking out these different acts of play. I feel a bit more on their level once they’ve explained more about each of the different areas they’ve suggested.

“Does anything that we’ve gone over sound intriguing, Giana?” Dante questions, and I nod, feeling equal parts excited and anxious.

All three sets of eyes are on me as I try to decide where to begin.

What sounds least threatening but also the most compelling?

“I think...” I start, nodding and attempting to reassure myself that yes, this is what I want, “I think I want to learn more about the temperature play first.” I look at the three of

them. “Breath play sounds intriguing, too. But maybe ease into things for tonight.”

Dante smirks at me, something knowing and dark in his expression.

It only serves to turn me on more.

My core knots, twisting as desire floods through me, and I can tell Dante somehow senses my eagerness as he runs his tongue along his bottom lip—it’s as if he’s beckoning me. *Daring* me.

He stands from the bed, and the rest of us follow. I trail behind him to a flat table-looking bed thing. It sits low to the ground and looks like a massage bed, and he motions for me to climb onto it.

“We need to talk about limits, safe words, and safe gestures,” Christopher says as I get onto the table. “Temperature play can be absolutely captivating, but it’s also something we need to understand prior to allowing you to play.”

Christopher’s voice is giddy and light, such a stark contrast to Dante’s. It feels like he really wants me to feel safe, and I appreciate that from him.

“What’s your limit?” Naomi asks as Christopher disappears from the room. “Would you like to stick to cold or hot? Perhaps a mixture of both? Do you have a preference of what you’d like to try?” she asks, then continues, “The heat will be controlled by you and your partner—in this case, Dante.”

I don’t miss the subtle twitch Dante has. As if her hinting that I may have a different partner strikes a nerve. Maybe I’m just dreaming...but he did react.

I think about Naomi’s questions. Heat sounds more enticing than cold.

“Can we start with heat and alternate if we want?” I ask, and she nods with a smile just as Christopher comes back in carrying what looks like supplies.

Dante interjects, “Of course we can, kitten. I need to know your safe word and safe gesture. These are two of the most important things prior to play.”

Why does everything this man says sound sexier than anything I’ve ever heard? He literally makes anything and everything sound so damn compelling.

I have no idea what a proper safe word or safe gesture is, and I really wish I would stop showing everything on my face, because now even Naomi can apparently read me.

“It can be hard to decide on words and gestures, especially being new to the whole aspect of this world. If I may,” she offers, as Dante strokes my covered thigh, “use something simple. Tell your partner ‘green’ if you feel safe. It means you’re okay and you feel comfortable. You can use ‘yellow’ if you’re still okay, but you’re edging closer to your limits. ‘Red’ is if you need to stop immediately.”

Dante helps to lower me onto the table as Naomi backs away.

“Does that make sense?” he asks, and I nod.

“Words, kitten.” He chuckles. “I need words, especially right now.”

“Yes, Dante.” I wiggle on the bed until I’m comfortable. “Yes, I understand.”

He smiles at me and runs his fingertips down my arm, leaving familiar goose bumps in their wake. “*Sei bellissima*,” he says. “You’re beautiful.”

“We need a gesture. This will be more important during the breath play you mentioned wanting to explore. But you need to have a safe gesture, too. We can use something like snapping your fingers. Would that be okay?” he asks, and I agree, using my words.

“I think we’re safe to get started, then, kitten. Remember, green, yellow, and red. I’m going to use this candle wax to start.” He points to the wax. “It melts down into massage oil, and it’s a good starting point. As opposed to normal wax that

hardens once it starts to cool, this wax melts into an oil substance, making it easier for play.”

My mind immediately races with thoughts of how many women he’s done this with.

He seems to know exactly what he’s doing.

“First, though, I need your clothes off. You can take everything off, or if you’d prefer just exploring one area of your body at a time, that works, too.”

He leaves it up to me, and I decide to take my top off, leaving my bra and jeans on for now. I glance over at a small table that Naomi and Christopher have rolled over and set the supplies on before meeting Dante’s eyes again—only to find the man practically salivating.

Over me? His gaze is glued to my chest and then bounces from my covered breasts and down to my bare stomach and back up again. There’s a hunger in his eyes I’d be careless to miss.

There’s a couple of different candles, a lighter, aloe vera, and what looks like a wax warmer with wax already melted inside it, among other things.

Naomi and Christopher fade into the background, and suddenly, it’s just the two of us.

“We need to establish a safe temperature for you,” Dante begins. “One that brings you to the brink but doesn’t facilitate in any unwanted or unpleasurable pain. Are you ready?”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Yante

THE MOTIVE? To use her to get to her family.

The current state of said motive? Unequivocally fucked.

As I watch her giving herself to me, surrendering her control on the table splayed out in front of me, the only thing my fucking mind can rationalize is the fact that I want to be nine inches deep inside her and pleasuring her in an entirely different way.

She apparently thinks better of leaving her bra on, and she sits up just a bit and takes it off, freeing herself. Showing herself to me in a brand new fucking way.

And I swear it's my fucking undoing.

It's like this woman has me in a trance, and I hate it. But I also kind of fucking love it.

After the conversations we've had, what's happened tonight, and just being around her...I'm fucked in the head. I want to bring her just as much pleasure as pain, and I'm going to fuck around and skew my intentions.

But I currently don't give a shit.

It's extremely difficult to tear my gaze away from her perfect fucking tits. From her unblemished, smooth skin to her rose-colored peaked nipples...everything about her is flawless.

I want to bite down on her taut flesh, explore her with my tongue.

Lure out the beautiful sounds I've been dying to hear escape from her throat.

I scoop some of the massage oil wax out of the warmer and hold it high above her belly.

"The higher I hold it, the cooler it will be before it hits your skin," I tell her. "The second the air hits it on the way from the jar to your skin, it starts cooling, so the higher, the cooler, and the lower, the warmer the wax. We'll start up here."

"I'm ready," she says, her pretty mouth forming a smile as she looks up to where I hold the jar above her stomach.

I tip the jar enough so just a small amount of white wax drips out, and it falls to her skin and creates a small pool of oil just under her breastbone. I groan when I see the oil against her skin. There's something so fucking sexy about wax play. The ability for it to inflict so much fucking pain, but also the contrasting capability to please to an all new level.

"Mmm," she moans, and my already thickening cock decides it's time to come out and play, too. "God, that was..." She inhales a quick breath, her stomach and chest quickly rising and sinking. "I liked that."

"Too cold? Just right?" I ask her, knowing it couldn't be too hot by the point it reached her skin.

I look down at it, and I'm unable to resist setting down the jar and using one fingertip to trail the warm oil from the center of her chest up and between her tits and just below her neck.

"I could definitely handle warmer. Green."

When she uses her safe word, I have the urge to bend down and claim her mouth.

"Good girl," I say. "You catch on quickly, don't you?"

She nods with a grin before sucking her lower lip into her mouth, and goose bumps break out along her skin.

“This wax is made for massage, so it won’t harden as it cools. Makes for easier cleanup, and it’s good for first-time use,” I tell her, and she nods. “Ready for more?”

“Yes.”

I pour the oil back into the warmer and scoop out a fresh jar full, this time holding it closer to her skin. I could probably still hold it farther away, but I have a feeling she can handle this.

I tip fresh wax onto her bare stomach, and the moment it hits, she jolts. Her mouth falls open, and then her lips purse as she blows a sharp breath out.

“Yellow. Can we stay here for now?” she asks, and I oblige.

I want her pleased. I want to pull every single ounce of it from her body and leave her writhing for more—desperate with fucking ravenous need.

The way I feel right now, for her.

My cock swells, and I do my best to keep my focus on her, using my hands to massage the oil into her stomach and up to her breasts. I pause, and she gives me the okay to touch her tits with a nod. I palm them, resisting the carnal desire heating inside me to grab her, to hurt her...to make her scream and beg. To leave bruises on her skin and then kiss each one to soothe them.

Instead, I run my hands over her delicate skin, the only barrier the hot oil as it glides across every inch of her chest. This is about her. Not my desires. Making her feel good.

She arches her back slightly, pushing her breasts toward me and letting out another moan; this time it’s longer, less stifled. I work her breasts, grabbing hold of them and massaging the oil into them. I roll my thumbs over her hard nipples, circling them with the pads of my thumbs as she cries out.

She glances over to the area Naomi and Chris were in when we first came in, but they’re gone. I can’t tell if there’s

relief in her features or if she's disappointed that we're not being watched.

This woman surprises me at every turn.

"Tell me what you're feeling, Giana," I coax her and continue massaging the oil into her skin. Doing my best to not pull myself out of my fucking pants and have my way with her.

This is about her. I know that. But I shouldn't want that.

Fucking Christ.

This internal war is greater than any external, any physical war I've ever taken part in.

"It feels so good. The warmth of the wax, and your touch. Your hands on me," she admits with a shaky breath. She inhales, and her chest rises and caves in, rises and caves in, the wax pooling each time she does it. "I want more."

I look into her eyes and decide to give her what she wants.

What kind of man would I be to deny her?

Once I've filled the jar, I get onto the table and straddle her, and her eyes go wide.

"This time I'm going to splash some onto your chest. The feeling you'll get is slightly different from letting it carefully drip. I won't hold it much lower than before. But I don't want it to hit your face, so I'm going to hold it closer to me and then splash it up your body."

She agrees, and I do as I said and bring the jar close to my own chest before releasing it toward her while I continue straddling her.

"Fuck!" she cries out, and I immediately go to wipe it away, thinking it was too hot, too much, but she swats my hands away and yells, "Yellow! I'm fine. Fucking yellow."

She swats my hand away again, and her heart rate intensifies. I see it just from the quickened rise and fall of her chest. I snap my eyes back to those tits of hers. How badly I want to take them into my mouth and make us both come.

The hot liquid sloshes around on her body, streaming downward in small rivulets, some going into her belly button and some rolling farther down to the edge of her waistband.

“It hurt.” She clenches her eyes shut before glancing down to the oil as I start massaging it into her skin. “But at the same time, it felt unreal. How can something painful make me feel so euphoric and alive?”

Her question sends a shiver down my spine.

Pain manifests as pleasure in so many ways.

Rather than answering her, I work the oil into her skin after setting the jar back down. Her little moans and sighs get the fucking best of me. Before I lose complete control over myself, I bring her to a sitting position, the leftover oil sliding down her skin. I bring her mouth to mine, pulling her into me as I bite down on her plump bottom lip, and she gasps.

I don't intend on drawing blood, but I do nonetheless.

She breaks away and stares at me for a beat as tiny droplets fall to her chin, and then to her chest.

Fuck me. I didn't mean to bite that fucking hard. My eagerness got the best of me. I'm not a man who is subtle. Who can easily control my emotions or my actions. It's just never been easy for me.

“I'm sor—”

Giana cuts me off as she presses her mouth to mine again. She drapes her arms around my neck, pushing her body into mine. Her blood smears onto my lips as she forcefully takes what's hers.

What *can't* be hers. For fuck's sake.

She pulls away, breathless, and silence lingers between us as I run the pad of my thumb along my lip and look down to see her blood covering my skin.

And then, I taste her.

Her pretty blue eyes grow wide as I suck every last drop of her blood from my thumb—the warm metallic liquid giving

me a fucking incomparable high. I bend down and lick the droplets from her chest and then from her chin, cleaning her.

She's not getting away from me easily now.

Morals be damned.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Giana

GONE IS the woman from last night. She's been replaced with good girl Giana. The dotting daughter and ever-disciplined prized possession of Gabriel Amato.

When Dante saved me from the man in the alley and took me to his favorite spot...it felt like I was living in this dreamworld. One where I was, once again, able to just be.

It's like the best drug I could ever think of.

Moving freely. Living on my own terms.

When I spoke about his sister, everything clicked into place for me. This man isn't just some sex club owner. He's a good man. He cares about his family, and he had an unbelievable bond with his sister. One that's left him hurting and messed up but somehow...still willing to step in and help others. Like me.

And then he asked me what I wanted to do, and goddamn, did he deliver.

I haven't stopped thinking about him, or the club, or the moments we shared in that room together.

He took care of me in a way no man ever has. Even after we were finished testing my limits, he rubbed my stomach down with aloe and told me about proper aftercare before I left

to meet back up with Niccolò. My brother was growing impatient, and I didn't want to ruin a good thing by having my father find me out. After Dante explained the aftercare, he called me an Uber, begrudgingly, but I didn't want my brother to see a random man dropping me off in a blacked-out vehicle.

He may be lenient with me, may treat me better than any other man in my family, but I know he's also protective.

My thoughts trail back to Dante.

I thought I was just like this big trophy for him. A virgin being served on a silver platter...but it feels different now.

I could get used to him.

To the way I feel around him.

And that scares me because I can't.

This room and these people only further remind me of that.

I glance around the enormous dining table at one of my father's best friend's restaurants, Signature Selections on Ninety-Fifth. My brothers, Gabriel Jr., Niccolò, and Matteo, sit in a line across from me, my mother and father on either side of me. And then there's the Martínez family. I wish I were anywhere but here.

My father and Matteo were gone when Niccolò and I returned home last night. Had they not been, I'm sure we both would've faced their wrath for being late. I didn't ask Niccolò what he told my father about us returning after our normal time, but whatever it was worked—my father hasn't brought it up. And I know it's because he trusts Niccolò more than he will ever trust me.

Gabriel Jr. eyes me as he stabs into his steak, giving me one of the looks I've come to know so well. He's planning something. And I know I'll be on the receiving end of his wrath tonight. I'm thankful for Niccolò and Matteo, each of them somehow having my back most of the time. But Gabriel Jr. has done nothing short of making my life hell for years.

There's picking on your siblings, especially your younger sister...and then there's what Gabriel's done to me.

My head pounds as I try to focus on the chandeliers and beautiful artwork surrounding us. I once read an article on diversion therapy, and it's safe to say...

It isn't fucking working.

I try again, roaming my eyes over the expensive floral arrangement in the center of our table. Only the best for a dinner between our family and the Martínez family. The blending of Chicago's oldest running crime family and the top cartel in the Midwest isn't an event to take lightly. Apparently, a room overlooking Lake Michigan, which rents for thousands of dollars an hour, is fitting for one of the last dinners we will have together prior to our wedding.

The thought makes bile rise from my throat and into the back of my mouth. The acidic liquid churns my stomach as I look briefly at Santiago, my fiancé.

He rubs his palms together, looking down at a plate full of the most expensive surf and turf this city has to offer, and I don't think he's bothered to even so much as glance in my direction. It's clear he only wants me for two reasons—to appease Roberto, his father, and to have a woman at his disposal.

I can't even think about what the Martínez family has up their sleeve, all the ideas they have for me. I've heard horror stories from other arranged marriages. Friends I used to have who were married off to suitors and used only for a place for these fuckers to stick their cocks in.

“So, Mr. Martínez,”—my father takes a drink of his liquor—“what can we do for you before these two exchange their nuptials? We've got, what?” He looks at his Rolex, pretending like he doesn't know, down to the damn minute, how much longer we have before the ceremony. “Ten days until Giana becomes a Martínez.”

I briefly glance back to the man I'm so close to marrying.

Santiago. The future leader of The Blood Syndicate Cartel.

Everything about him makes my stomach clench with pure disgust. From the brief conversations I've had with him to his

pedophile mustache and his greasy black hair...everything about him only signifies just how much I'd rather marry just about anyone *but* him.

Maybe I could even deal with the physical stuff. I'm not a complete asshole, but he's just an awful person to be around, too. I never feel comfortable in his presence.

Never.

And I can only imagine just how uncomfortable I'll be once I'm married off and living with him.

Roberto looks directly at my father over his own glass of dark liquor, his beady eyes boring into him as if he just asked him how business is, something the men never discuss in front of us women.

To men like this, women are nothing but toys.

We are to be used and abused and disposed of like the insignificant trash they think we are.

My mind wanders back to the man from the sex club. The one I haven't stopped thinking about in the past few days. *Dante.*

The way the touch of his hand on my skin filled me with an intense energy I can't ignore, let alone forget about. It was only meant to be physical, but after the rooftop and the diner...after the way he was watching me...how he saved me...the way he pleased me and took care of me...it feels like more.

I need to forget him, need to forget about those amber eyes. His dark-brown hair and his handsome smile. The way his mouth molded to mine in a way I've never felt before.

But I can't. And I'm still determined to get back there again before this wedding. To fully give away what's rightfully mine to give.

To *choose.*

My pulse quickens, and the same feeling I had just before the man pulled me into the alley washes over me. When I replayed those moments later that night, I assumed it was from

the man watching and waiting...but Dante was watching and waiting too.

What if he's watching me right now? What if he's seeing me sit at this table with my family—with cartel members? If he knew what was good for him, he'd stay far away from me, but the feeling in my gut is hard to ignore.

I take a deep breath and regain control of my rapid pulse. It's probably just from the scrutiny I'm under. All of these watchful eyes on me. My father, my brothers, my mother. Roberto and his son.

I'd rather keep on pretending, using my fucked-up coping mechanism and staying in the headspace I'm in while thinking of Dante.

I just hope I can get back.

I hope he's the first one to take me.

Because I know he wouldn't disappoint.

Shit.

I ring my hands under the table when I feel eyes on me. Glancing up, I notice my father staring daggers into my face as if he's waiting for something.

"Sorry, Father. What was that?" I ask, already knowing I'll face his rage later.

He clears his throat and sets his whiskey on the linen-covered table a bit harder than the previous times, rattling the ice in the glass.

"I said, why don't you tell the Martínezes about the Presidential Excellence Award you received?"

Santiago finally speaks up, taking a break from devouring his food. "To be frank, Mr. Amato—"

"Call me Gabriel, son," my father interrupts, and I don't miss the look Santiago shoots in his direction.

Pure fury.

“As I was saying, *Gabriel*, to be frank, I prefer my future wife to have...how do I say this...other redeeming qualities. I’m not as concerned with her intelligence as I am with her abilities in other areas.”

Gabriel Jr. starts cackling like the asshole he is as he rubs his palms together. Redness flares on my father’s cheeks, and his brows draw sharply together. He quickly regains his composure and clears his throat just as Roberto mumbles something to Santiago I can’t hear. My father takes a drink of water and sets the glass back onto the table with force, causing the table to shake and the water to spill over the edge of the glass.

I may be only a pawn, but I am *his* pawn, and I know he didn’t take a liking to such immodesty at the dinner table.

Not to mention...fucking yuck.

The man all but just told my father he’s more worried about my ability to give a proper blowjob than about my brain.

What a catch.

“If you’ll excuse me,” I say to the table, needing to go to the restroom before I throw up all over the table.

I stand, nearly losing my footing and tripping over my YSL gown. I knew this damn dress was a disaster waiting to happen. The beautiful red satin gown is perfection, but it’s also a damn death trap.

I pass the gold-plated walls, the signature statues, and outrageous sconces. The dim lighting is just enough to light the way in the dark hallway. I stomp like a petulant child toward the ladies’ room, feeling eyes on me the entire time, and I curse my father and the stupid cartel. Screw them all.

Once I’m inside, I check under each stall to be sure I’m alone before letting out a sharp, high-pitched whisper-scream, muffling it with the back of my hand. I run the water under my hands, aching to splash it on my cheeks that are warm with embarrassment, but can’t risk ruining my makeup.

As if I could scrub them all off the face of the earth, I rub soap into my hands quickly, digging my nails into my skin to

focus on a pain other than the one radiating in my chest.

“Screw them. Screw being a damn pawn. Screw—”

Warm arms wrap around my waist. Just as I start to let out a horrified scream, the arms are gone, and a palm makes contact with my mouth, cutting off the blood-curdling scream.

My eyes connect with his in the mirror, and I realize...it's him.

Dante.

“Promise to be a good girl and not scream?” he whispers into my ear, his breath hot on my skin and his deep voice penetrating every inch of my body, shattering my resolve. “At least, not right now,” he says. “Let's save that for later, yeah?”

He grins, and I don't miss the sexual innuendo.

I nod slowly, completely unaware of how he got in here, or why.

He gently removes his hand and gives me that same smile I've been obsessing over. This man. He's ungodly attractive, unfairly, too, even in street clothes. How can one man be so unbelievably delicious-looking? Jesus Christ.

“I can't stop fucking thinking about you, Giana,” Dante says, his voice low and deep, causing a knot to form in the pit of my stomach. “About these lips...” He stays behind me as we look at each other in the mirror, and he runs the tip of his finger down my lip, exposing my teeth. “About how you taste...” He moves his face to my neck and whispers the words into my ear, causing that knot to double in size. “About how badly I want to continue showing you everything you've been missing out on.”

Before I can even fully wrap my brain around what's happening, his hand clamps around my throat. He curls his long fingers, digging his fingertips into my skin. Fear blooms in my chest, and as I look into his eyes, he presses his forehead to mine.

“Did you know our minds can't truly distinguish pain from pleasure?” he asks. I yank backward from his grasp, but he

only tightens his hold. It isn't enough to fully cut off my air supply, but it's enough to make me wonder what he's getting at.

Why is he here? *How* is he here?

“Remember how you asked how something painful can make you feel so euphoric and alive? When you experience pain, your brilliant little body releases endorphins. And we know what endorphins do, yes? They get us high. Drunk on love and lust and fucking happiness. Those same endorphins block out our pain. They protect us from the shit that haunts us, kitten.” He pushes his hips into me and squeezes me tighter, bending down to whisper in my ear. “So which is it? Are you in pain right now? As my fingers prevent you from getting the oxygen you need? Or are you high? Have you relinquished that pain? What's that pretty little mind of yours telling you?”

He licks from my earlobe up to the top of my ear before gently biting my skin.

“What are you doing here?” I ask, and it comes out as a whisper.

“Answer me.”

I can't deny the desire pooling between my legs right now. But is it from seeing him again or the fact that my brain doesn't know if him choking me is pain or pleasure? I don't know.

“My hand looks good around your throat, angel.”

I glance at the door, or try to, knowing if we get caught together, if my father, Roberto, or Santiago sees me with another man, even if it's an innocent conversation, Dante's blood will be on my hands. They won't ask questions. They are made men. They take what they want, and they do so without reason.

He finally lets go, running his hand down my neck before smoothing it over the fabric of my dress.

“What are you doing here, Dante?” I ask, my heart beating wildly while I feel the thunderous thumping of my pulse in my

ears. “You can’t just keep showing up like this. You don’t understand—”

“I understand much more than you think I do.”

As if reading my earlier thoughts, Dante reaches over with his long, lean yet muscular arm, and with one simple flick of his finger, he engages the lock on the door. The bolt echoes throughout the small room.

My eyes widen as I shake my head. “Answer me. Did you just *need* to see me again?”

“Does it matter?” He shakes his head as if he’s batting my question away. “Yes. I needed to see you. I risked my fucking life getting in here. The owner of this joint doesn’t like me too much. I had to get a bit stealthy. Luckily for me, the cameras just so happened to be down. I don’t know how... I guess someone tapped in and fucked with them.” He winks. “As I knew he would, the owner called his security company, and they came out. I just had to pretend to be with them, even *borrowing* a shirt of theirs from a nice man I paid to get the fuck outta here, and I was let right in by a front-desk girl who was eye fucking the shit outta me.”

I’d love to do so much more than just eye fuck this man.

“I needed to see you again, Giana. I just can’t leave you alone.”

This gorgeous, sex-club-owning god is stalking me, and I like it.

There is something seriously wrong with me.

“This is more than just randomly deciding to show up to the place I volunteer and then sneaking into a restaurant, isn’t it? You’re stalking me, aren’t you, Dante?” I ask, feeling more myself than I have in a long time.

He’s intimidating, but not in the way my father or his men are. Not in the way The Blood Syndicate is. He’s intimidating because he looks like every sin I’ve ever dreamt of in the flesh.

Dante lets out a smooth chuckle before running one finger down my cheek and pushing himself into me. He's got me backed up against the sink with not even a spare inch of space between his body and mine.

"Would you like that?" he asks.

I don't know whether he's joking or being serious at first, but his lips draw into a line, and his scowl tells me all I need to know.

"You call it stalking. I call it observing. Either way." He shrugs. "I need more of you."

His bold eyes size me up, dark brows drawn together. He grinds against me, cups my face, and claims my mouth. Every single dreaded thought of what my life is becoming shrivels up and disappears, and suddenly it's just the two of us as he demands entry inside my mouth, his tongue tangling with mine as I moan, wordlessly pleading with him for more. He grows hard, his cock pushing against my stomach so forcefully I swear it's going to rip through his pants.

My body warms from his touch, with the weight of his body against mine, and I'm falling into fucking oblivion from his taste. Mints and liquor and lust and sin. He moves one hand to tangle in my loose curls, and the other trails down my body to my center. The same spot I've touched myself every night since meeting him.

"Dante," I whimper as he bucks his hips into me greedily, telling me he wants this as much as I do.

A knock on the door startles both of us, and he quickly pulls himself away and places a finger to my lips. I ache to suck it into my mouth, to show him what I've thought about each night when I'm touching myself to the thought of his hands on my skin.

He removes his finger and backs up. I slowly make my way to the door, and he goes to stand behind it.

The moment I open it, my mother is questioning what's taking me so long, why the door is locked, what my issue is. She's relentless.

“What is wrong with you? Get out of there.”

“I’m sick, Mom. My stomach is killing me. I locked the door so no one had to be in here while I’m throwing up. I’m not sure what’s wrong.”

She smooths her designer dress that probably cost more than this entire dinner, the room, and my own dress. “I don’t care. Finish and get out here. Now.” She seethes, her red lips twisted in a snarl. “And fix your lipstick. You’ve ruined it,” she adds before spinning on her heel and leaving without another word.

Dante immediately slams the door and locks it again. I take the seconds before he reclaims my mouth to look at how handsome he is in his charcoal suit. He fills it out in all the right places, from his wide frame and muscular arms to his long torso and legs. His mouth crashes against mine once more.

“Tell me you’ll come back. Come see me tonight. I can’t fucking stay away from you.” His words come in short pants against my lips as my body ignites with a pleasure that I’ve never felt in my life. “I’m done waiting.” Dante teases me, running his hands up and down my dress-covered thigh. “I need this”—he reaches under my dress and palms my pussy with one hand and pulls me into him with the other—“I am taking this pretty pussy of yours tonight, and I don’t give a fuck what you have to say about it.”

My head rolls back from the impact of his words. They should scare me. Should make me run in the opposite direction, but I refuse to lie to myself.

I love his dirty mouth.

His ability to get me high on his words.

I’m taking that pretty pussy...

God, I want that. I *need* that.

But things aren’t that simple, are they?

I whimper at the loss of his touch as his palm leaves my center.

“Things are complicated, and I can’t get away all the time,” I tell him, unsure how to tell him my father is a bit more overprotective than I told him about the other night.

Not many people would understand. And telling him he’s a mafia boss is out of the equation altogether. Not even Remi knows yet. Guilt burrows in my bones, and I justify that by reminding myself I’m keeping her safe.

“Well, you’re going to get away tonight. I thought I could stay away from you, but I can’t stop thinking about you, Giana.” He kisses me, and I can barely keep myself standing.

This man is quickly becoming a fantasy I’m not sure I can give up.

His ability to sense my every thought is uncanny, because he picks me up and sets me on the marble sink, placing his hands on either side of my face again.

“Tell me you’ll come,” he demands with a sly smile that makes me think he means that in more ways than one.

He hikes my dress up again, this time ripping my panties and throwing them to the ground. I stare at the fabric on the floor as a rush of warmth runs through my core.

“Tell me you don’t want this, and I’ll stop,” he says. “I’ll fucking hate it, but I’ll stop.” He runs his finger down my soaked slit, my desire for him evident. He smirks. “You don’t want me to stop, kitten. Don’t lie to me—don’t lie to yourself. I feel how fucking wet I make your sweet cunt.”

I shiver, and he chuckles like the beautiful, cocky man that he is. He bends down and looks at my bare center before looking up at me.

“Fucking glistening for me,” he growls.

Then, in one slow, ungodly holy and sinful movement, he darts his tongue out, licks me from the bottom of my slit to the very top, and sucks my clit into his mouth, forcing a long moan out of me.

Fucking fuck. Fuck!

His mouth against my skin is like a drug I've never known. My core tightens, and he comes back up to a standing position.

“Fix your dress, go out there, and remember that I am the reason you're dripping wet,” he demands, and my body ignites with something I can't even put into words.

Before I can think better of it, the words are falling from my lips, and I'm promising him something I don't know I can deliver.

“I'll be there tonight,” I tell him.

“I'll come for you if you aren't,” he says, and I believe him. “Don't disappoint me, Giana.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Yante

“HE’LL BE HERE IN A MINUTE,” I tell Leonardo, my family’s consigliere, and Van, the soldier we’ve brought with us.

The guy is young, twenty, but Leo and another one of our men have vouched for him, so I’ve taken him under my wing. I’ve been spending the last week showing him around and getting him ready to go out on his own, but things like this take time.

I do my best to train all of the soldiers coming in under me, refusing to leave it up to anyone else, especially since they will be classified as my men. If they fuck up, it’s on me.

“This is going to be part of your job description eventually,” Leo says to him. “You ready for this?” Leo looks from Van over to me and grins. “The key is to know when you need to be intimidating, know when you need to get down on a man’s level, and know when to act like their friend, even if neither of you believes it.”

Van nods, and true to my word, Benny rushes through a door and walks over to us, wiping sweat as it rolls down his cheek.

“Benny,” I say as I shake his sweaty palm, the white-gold chain on my wrist jingling as the two of us go head-to-head

over who has the firmer handshake. “Thanks for meeting me, Chief.”

The fat bastard is on the Amato payroll, so we’ve taken our meeting to one of my blacked-out, military grade SUVs, and I’ve decided to come to him—something I don’t typically do.

The alley behind the station is fairly covert, leading to what I can only hope is a quiet operation. Benjamin Rosco, the police chief, eyes me up with his baby-blues, no doubt uncertain why the fuck I called this special little meeting with him.

“Cut the shit, DeSantis. If Mr. Amato finds out I’m talking witcha’, he’ll have my fucking head. What’s this intel ya’ got?” The pig removes his hat and swipes at more little beads of sweat as they form.

He really is terrified of Amato.

He should be.

“Listen, I got word of some real fucked-up shit going on at the Amato strip joint. The one on Center and Ninety-Fifth. Don’t act like you don’t have eyes over there all the time, Benny boy.” Does the fuck realize me calling him Benny is an insult? If he does, he doesn’t act like it.

This is the fucker who got my dad penned up for ten years when I was a kid. I’ve got nothing but bad blood with Benjamin Rosco and his whole dirty, crooked crew.

“Cut to the chase, would ya’? I’ve gotta get back in there, and I’m startin’ to think—”

I raise my palm in a signal that I’m getting there. “I heard from a very reliable source that Gabriel Amato has the mayor’s missing daughter there. He’s got her chained up in one of the back rooms, a private whore for his top paying customers.”

The mayor’s teenage daughter went missing last year, and I have no idea where she is. It’s sad because I’m sure she’s just another casualty of the system here. And a really big part of me feels like a fucking jackass for using her probable death to

get these fucking pigs to raid Amato's strip club, but I need something that'll get these asshats to move.

“Listen, DeSantis, I ain't got no business dabbling in Mr. Amato's business transactions. You know as well as I do that we got a system in place. Don't act like you're above the bullshit, because I know your crew's got plenty of lowlife fucks you pay off, too.”

Rage boils in my gut.

I'm going to see Giana tonight even if I have to gut this fucker.

Instead of threatening with violence like I want to, I decide to put on a happy face and try another route.

“Think of it now, big boy. *Benjamin Rosco, Chicago's hero!* I can already see the headlines.” I pause for dramatic effect, to really let it sink in for Benny. “You may piss some of the Amatos off, but there's ways around that shit, yeah? You tell him they got it wrong. Tell him you had nothing to do with the raid you're gonna pull off tonight. Say you were home with a sick kid when your boys at the station got a tip. But to the news headlines? It's another story. You picking up what I'm putting down?”

The thirst for hometown fame starts to gnaw at this dumb slob. He's buying it. He's eating every bit of this up. No way Amato's gonna buy that he didn't orchestrate this, but that's what he gets for dealing with the snakes that make up that family. That's what the coward gets for pinning shit on my dad that wasn't his fall to take.

“What's in it for me? You gonna start signing checks?”

I shake my head and can't help the low chuckle that escapes me. “*Maledetta merda.* Nah, Benny. I'm gonna let you live. I'm gonna let that sweet-as-a-fucking-peach daughter of yours live. What's Jenny now? Fifteen years old, right? Goes to that private school in River North? Has the bedroom on the first floor. Big bay windows—”

Benny slams his fist against my shatterproof window. “Fuck. All right, DeSantis, all right. Shut the fuck up so I can

think.”

I’d never touch his daughter. But I know any man’s weakness is his child.

Does it make me fucked up? Maybe. But it’s gonna get the job done in three, two, one...

“We’ll bust in just after sundown.”

I smile and adjust the cuff link on my sleeve.

“Good boy, Benny,” I tell him. “Now get the fuck out of my sight.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Giana

THERE'S no way in hell I would have delivered on the promise to meet Dante tonight had my father and brothers not been called to one of their clubs that was being raided.

Normally, I'm never let in on my father's business, but he and my brothers were frantic as they left the house. Their normally cool, calm, and overly collected demeanors shattered from the news. Especially because the police in that particular neighborhood are on my dad's payroll; another bit of information I found out tonight.

My father has been shielding me from the inner workings of our family's business because I'm a woman. It's just another bullshit stereotype that women aren't strong enough to handle the life. I'm more than strong enough, if only dear Daddy knew.

I'm walking into Dante's sex club again—and starting to feel like I'm a member myself. The moment I step through the door, Dante is pulling me behind him to one of the private rooms adjacent to the viewing rooms.

“Care to tell a girl hello?” I ask, to which he scoffs.

“Care to keep me waiting another second longer?” He turns around and plants a rough kiss to my lips, biting down on my bottom lip and growling against my mouth. “Hello,

Giana.” He pulls me in and slams the door shut. “I don’t like to be kept waiting. And I really don’t like having to hunt down my conquests.”

“Am I a conquest of yours, Dante?” I ask playfully, allowing my confidence to come to the surface now that I’m with him and not the powers that be. “Because if that’s all I am to you...”

He picks me up and twirls me around before lightly tossing me on the perfectly made-up bed. I haven’t even had a second to look at my surroundings because every ounce of my attention is drawn to him. He crawls up the bed on top of me, his large frame casting a shadow on me.

“You know you’re more than that. I wouldn’t come looking for you, and I certainly wouldn’t have brought you out with me if you were only a conquest to fuck.” He grins. “I’ve been dying to get you back here.”

There are two sides to Dante—three if you count the rage in his eyes when he sank his fist into the man in the alley’s face. He’s feral, like in this moment right now. I can practically feel how badly he wants me. But then there’s also the man he was in the diner. When he opened up to me.

Both sides are equally intriguing, and I find myself quickly becoming captivated by his presence. That taste of freedom mingles with the taste of being wanted by a man I reciprocate that want for.

For the first time in my life.

“I crave you. Remembering the way you felt in my arms. Your perfect, pouty, crimson lips.” He runs a thumb down my lips, pulling the bottom one down and exposing my teeth. He moves his mouth to my ear, and his breath is hot, sending a chill down my spine in the best way. “Imagining every single inch of that perfect body of yours on display for me so I can worship you like the goddess you are,” he whispers before biting down on my earlobe.

“I have to say, I’ve enjoyed learning about what makes you tick, kitten, but tonight, I need more of you. And when I say

need, I swear to the fucking devil himself, I need that beautiful cunt of yours.”

My cheeks flame as the naughtiest words to ever be spoken to me leave his lips. He is sin and chaos, and something screams to me that he will be my downfall, my complete undoing, but I don't care. I cannot bring myself to give one solitary fuck. Not in this moment. Not ever. Not with the way his whiskey-colored eyes are reading my every cue like he was made to pleasure me.

This right here, this chemistry, this feeling of being on fire for someone else's soul, for their touch... This is what I've been missing my entire life.

“I...want...” I prolong telling him, as if I haven't thought about this at least ten times since the other night.

“Spit it out, kitten.”

It feels like my stomach is a glass jar with ten thousand butterflies inside it.

Butterflies. *Butterflies*? Have I ever felt them?

“I want you to teach me how to give a blowjob.” I spit the words out like they're on fire, and he immediately cocks his head, looking at me like I'm a damn fool.

I shrink into myself and make a move to sit up on the bed, but he doesn't move, doesn't let me up.

“While I'm all for you sucking my cock, and in fact, it's something I've been imagining all day, this is about you. Tonight is for you.” He bends down, kissing my neck, my chin, my throat.

I close my eyes and shake my head.

“Have you ever had an orgasm?”

I gulp back my anxiety.

“If you have to think about it—”

“I think so,” I admit.

He draws in a long breath before sitting on his knees, still straddling me. “You *think* so?”

He cocks his head, clearly a habit of his when he’s confused, something I commit to memory for when he’s gone.

“I mean, yeah. I think I have. I feel...excited...when I touch myself.”

I think about the way he made me feel earlier. I’ve never felt like that before.

Dante pulls me up to a sitting position and examines me from head to toe. “I can almost guarantee you that you haven’t if you only *think* you have.” He pulls his bottom lip in between his teeth, slowly shaking his head. “Kitten, you are an anomaly. How can someone”—he pauses to trail his finger down my cleavage, the dress I’m wearing showing just enough to be tempting but not enough to give everything away—“who looks like this be so underappreciated by the male population?”

For the second time today, every word I’ve ever learned flies out of my brain and into oblivion. I’m left staring at this beautiful man like a deer in headlights.

“Tonight’s lesson: how to orgasm,” he says, and suddenly my nerves all fade away.

I was more nervous thinking about not giving him a good blowjob, but I know my body. I know how to touch myself. Even if I’m not orgasming, I feel good while I’m doing it. Seems like a decent first lesson.

“Let’s start by getting you warmed up, yeah?” he suggests. “I’ll get all the kinks out so you can focus on nothing but pleasure. Strip down, kitten. You’re getting a massage.”

Being bare in front of Dante turns me on like nothing else. I haven’t even been fully naked in front of him, but even that’s been enough to send me over the edge—to form that knot at the base of my stomach and set every inch of my body on fire.

Dante will be the first man to see me this way, fully naked and vulnerable and completely bared to him. I have the power to give this piece of myself away—no one else.

He takes me by the hand and leads me to a full-length mirror. Standing behind me, he directs me to look at my reflection, and I start to slowly remove each article of clothing.

I start with the dainty straps of the revealing white dress, slowly sliding them down my shoulders. Dante lightly follows the trail of the straps, running his palms from my shoulders and down my arms.

“Is this how you undress each night?” he whispers into my ear, his voice gritty and dark. “Before you play with your perfect cunt, do you admire how beautiful you are, sweet girl?”

My mouth has gone completely dry, and I lick my lips, attempting any moisture I can get.

I grab hold of my dress by the bust and carefully, slowly start sliding the fabric down my torso, revealing my strapless black lace bra and naked stomach. Glancing at him in the mirror, I watch as his eyes follow the same path as the fabric; scanning from my chest down to my lower stomach as the dress finally falls to the floor, showing off the matching black G-string.

“Art,” he says.

I flick my eyes from my panties to his dark gaze, needing him to elaborate.

As if he knows, he does. “This body of yours is its own fucking art form. Like...”

I think this is the first time he’s been at a loss for words.

“Like heaven and hell conspired together to create something so beautifully damning, it should be a sin to even glance in your direction.”

The energy between us shifts, and my gaze falls to the reflection of my chest rising and falling in the mirror, quicker than just moments ago.

“Keep going, Giana.”

I do as I’m told, gently sliding both my bra and panties from my body and allowing them to fall to the floor. Once I’m

completely bare in front of him, he finally touches me again, and I realize how much just these past few minutes without his hands on my skin have left me aching with a desperate need. The way I feel when his touch collides with my skin.

He edges closer to me, and I feel how hard he is—how hard *I've* made him—as his cock comes into contact with the top of my ass cheeks. Wrapping his arms around me from behind, he palms my breasts, and goose bumps break out across my skin.

“Is this how you touch these perfect tits of yours?” His words send me spiraling, but it’s his touch, the way he intimately runs his warm palms over my breasts, rotating between lightly and forcefully playing with my hard nipples, that makes me writhe beneath his touch. “Answer me, kitten.”

I shake my head and let it fall to his chest, my breath picking up as my pulse thumps away in my ears. It feels so good. Too good. All I can think about is how much I’ll miss this.

And I hate it.

“Then show me.”

I greedily swat his hands away, feeling my core tighten and heat run through me like a wildfire spreading just under the surface of my skin. I pause for a moment, that little voice in my head asking me what the fuck I’m doing. But I want this.

I want this *so* badly.

I take my breasts into my hands and show him exactly how I play with myself—watching him in the mirror the entire time. Taking my nipples between my thumbs and index fingers, rolling them, lightly flicking and then caressing each one with generous attention. I lightly run my nails in circles around the sensitive peaks, touching each sensitive nerve just enough to spark life into them.

Dante groans before I hear him whisper a “Fuck yes, baby.”

It’s low and barely there, but his words further stoke that flame inside me, encouraging me and pushing me to step out

of my comfort zone.

“I want you to touch me,” I tell him, desperate for him to make me come undone.

My eyes find his in the mirror just before he spins me around to face him and shakes his head. “Not yet. First you’re going to get on that bed.” He nods to the bed we were on not long ago. “And I’m going to give you the sex-club special.”

I snort out a laugh and quickly cover my face with my hands. “Listen, I’ll pretend you didn’t say that if you pretend I didn’t just snort like a beast.”

A smile crosses his face, lighting up his eyes, and the first thought that pops into my mind is, I could fall in love with that smirk of his. It comes out of nowhere, and I immediately shut it down. But it floats back in moments later, and this time, I can’t push it away. It lingers.

Once I’m adjusted on the bed, he gingerly takes off my grandmother’s necklace and sets it on the table beside us. I’m facedown so he has access to my neck, and I wiggle again until I’m comfortable.

I’m not mad about him working these kinks out. My body could use some attention.

“You’re going to give an *old man* a heart attack, Ms. *Carey*.”

He emphasizes the fake last name, and it catches me by surprise. A pang of guilt makes me chest heavy.

Another thought I bat away. *No time for feelings, Giana.*

It’s one of the first lessons my father ever taught me. One I’m sure will stick around for my entire life.

“You’ll never let me live that comment down, will you, Dante—?” I mimic his use of my name and remember I don’t know his last name.

I’m about to ask for it when I realize I don’t need him asking me more questions about mine, so I shut up instead.

“I’m thirty-eight, kitten. You were right. I’m much older than you. I was fucking seventeen when you were born. I was jerking off to porn before it was actually ethical while your mom was in labor, and then I had my own son not long after.”

For the first time, I actually consider the difference in our age, but ultimately, isn’t age just a number? I don’t know. All the men in my family are older than their wives. It seems rather comforting. A normal to this unknown I’ve thrown myself into.

Something drops on the floor, and I immediately go to pick my head up, but Dante pushes me back down. “Relax, kitten. Just dropped the oil. Awfully jumpy.”

I suppose he’s right. But if he only knew.

“Anyway,” I say, getting back to my point. “Men mature eons slower than women. You’re probably just now reaching my level of maturity,” I tell him with a smile, even though he can’t see it. “I don’t think I’ve ever met a man who was more levelheaded than me. No matter the age.”

“Damn. Getting cocky. I like it... It suits you well.”

He moves his hands from my neck down to my shoulders and then to my lower back. I have to give it to him—he is good at this.

I briefly wonder how many women he’s had his hands exploring like this, but at the end of the day, it doesn’t matter. Not to me. He’s with me right now, and he’s showing me just how good he is with those large hands of his.

I moan as he moves down to my ass, and then just under my cheeks, kneading the skin and doing exactly as he promised and working out each individual kink.

“Keep moaning like that, and we won’t have time for a lesson. I’ll be sinking my cock deep inside you before I can even finish this massage if you keep that up.”

I do my best to stay quiet as he works each section of my body like a pro. His palms kneading each muscle and sending me spiraling into an ecstasy-induced oblivion. He runs the tips

of his fingers up and down my back, scratching my skin with delicate precision.

Suddenly, I feel him bend over my back, and I shiver as he pauses his movements to run his tongue along the base of my neck, his breath hot against my skin. He slowly licks my flesh, leaving my skin blazing as he moves around my neck and up to my ear. His teeth sink into the side of my ear, and he gives it a firm tug before letting go and leaving my body trembling with aftershocks.

Holy shit.

I have never had someone touch me like this. I imagine the feeling of his hands on my body is similar to a drug for a user. For each gentle stroke, there's a rough squeeze or a sharp bite as his teeth sink into my flesh.

And I savor every single second of this high like it's the last one I'll ever experience.

He moves his palms along my body and whispers into my ear. "This is what foreplay feels like, kitten."

I clench with his words, the area between my thighs pooling with desire from his touch—his words.

Once he's got my entire body warmed and ready, his hands leave my skin, and I immediately feel greedy, needing his touch like I need oxygen.

"Turn over," he commands. "I want you to show me how you play with that pretty pink pussy."

This man is going to be the death of me.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Gante

I HATE that she's perfect in every goddamn way. Her body is top-notch, and that mind and sense of humor of hers are so fucking fitting. She's everything I've been taught to hate, but at the same time, I can't seem to correlate the words *hate* and *Giana* in my fucking mind.

I came into this night with an agenda, but the moment I saw her, my desire for her, for the *enemy*, overtook me. It's a dangerous fucking game, one I didn't sign up for but that I'm partaking in anyway because this woman has me in a choke hold.

No matter how badly I want to struggle free.

She's an angel in the middle of a fucking minefield.

Perfection in the pits of hell.

Nemica. The enemy, my traitorous fucking brain reminds me.

I've accomplished the bulk of what I wanted to tonight, and she didn't suspect a thing. That necklace of hers was the perfect spot. Damn thing fell right into my lap, and all I needed were a few minutes to have one of my men sneak in and plant the device into it as I worked away at her tight body. It felt too fucking easy.

I just wish she would stop being so...her. She's putting an ache inside my chest where my hatred should be burning.

And I hate it. She's all-consuming, and I need to figure out a way to get her off my mind. I'm teetering along this line between payback and obsession, and I feel myself slowly unraveling.

It's just so damn hard when my body, every fucking inch of me, responds to her in this way.

Giana quickly puts her necklace back on. She really meant it when she said she never takes it off. It seemed like it was her very first thought, even with all this sexual tension dripping in the air.

She rolls back over without a word, positioning herself in just the way I pictured as I was stroking my cock to thoughts of her. *The enemy*. She's lying back on the bed, knees bent, and just as she spreads her perfect thighs open for me, I catch her eye, and she quickly looks away.

"Eyes on me," I tell her, and it takes her a minute, but her eyes connect with mine—lust and passion burning inside those pretty irises of hers. "You keep your eyes on mine when you play with your pussy. Do you understand? Focus on me and me only, or you'll be punished."

"Punished how?" she asks, and I have to stop from grinning.

She's so pure and innocent.

"I won't hurt you, Giana. Any time my hands touch your skin, there will be nothing but a form of intimacy behind them."

My answer seems to satisfy her, and she nods.

"Okay, I understand."

"Good girl," I coax. "Now I want you to let go. You are so fucking sexy, Giana. You don't even fully realize the effect you have on men. I'm sure of it. Any of the men in this club right now would fall apart at your feet and would beg to get just a quick taste of you. Use that knowledge as confidence,

and show me exactly how you play with yourself when you're all alone. And don't leave anything out. I want to see every fucking thing."

I can practically see the surge in confidence from hearing my words. It's true. I don't know one single man who wouldn't fall at her feet. Although, I'd never let them touch her.

She's mine to play with. Mine to use. Mine to completely fucking lose my mind over.

The look in her eyes shifts from nervous to devious and playful and sends me spinning into an alternate fucking reality. I'd have a much easier time trying to use this woman if she didn't look at me like that. But I guess I brought this upon myself.

If I were a fucking blind man, none of this would be as hard as it is...or maybe it would.

I wouldn't see the way those tanned legs fall open for me and only me. How she eye fucks me as she slowly spreads that perfect pink cunt open with two fingers, just so I can see how tight she is.

Fuck.

If I've ever had a downfall, she's it.

"Talk to me, kitten."

She inhales as her head rocks back.

"I'm nervous."

Her fingers trail up and down her glistening pussy. It takes every ounce of restraint inside me to not close the space between us and devour her whole. Ravage her fucking pussy until she's seeing stars.

"I'm nervous, but I want this. I want to show you..." She pauses and then adds, "I usually play with my clit like this."

She hesitantly moves the tips of her index and middle finger to her pink bud.

“Yeah, why’s that? How’s it make you feel?” I coax her and adjust my cock, which is straining against my black pants.

I’m so fucking hard it’s damn near painful.

“Because...because it feels good. It feels like...God, I don’t even know. Like every nerve ending I have is sparking to life.”

She rubs her clit harder, those two fingers finding a perfect rhythm as she bites down on her plump bottom lip, driving me fucking wild.

“Do you ever stick those fingers into your pussy? Ever taste yourself?”

Her eyes snap open, and she shakes her head as she takes a break from her throbbing clit, trailing those fingers down to the hole I want desperately to sink my fat fucking cock deep inside her.

I swear to fuck she’s teasing me as she rocks back and spreads her legs wider, opening her hole as wide as she can so I can get a look inside her. She’s so fucking pink, so fucking wet, so fucking ready.

Thinking about what it would feel like to slowly stretch her wide open with my girth, her juices flowing down from my tip to the base of my cock. It’s enough to make me blow right here and now without even touching her.

“Tell me what you’d do to me if you could.”

Her words set me ablaze with the notion of getting to do just what I’ve wanted from the moment I laid eyes on her.

“The better question is,” I say, “what wouldn’t I do to you, kitten?”

My voice is so low and dark I barely recognize myself. This is an entirely other feeling from anything I’ve ever felt... even with her. Even when I’m getting revenge. Even when I’m making some fucker pay his debts. This feeling I have right now, this longing and desire... It’s completely unmatched.

“I’d start by licking you from your puckered hole to that perfect pink cunt of yours. While tongue fucking the life out of

you, I'd make sure that pretty clit of yours was well taken care of, too."

She immediately moves her fingers back to her clit as she writhes on the bed.

"I'm going to come. I can't stop it. Fuck, it feels so good, Dante. Please—"

Her moans are more intoxicating than any fucking liquor I've ever downed.

More than a kill.

More than the sweet revenge I enact anytime I get the chance.

Those sweet little sounds breaking free from her throat are what my dreams are fucking made of. She pants, her chest rising and falling in quick succession as her tits bounce in time to her breaths, and I rub myself through my pants, no longer able to control myself. I can't fucking wait to sink into her.

"Mmm, mm, mm. You're a delicious, dirty girl, aren't you, Giana?"

I step forward as she lies back on the bed, ecstasy flowing through her body.

"But I'm not sure if you really came or not. You wouldn't lie to me, would you? You know..." I straddle her naked body, and my cock pushes into her stomach. "You shouldn't lie to your instructor."

I play the role of someone who is really teaching her. Role-play has always turned me on; it's one of the reasons we have an entire wing dedicated to it here at the club. I wonder if she feels the same.

"I want to believe you came. But I also want you to be truthful. I can't give you the help you need if I don't know exactly where I need to help. You know?"

I tilt my head to the side as a beautiful smile stretches across her face.

“I think I came, Professor. But maybe you could show me...I don't know. Maybe if you showed me, I'd know for sure.”

Giana fucking Amato understands the assignment, ladies and gentleman.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Giana

SOMEONE POUNDS on the door of the room, and it completely breaks the unbelievably hot moment Dante and I were just sharing.

“What the fuck do you want?” Dante calls out, and my eyes trail to the outline of his hard cock.

The way he’s been palming himself as he watches me has only turned me on more.

What we just did... What I just did in front of him. It’s something I’ll never forget. Those few moments in time were some of the most adrenaline-spiking minutes I’ve ever had. Actually, I think it’s the absolute most adrenaline I’ve ever felt.

It was so hot watching him watch me, knowing I was completely on display for him... It was like something straight out of a romance movie or novel or some fucking smutty after-dark read. But I was living it.

I *am* living it.

“We have a guest on a pass who says she needs to speak with you,” a deep voice calls out, the barrier of the door the only thing separating my naked body from whoever is on the other side.

Dante clears his throat and scrubs a hand down his handsome face as he contemplates. His facial hair is so dark it's almost black, and it pairs so well with his olive skin tone. Those amber eyes of his that were filled with unbridled lust only seconds ago now flash with annoyance and rage.

“Tell them to fuck off. I’m busy.”

Thank God.

“Tell me you’re ready to fuck tonight. Because I don’t know if I could stop myself if I tried. I meant what I said.” His words come out gritty and deep, as if he’s trying to mask his desire. “Seeing you on this bed, touching yourself, giving your body exactly what it craves... It fucking does something to me.” He shakes his head before looking at the ceiling. “*You* fucking do something to me. I fucking hate it. I want to make that very clear. I don’t like that I want to fuck you more than I want my next fucking breath, but here we are.”

I pull him down by his collar so his body is flush with mine, and I kiss him the way he’s kissed me—unbridled and unrestrained. I don’t want to hear him say another word. I want him in every way I can have him tonight.

Dante parts my lips and his tongue darts in and out of my mouth, tasting me before he forcefully bites my lip, something I know is for sure going to bruise. I don’t care. I want more.

“Tell me I can fuck you, Giana,” he grits out. “Tell me that cunt is mine.”

My breath hitches. I love this man’s filthy mouth. How he speaks to me without any filter—giving himself to me in his truest form of raw depravity. I love knowing how badly this man wants me. How dire his need is for me. It sparks something so untamed and foreign inside me that I never want to let go of.

“You can fuck me. Come fuck your tight cunt, Dante.”

I do my best to match him—to give him back even a fraction of the filth he’s giving me. My body heats with the words, words I never dreamed of speaking aloud.

But I mean every syllable that falls from my lips.

I don't want the Santiagos of the world.

I don't want the boys who hit on me when Remi and I sneak out.

I want this man in front of me.

I want Dante.

He glances down to the engagement band on my finger, and I realize I didn't take it off before coming tonight. When Remi and I came here the first night, I left it at her house. Then, it was such a close call at the diner because I wasn't expecting to see him that night.

I can't even remember what was going through my mind when he found me in the restroom, but neither of us said a word about the ring then. We were too wrapped up in each other.

But tonight...

Tonight, I was in such a rush to get here, and I'm horrified that I forgot about it. This is going to ruin everything.

Fuck, fuck, FUCK.

"I don't care," he grits out. "I don't give a fuck. But I'll tell you something, kitten. I refuse to fuck you while another man's ring is on your finger."

I'm shocked that he doesn't ask questions, that he doesn't "care," but I'm also not about to argue with him. I make a move to take the ring off, but he lunges at me, forcefully rips the tainted metal from my finger, and throws it across the room.

I will never see that ring again. And I'll pay for it. But right now, I don't care.

I never want to put it on again.

Never want to feel the suffocating choke hold it has on my skin, the weighted time bomb that's ticking away, counting down to the end of my newly found freedom.

In one fell swoop, he's off me, and we're a mess of tangled limbs as I help him rip his clothes off. He unbuttons his dress

shirt in less than a second, sending buttons flying all over the room, and I work to free his cock from his pants. I've only felt it against me, only saw the outline, but I can tell just by the feel of it that he is ungodly well-endowed.

The moment I free him of his pants and briefs, his cock springs to life like it's been trapped in a damn cage for far too long. And my God, was I right.

Long, girthy, and with just the perfect amount of a curve. I know that thing will undoubtedly hit spots I can only dream of. Spots I don't even know of. He's so thick. So long. My mind can't even wrap around how big he is...in every single possible way.

“Holy fuck, Dante.”

He lets out a laugh as he looks down at himself. “Don't give me a big ego, kitten.”

I roll my eyes. “I think you have enough of an ego. I'm just calling it like I see it. There's no way that thing is going to fit inside me.”

Another laugh bursts through his lips, and I widen my eyes.

“Let me worry about that, okay?”

I nod and lie back on the bed, allowing him full access for anything he wants to do. I'll let him. Willingly. This is my choice. My decision. And I want him more than I care to admit.

Dante leans over to a bag he brought in here with him and grabs something resembling lube out of it. It's in a small pink bottle that I try to read but ultimately fail because he squirts some in his hand and then throws it behind him on the bed.

“This is just to get you warmed up, kitten.” He only has a small drop of it, but I know why the moment his fingers meet my sensitive pussy.

I'm immediately brought back to life as he swirls my clit with the pad of his thumb.

“Fuck,” I grit out, grabbing hold of the bedsheets to try to control myself, but it’s no use. “Are these rooms soundproof?”

“Eyes on me,” he says the moment I clench my eyes shut. “These rooms aren’t soundproof, but I can guarantee the sound of that sexy little moan you’re doing will only make every man, woman, and other person out there jealous that I’m in here with you and they aren’t. Now, see how I’m barely applying pressure right now? But you feel it everywhere, don’t you? The ache. The intense euphoria burning through your core.” He swirls my sensitive nub with slight pressure, and he’s right.

I feel like I’m on fire in the best way possible.

I buck my hips toward him, wanting friction of any kind, needing it like I need air in these lungs.

“You want more?” he asks. He moves his other hand to the entrance of my pussy, one finger teasing my hole, just barely entering and coming right back out. “You want me to fuck you with my fingers, don’t you? You want me to prime your pussy so it’s ready for me to claim it?”

“Please,” I all but beg him. “Please, please.”

He obliges. And I feel like the most powerful woman in the fucking world making this man bend for me.

He inserts one finger inside me, and I cry out as he continues working my clit and curling his finger as if he’s beckoning my pussy to come for him. “Do you like that?”

“I— Ye—”

“Use your big-girl words, yeah?”

“Yes,” I manage to get out as my body writhes under just this simple touch.

Dante moves his finger in the slowest, most tantalizing way, hitting an untouched spot that feels like nothing I’ve ever experienced before.

“I’m going to use another finger now.”

He looks at me, and I nod, barely able to take a full breath as I continue to move my hips in time to how he pumps his finger in me.

The look on his face is a mixture of ease and destruction. Like he wants to claim every inch of me for himself, to mark his territory.

And I fucking love it.

He pauses playing with my clit as he slowly inserts a second finger. The burn I feel as he stretches me is unreal, but in only seconds, it transforms from pain to intense pleasure. He now uses two fingertips to do that beckoning motion and he's back to swirling my clit, and I am seeing full-on stars.

"Dante. My God."

I look down at his rigid cock as he uses my leg as friction for himself. He pushes against me, and he feels so hard, like he's on the verge of breaking.

"I'm going to come again," I tell him. "I can't stop it."

Suddenly, he stops. No more movement at all. And I am left with the biggest ache inside me that I have ever felt.

"Why'd you stop?" I ask, feeling anger settle into my bones.

I want to come. I need to come.

"Because if you're going to come anywhere, it's going to be on my cock. Now lie back and take me like you were meant to."

His words in combination with the intense rush of pleasure I feel swarming inside me again almost make me come undone, but I somehow stop myself from falling apart as he uses my juices to coat his thick cock.

"You're so fucking wet and needy. So fucking ready to take me," Dante says before reaching for a condom in his bag.

"No," I almost shout at him. "No. You know I'm clean. I'm a virgin. And I want this with you. I want to feel you. No barriers between us. Give me this, Dante." Something about

Dante makes me trust him. It's a scary thought to have, especially in a vulnerable moment like this, but I don't think he'd fuck me without protection if he knew he had something going on.

"Are you on the pill?" he asks, and I nod, sharing another secret with him.

"Your wish is my command, kitten."

He slides his hand up and down his long, thick shaft with purpose, and I revel in the fact that I'm wet enough to fully drench him.

I reach out before I can think twice and wrap my hand around him, gasping in disbelief when I realize my fingers can't even wrap all the way around him.

"Is that...normal?" I ask, feeling like an idiot two seconds too late.

He lets out a smooth chuckle. "It's going to be fine. Now, pump me faster, squeeze. I want that pretty mouth of yours on my cock, but I need to get inside you first. You can suck off our orgasms when we're done."

My cheeks redden, but there's nothing I want more than to taste the two of us mixed together. It's so far from anything I've ever wanted, let alone experienced, and desire strikes through me like lightning as I think about it.

I do as he says and pump my hand up and down his shaft, my juices coating him, making a sloppy noise as I move up and down. He's so hard. So fucking hard. And it makes me feel insanely dominant knowing that I did this to him.

"I'm going to fuck you now, kitten. Lie back so I can put my cock where it belongs. Inside that tight, needy cunt of yours."

I lie down and he scoots up toward my pussy, cock in hand and his stare focused intently on me.

"You ready?"

"I'm ready. Please."

And with that, he slides slowly inside me. His eyes are locked on mine the entire time, and I bite down on my lip to keep from screaming from the intense way his cock fills me. It's painful, raw, and the pressure is unreal.

But he slowly works himself inside me, pushing and pulling, entering and sliding back out, until my pussy is so wet and so sore and so unbelievably filled with pleasure that I don't know which way is up and which way is down anymore.

Once he's entered me as much as he can, he starts to find a rhythm pumping in and out, arching his back and moaning with me. Fuck, his moans are sexy. Perfect. They just coax me more over the edge.

"You're my good girl, aren't you?" Dante says. "You're taking this cock like it was meant for your tight little cunt. Such a fucking good girl, Giana." He speeds up, fucking me faster as he pays exquisite attention to my clit with one hand and palms my breast with the other, teasing my nipple how I showed him I like it. "You're so tight. Fuck, Giana. So fucking tight. God, this pussy is un-fucking-believable."

His cock is like a drug.

The way he moves in and out of me.

Every single thrust of his hips gets me higher and higher, to a place I never want to come down from.

"Talk to me," he reminds me, and I snap back to the here and now.

"You feel so good. Keep fucking me. Keep fucking my pussy, Dante. Give me what I need." The words pour from my lips, and I feel like a different woman, like he's pulling something deep and visceral from me with each thrust.

"I'll give you what you need and more, kitten. Fuck. You're so fucking sexy. Grind your hips against me again. You're forcing my cock even deeper inside you." I do as he says, and he moans my name. "Fuck yes. Fuck me like a good girl."

It's as if I'm in a trance as I buck against him, each of us seeking dominance over the other, a push and pull I'll never

get tired of. He's so deep inside me I swear I can feel him under my belly button, and he's hitting all the spots I never knew existed.

He starts picking up his pace as his moans intensify, and I come undone the moment he says my name again. "Giana, fuck yes."

I don't even know what's happening.

I really, truly am seeing stars now as my vision blacks out, and the most intense, pleasurable feeling ricochets throughout my entire body. Starting in my pussy and shooting up through my stomach and back down, I am totally incapacitated as my orgasm hits me like I've never felt before.

I come apart all over his cock, riding the waves of the best orgasm I've ever had in my life just as I feel his warm liquid shoot inside me, his cock pulsating as he all but screams, "Fuck!" when he loses control.

And I swear to God, I don't even know my own name in this moment.

He collapses on top of me and plants a kiss on my lips just as I start to come down from my insane high.

He rolls over until he's on the bed next to me and positions himself on his side before looking at me and brushing my hair away from my face.

"Now that is an orgasm, kitten."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Yante

I FUCKED THE ENEMY.

I told myself I'd fuck her and then send her on her way. I promised I wouldn't hold her the way I am now, that I wouldn't look into her eyes and wonder where the fuck she came from. But it's too late. She's under my skin.

The woman has a power over me that's dangerous.

That could very well be deadly.

"You were right," she says as she intertwines her fingers with mine.

Confused, I furrow a brow and wait for her to elaborate.

"I'd never had an orgasm before. I've never felt like that. The way you just made me feel." She turns to me with swollen lips and a post-sex look that could rival even the most beautiful paintings in all the world.

Her hair falls around her face like she purposely styled it that way, and the look in her eyes is so damn pure it hurts. She's otherworldly. Of the heavens. *Mine*.

My angel in the middle of the underworld.

Mine? Who do I think I am? Post-nut clarity's got me all kinds of fucked up.

She is not mine. She's Gabriel fucking Amato's daughter. She can never be mine.

I look down at our hands, how they fit together, and I feel like a fucking lovesick teenager. Giana is the first woman to penetrate through the armor I put up after Julissa and Sofia, and fuck me...of course it has to be her.

Her thumb gently strokes my hand, and I flit my eyes down to her naked ring finger.

"What are you thinking about?" she asks, and I soften.

She's got a way about her that makes me at constant war with myself.

"You were fucking amazing," I tell her.

And it's the truth. I've fucked plenty of virgins and non-virgins alike. I've fucked multiple women at once. I've fucked women who knew exactly what they were doing with a cock and some who hadn't a clue. In any of these scenarios, Giana is undeniably the best I've ever had.

"Thinking about how greedy that wet pussy was for my cock. How good you took every single inch of me."

Redness blooms on her cheeks. After everything tonight, and that's what's got her feeling embarrassed?

"Don't feel embarrassed with me, Giana. Never. You've got nothing to be ashamed or embarrassed of."

Me, on the other hand...

"I wasn't completely honest with you the night we met," she spits out quickly, like if she didn't say the words fast enough, she wouldn't at all.

"Humans aren't honest by nature. You know that, right?" I grip her hand in mine, and she kisses me.

It's slow, sensual. It's very Giana. She places her palm against my chest before ending our kiss, looking into my eyes.

"We're naturally deceptive creatures, quite literally wired to deceive. Whether it's to fit in, stand out, or gain an advantage over others, we're liars. All of us."

It's the truth, ironically enough.

"Have you lied to me?" she asks, and I can't decide whether she's trying to get me to give up information or if she's trying to back me into a wall of some kind.

What's her angle here?

"Yes, I have," I tell her.

She immediately removes her hand from my chest, scooting away from me on the bed.

"Come on, kitten. I just said we all lie. I guarantee you've lied, and many times, to me since we met. Don't be like that." I pull her close to me again, putting my arm around her so she can rest her head on my forearm. "Now, what weren't you honest about the night we—"

I'm cut off by the sudden blow of the door being shattered into pieces, wood shrapnel flying in every direction, a smoke bomb detonating, and a spray of bullets flying through the air.

"Get down, Giana," I yell at her, yanking her from the bed and onto the floor, getting her as far under the bed as I can manage before pulling my side piece from where it lies in my pants on the floor.

I flip off the safety and shoot, trying to use the bed for cover once the smoke clears.

"Fuck," I mutter, my heart beating rapidly in my chest.

I yank on my pants quickly and throw Giana the blanket, keeping my gun drawn toward the doorway the entire time.

"Show your fucking face, coward!" I yell into the void. "You come in here and fuck up my shit, you best fucking face me like a man instead of a coward hiding around a corner."

I taunt the bastard out of his hiding spot, and I'm met with none other than two Amato fucks. Guess they took care of their raid quicker than I thought they would.

"Well, if it isn't *little* Gabriel," I mock Gabriel's son, Gabriel Jr. "Did *Daddy* send you in to do his dirty work?"

“Gabriel, what are you doing here? What the hell is going on?” Giana scoots out from under the bed and comes to stand between the two of us.

She’s still naked, but thank fucking God she has the blanket draped around her.

What the fuck is she doing?

The look on Gabriel Jr.’s face says it all. His eyes widen as he trains his gun on me, signaling to his fuck of a friend to keep his eye on me so he can deal with his sister.

Gabriel bursts out in laughter, damn near doubling over at the sight of his sister, naked as the day she was born, standing between us.

“Well, isn’t this fucking rich?” he gets out between laughs.

I want to knock that smug fucking look right off his scarred-up face. Doesn’t surprise me that someone took a knife to his pretty-boy looks. He runs a hand through his dark hair, shaking his head as if he can’t believe what he’s seeing.

“Damn, bro. Never thought I’d see your little sis like this. Wrapped up with a DeSantis. Why don’t you drop the blanket, baby? You’re lookin’ fine as fu—”

Gabriel turns and shoots him point-blank in the head.

“He talks too fucking much,” he says before turning back to me, unwilling to take his eyes off me now that his backup is gone.

“What the fuck are you doing here, Giana?” Gabriel’s stern voice and snarl makes me instantly want to do nothing more than protect her.

She shouldn’t be here; he’s right. But she is, and I cannot deny the intense urge I feel to do anything I can to make sure she stays safe.

“I could ask you the same thing, Gabriel,” Giana says with the faintest hint of a tremble to her voice.

I don’t miss the way she’s backed up a bit, putting more distance between herself and Gabriel, looking between us.

“Why are you here? How does Father know I’m here? He fucking sent you here for me, and you had to come in with your damn guns drawn? Overreaction much?”

She’s a fucking spitfire, my girl.

She bends and grabs her shirt and pants, and I step around her to protect her privacy as she quickly throws them on. She discards the blanket, not taking her eyes off her brother, and then steps around me again.

“Get behind me, Giana,” I grit out, making a move to pull her behind me, to shield her, but she shrugs me away, facing off with her brother.

I grab hold of her wrist and forcefully pull her to me, needing to put space between her and Gabriel. “Gia—”

“You’re real fucking classy, sis. If our father knew you were here, this whole place would be burning to the ground. Don’t you worry. I can’t wait to tell him I found his little darling in bed with one of his sworn enemies. Can’t wait to watch you fucking squirm, little sis.”

I tug her backward, not liking how this fucker is talking to her, and she finally turns to look at me as I remain holding her wrist, an unspoken question dangling in the air.

“Dante—?”

“Dante DeSantis,” Gabriel interrupts her. “Capo for the DeSantis Crime Family. Bastard who had our strip club raided tonight. Same bastard who has one of our men holed up somewhere. That is, if he hasn’t already killed him. Where’s Marty, Dante? Where’s my fucking friend?”

“If that’s how you treat your friends...” I glance over at the man he just shot. “Marty’s probably better off with me, isn’t he?”

“You fucking piece of lowlife trash!” Gabriel screams just as one of my men rounds the corner into the room, his gun aimed right for Gabriel’s head.

“Stand down, soldier,” I say to the kid. “This one is all mine.”

“Sir, are you—”

“I’m fucking sure. Is backup here?” I ask, wondering where the fuck the family is and hoping we don’t have any casualties. The soldier nods, and I motion with my head for him to get the fuck out of here. “Go where you’re needed.”

He does as he’s told, and my mind flashes to Marty in the basement. He’s gonna get special treatment tonight as payback for his family blowing up my fucking door and who the fuck knows what else.

“Dante DeSantis. You’ve got to be kidding me. How could I not know this?” Giana shakes her head as Gabriel chuckles.

“Because you’re just a dumb cunt.”

“Watch your fucking mouth, Amato,” I grit out, cocking my gun.

“How cute. The two of you shacking up. What are you, in love? I can’t blame you for wanting some of this premium Amato pussy. I had a go at your dead wife before we offed her, loose as a fucking—”

I fire a warning shot that narrowly misses his head—on purpose—because an easy death would be way above him. Giana’s shrill, high-pitched scream echoes in the room, bouncing off the walls and disorienting me for seconds before I come back to, realizing how fucking angry I am.

“If you don’t get the fuck out of here in two fucking seconds, I will drag you down next to Marty and make you suffer for the rest of your miserable life.”

He moves to shoot me, but Giana is close. Too close. I don’t think of myself. I can only think of her. Quickly, I shove Giana out of the way just as the bullet whizzes past her and hits me in the shoulder. I fire my own weapon at him, this time hitting him in the chest.

“Fuck!” I yell.

The bullet has burst through my flesh and out the backside of my shoulder. Fucker burns like a goddamn bitch.

Gabriel and I both collapse, falling to the floor and clutching our wounds. I scoot up against the wall and prop myself up, applying as much pressure as I can to my wound. Gabriel must have dropped his gun when he fell, because it's sitting a couple feet away from him on the floor, but just as he goes to reach it, Giana is up and kicking it in the opposite direction.

She rushes over to me and falls to her knees, and to say I'm even more confused than moments ago is an extreme understatement. Why is she not helping her brother? Aside from the obvious fact that he's a fucking tool. But...she's choosing me in this moment, and I can't make fucking sense of it.

"Dante, what the fuck?" she asks, but it's almost a demand, a demand to know what the fuck is going on.

Wish I fucking knew.

"What's happening?" She covers the hole in my shoulder with both of her palms, giving me a moment to rest.

I feel like all of the air has been sucked out of me as I lean my head against the wall, keeping an eye on where Gabriel is lying on the floor.

"You fucking bitch, get over here and help me!" Gabriel screams at Giana, but she doesn't pay him a second of her time. "You fucking cunt. You fucking traitor! Get over here!"

She keeps her palms on me, looking at me with tears brimming in her eyes.

"There's more to this, isn't there?" she asks, and if I hadn't known I fucked up by now, I definitely would in this moment.

I've fucking fallen for this woman.

I've been falling for her this entire time...

For the woman I swore I'd use to get my payback.

She just so happened to be the only thing that mattered as her brother pointed the gun in our direction...and that only further drives my point home.

Everything has changed.

Every fucking thing.

“Worthless cunt!” Gabriel screams as he tries and fails to apply pressure to his gunshot wound.

“Can you handle this for a minute?” Giana calmly asks, referring to my bullet wound.

I nod, and we switch places; she removes her palms, and I place mine over the bleeding wound. Giana grabs my gun from where it sits on the floor next to me and spins around, pointing it directly at her brother.

“You’ve made my entire life hell, Gabriel.” She chokes back a sob. “I’d ask you why, but it doesn’t really matter, does it? Not anymore. Every single time you cut into my skin, used me as a toy to take out your frustrations on... Each time you hit and punched and kicked and left me in pieces for your own entertainment. You deserve worse.”

As soon as the last word leaves her lips, she pulls the trigger, putting a second bullet hole dead center in his chest.

She just signed her brother’s death certificate.

Blood splatters from the hole in his chest, and he slumps over onto the wooden floorboards. A metallic scent lingers in the air, reminding me of my own injury. I press harder, the pain radiating from my shoulder down my arm and back up again.

“Giana, what...are you...fucking...doing?” Gabriel gasps, sucking in fragments of air as blood trickles from the corners of his mouth.

The bright-red liquid falls to the floor as he tries speaking again, but in mere seconds, his eyes are rolling back in his head. The bastard is dead.

Fucking Christ.

“Giana,” I say, needing her to let me explain.

For all I know, she’s going to blow my brains out in retaliation of the news she just found out. I’ve fucking lured

her in. Duped her. She's given the only thing she has left away to a fucking monster.

“You owe me an explanation, Dante *DeSantis*.” She all but spits the words out like they're venom.

I recoil as she makes a move to help apply pressure to me again, despite the fact that I'm an unworthy fucking bastard.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Giana

THE WORLD CONTINUES SPINNING, but I am standing still.

I'm here, but I'm not. Much like the day in the seamstress's office, I'm floating somewhere just beyond recognition, my mind protecting me, dimming the hurt... fading it into nothing but background noise.

Multiple men run past me, but the only thing I can concentrate on is the loud ringing in my ears. The noise begins to sound like a song, one I recognize but is just out of my reach.

I killed my brother. My flesh and blood.

And it felt so damn good.

The moment I pulled the trigger, the flashbacks floated back to front and center in my mind. Gabriel's fingers wrapped around one of his many knives, digging the blade into my palms. The way he dug his fingers into my hips as he pinned me down and wrapped a bag over my head until I passed out. His beatings... The way he'd use me as a punching bag whenever our father pointed out his flaws.

He's taken and taken and taken from me—and for years.

And now he's paid for it with his life.

My only complaint is that I didn't have the guts to do it sooner.

Part of me wishes my other brother, Niccolò, were here. Maybe he could have talked some sense into Gabriel. Maybe this could've been avoided.

But would I take this back if I could?

Never.

"Stand down!" Dante screams at the men surrounding us from where he's perched on the floor, blood oozing out from around my hands.

I'm trying and failing to keep this man alive. He's lost so much blood. So, so, so much blood. His usual olive skin is ashen, a sheen of white cast on his handsome face, and his breaths are shallower with each passing second.

Someone rips me off him, and I scream before I even fully know what's happening.

"Get the fuck off me! Get off me, you bastard!" I yell, kicking and flailing my arms as someone much bigger than I am grabs me around the waist and hauls me away from this man, who only mere minutes ago was inside me, giving me the best experience of my life. "Dante!" I scream, reaching for him as terror burrows into my bones.

I have no idea what's happening, how my brother got to be here, what Dante has to do with what's unfolded, but I know this much... I deserve to hear the truth from him.

"Get off!" I kick the asshole away from me as I scratch at the floor, clawing my way on my hands and knees back to Dante.

Just as I reach him, the man grabs me again. Is he one of his men or one of my brother's men? I can't even tell because everything is blurry, and the adrenaline pumping through me is causing all my thoughts to jumble.

"Shut the fuck up, bitch!" The man whose hands are digging into my arms screams at me, his deep voice shaking me.

Dante coldcocks the guy with his good arm just before his body goes limp, and men rush to surround him.

“Dante!” I scream again, needing him to wake up, needing him to tell me what the fuck is happening. “You don’t get to die!” I yell at him, my voice cracking. “You have explaining to do, you bastard!”

I scream, but it’s no use. His eyes have fallen shut, his wound is gushing, and his chiseled chest is covered in his blood.

“Call Gabriel Amato,” someone says as I’m picked up and carried out the door. “Hold her somewhere and tell him to come get his daughter before I do something I don’t want to do.” The voice is deep and husky, and he sounds older. “Now!” the man sternly yells at the person carrying me.

“You better pray to your God that Dante isn’t dead,” the man carrying me mutters into my ear. “Because if he is, no one is going to be able to save you. Rules and code be damned.”

His threat is the last thing I hear before I finally give in to the pain shooting across my chest, the heavy, thundering heartbeat galloping in my throat, my temples, my ears.

I close my eyes and will whatever God this man is mentioning to take me right now.

Because that would be a much easier sentence than what I know I’m about to face.



“You stupid, selfish, naïve little girl.” My father’s voice is the first thing I hear when I come to.

Unmistakable, a voice I’d know anywhere. Calm and warm, but with a bite that could gnaw at you even in your sweetest of dreams. That’s Gabriel Amato for you.

I slowly come to, realize I'm lying on the couch in my father's office, and stand up too quickly. The day, time... hell...even the month. None of it registers for a moment as I rub my fuzzy eyes, trying to see straight.

The second I see somewhat clearly, my father's palm connects with my cheek.

I stumble to the floor from the force of his slap, my hand automatically flying to my cheek as I try to soothe the sharp sting.

"You go twenty-one years without disappointing me, and then only days before the most important union the Chicago underworld has ever seen, you decide to whore yourself out to none other than Dante *fucking* DeSantis?" He bends down to eye level with me and spits in my face.

I cower backward, simultaneously wishing I could stand up to him and knowing I can't. My entire body tremors as I wait for the next blow.

"Have you gone mute, little bird?" Father yells. He uses one hand to swipe everything off the fireplace and sends it crashing down to the floor. Pieces of glass shatter and fly everywhere, one small shard landing next to my palm. "Your brother's blood is on your hands, you ignorant little bitch," he snarls before letting out a loud cry.

It sounds like a mixture of intense pain and absolute anger rippling from his lungs.

I don't know how much my father knows. Does he know I killed Gabriel? He clearly knows why I was at the club. My thighs are sticky with the aftermath of Dante and me and what transpired between us.

"Had you not been giving away your pussy to my enemy's son, your brother never would have been killed in that shoot-out."

Okay, so he doesn't know it was me.

Who am I kidding? If he knew, I'd be dead.

He comes near me again, and this time, he kicks me hard in the stomach, sending me flying backward. A noise I've never heard comes out of me, and I resist the urge to throw up. My entire body aches with the weight of that kick, my chest cracking as I move to sit up on the floor.

“You better hope Santiago doesn't find out you've given yourself away to another man. If he even so much as thinks you're not a virgin, you'll just be sold into slavery like the rest of the whore bitches that get mixed up with the cartel. You stupid, stupid whore. Do you even comprehend how badly you've fucked me?”

I know better than to answer him. Know better than to try to come back with any kind of answer or reply at all, so instead, I just nod my head.

I can only assume how bad this looks for my father—for the rest of my family. I try to wrap my mind around everything that's happened. I don't even know how long I've been out. Nothing makes sense, and none of the puzzle pieces in my mind are snapping together.

“I don't know what kind of bullshit you've been up to, Giana, but you'd do best to remember who I am. I am Gabriel Amato. I am your father, and I am the head of this family. We do not mix with the likes of the DeSantis family. You do not mix with anyone unless I tell you to. You are going to marry Santiago in just a few days. You are going to act like a little golden girl virgin on your wedding night. You are going to clench that pussy like you are the tightest little bitch in this city, and you are going to hope he is none the wiser. Do you understand me?”

I finally lose control of my stomach, and bile rises into my mouth. I have to choke it down so I don't make things worse for myself.

I nod my understanding, and the moment my father turns his back, I let the tears I've been holding in fall, being sure to wipe them away before his attention is back on me once again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Giant

“FUUUUUUCK,” I growl as I come to. A bright light flashes in my eyes, forcing me to peel them open and then shut them again. “Whoever’s holding that flashlight is about to be a dead man.”

I hear a low chuckle as I wince. The pain radiating through the left side of my body is enough to snap my attention back to the present.

Giana.

I move to sit up, but two hands push me back down to a lying position.

“I don’t think so, Mr. DeSantis,” Doc says, shaking his head. “You’re not moving for a bit. We need to get fluids in you, and you need rest before you even think about standing up. We don’t need you passing out on us again.”

I look to my shoulder and see it’s patched up. White gauze and medical tape wrap around what I’m sure is a shitload of stitches.

“You scared the fuck outta us.”

I hear my son’s voice, immediately scan the room, and find him sitting in a high-back chair. The boy is my spitting image, save for nineteen years younger. I can only hope he doesn’t

turn out to be such a fucking shit. I remember what I was doing in my late teens and early twenties, though. I wasn't always the best man, and I sure as shit wasn't prepared to be a father.

“Hey, son, I'm sorry. I'm good. I swear to you, I'm good. Doc always knows how to patch me up.” I look at Doc and nod my thanks just as he exits the room.

I have no doubt he's leaving strict orders for me with somebody out there. Strict orders I don't plan on following.

Antonio walks up to the bed and places his hand on my leg, patting it. He's too pure for this world. So much more of his mother inside him than me. Julissa was soft. Beautiful and kind. He's got my features, but where it counts, he's Julissa, and I see it more every single day.

I just wish she were here to see it, too.

“The Amato lady, huh?” he asks, concern written on his face plain as day.

Mafia men aren't known to be the most loyal bunch, but me? I was loyal as fuck to Julissa. She and my son were all I needed after a long day of business. It was never the type of love you fucking read about in books. But it was young love that turned serious when we had a child together. We were both committed to our son, to giving him the best life we possibly could.

The other women I've been with... It's all been purely just for a release.

Until Giana.

Until that perfect-as-sin woman walked into my life and spun everything on its axis.

She was meant to be used as payback, and now that I can't think of her being anything other than mine, I'm at war with myself over it. I fucking hate that I've allowed this to happen, but if this has taught me anything, it's that I want her.

I fucking need her.

“Don’t remind me,” I say, trying to play off my feelings for Giana as I readjust myself in bed, my body aching as I move. “I’ve fucked up in more ways than one.”

I shake my head just as my father walks in.

Romeo DeSantis is a force to be reckoned with. He isn’t one of those mafia bosses who doesn’t give a fuck and likes the view from the top. He’s one of the best guys I know, a top-notch man even in this fucked-up business we’re in.

While the rest of the Amatos are out fucking with the cartel and sorting through millions in drugs, Romeo DeSantis prefers his family to come by money in a more ethical way. As ethical as a mob family can be, anyway. We don’t fuck with drugs, and we don’t hurt our women. We may launder money here and there, may deal with some rather shady characters, but never the cartel or their fucking junkies.

“Well, if it isn’t my two favorite boys,” my dad says with a smile.

His facial hair has grown out since I saw him a few days ago; the gray he has seems to have multiplied. I can probably thank myself for that.

“What about Uncle Lorenzo and Uncle Rocco?” Antonio asks, referring to my brothers.

I haven’t seen Rocco in a while. He’s been on a mission of his own lately.

Dad laughs and shrugs. “I won’t tell ‘em if you don’t, kid.”

My dad is too fucking good to us. I often wonder why he didn’t leave this life when he had a chance. He’s not your typical mafia boss, at least not like the ones I’ve met. He stands back. Observes. Remains quiet and calculated. The others I’ve met talk too damn much; they try proving their points through yelling and threatening.

Not Romeo DeSantis. When I was a kid growing up, I told my friends he owned a diner. My friends always said how that was such a perfect job for him because he seemed so friendly and nice.

And he is.

Until he isn't.

Until it comes to protecting his own.

Then he's the fucking opposite of soft and nice and friendly.

"You wanna tell me what you were doing mixed up with Giana Amato, son?" Dad asks, pulling up a chair for both himself and Antonio. "I mean, I know I told you to hold off until I could come up with a plan, but I didn't mean you needed to spend your time rolling around in bed with her."

I'm clearly not getting out of this without the two most important men in my life hearing about my dirty laundry.

Antonio rolls his eyes as a look of disgust spreads out across his face.

"Hey, you're welcome to leave, kid," I tell him with a shrug.

When he doesn't make a move to go, I tell them.

I tell them about everything after the meeting I called when I first explained I had her under the roof. I leave out the sexual shit, but I explain how she got under my skin, how I implanted a military-grade, microscopic tracking and audio device in her necklace under the guise of giving her a massage, how I wanted to use it to get intel—or try to. How the plan was foiled when the Amato crew blew into the room like a fucking tornado.

"A woman getting under your skin is pretty rare, isn't it, boy?"

I consider my father's question. Maybe not so much consider as wanting to evade the truth—because he's right.

"I was fucked up from the moment I found out who she was. Part of me wondered, deep down, if her dad sent her in, but that didn't make sense. Even for Amato. I knew it had to be sheer luck that she walked in, and I vowed I'd use her to get payback on her family, and I was willing to go against your

orders to stand down. I shouldn't have been so hot-tempered, but honestly, can you blame me?"

I shrug and wince from the pain that shoots through my shoulder and chest. "I'm not too proud to admit she got the best of me. I wanted to be around her. Kept inserting myself into her life under the guise I was going to ruin her, or at least, use her to get back at them, but fuck. I don't think it was ever actually about that. No matter how fucking bad I wanted to believe it."

I clench my eyes shut, and thoughts about how badly I've fucked up run rampant through my head. I'm supposed to be a fucking capo for this family, and I couldn't resist the one woman I should've been able to forget about.

But I'm fucking useless when it comes to Giana Amato.

"When Gabriel Jr. busted through the door, I saw how strong she was. How unwilling to back down even when she should be terrified. Saw this whole other side of her that just reassured me that, everything else be damned, she's it. All I wanted was to keep her safe. And I know I've fucked up, but I'm done denying I want her." I shake my head and try to move my stiff arm, but the pain bites back quick as fuck. "It was never supposed to be her. The enemy. *Nemica*. But it is. It's her."

The truth hurts more than the fucking bullet wound.

The whole damn time I was trying not to fall for her, falling anyway, but still using her in part to reverse what I thought was going on... What a fucking bastard.

I look at Antonio, and I can't read the expression on his face. My dad, though...

My dad is pissed off.

A scowl crosses his face as he inhales deeply before reaching over from his spot in a chair to stoke the fire next to him.

"Falling for the enemy. For an Amato, of all people, Dante..." My father scratches his head as he shakes it slowly back and forth. "I'm not proud of how you've been acting.

You're too trigger happy—with everything. From actually pulling a trigger to falling for a woman that is going to get us into even deeper shit than we're already in with that family."

"I kn—"

He holds up his palm. "I'm not finished."

I glance over at my son, his eyes locked on his grandfather as he shifts in his seat.

"I'm displeased, but I'm not heartless. We're going to figure this out, but we're going to do it my way. Do you understand me?"

I almost think I see a smile, but he quickly rights himself.

"You've been nothing but a damn handful since the day you were born, son." Dad finally lets a small grin spread on his face and sets the fire iron down in its holder. "Not sure why I let it surprise me that you'd get yourself wrapped up in a girl you've got no business wrapping yourself up in, but hey." He gently hits the arm of the chair. "What goes around comes around, boy. I hope I'm here to see Antonio give you as much shit in the next few years as you gave me in your twenties."

I make a move to disagree, but he holds his hand out, silencing me.

"Now, let's get down to business, shall we? We've got a shitstorm with the Amato family that we need to figure out once and for all. I've called the guys in. Rest up so you're well enough for all of them to give you shit, too."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Giana

“WE’RE NATURALLY DECEPTIVE CREATURES, *quite literally wired to deceive. Whether it’s to fit in, stand out, or gain an advantage over others, we’re liars. All of us.*”

His words play on a loop in my mind.

Blood pools in my mouth, some of the liquid sliding down my throat. Warm and thick and gooey. The coppery, metallic taste sends my stomach spinning, but I ignore it and continue to bite down on my lip, needing to focus on the here and now and not get lost in memories again. His ghost is haunting my every single waking moment, and sometimes even my dreams. The memory of him, of his touch on my skin and his voice in my ears... It’s too much.

I had a taste of the freedom I so desperately crave, and just like that, as quick as the bullet I sent careening into my brother’s chest, it was gone.

It’s *all* gone.

My knees are cradled against my chest as I rock back and forth and stare at the wall in front of me in the dark cellar of the house I’ve grown up in. The house that has never been a home to me.

Thwack!

The bite of my father's belt stings my skin as the leather slaps quickly against my flesh. Vomit threatens, this morning's barely there breakfast and acidic poison climbing up my throat, but I shove it back down, unwilling to give my father a reaction.

He's jonesing for one.

Seeking it out like a junkie.

But I refuse.

I fucking refuse.

This man has gotten the best of me for far too long.

"It appears the lashings have lost their effect, Giana." My father spits the words like venom. "Should I switch tactics?"

I don't reply.

He's going to do whatever he wants regardless of my reaction.

Thwack!

This time, I jolt when the belt smacks me in the exact same spot he hit moments ago. No doubt, doing it on purpose. Trying to wound me as deeply as he can.

My father has always loved his payback.

I try to shrink as small as I possibly can, pushing my chest against my thighs and pressing my face into my kneecaps.

Let me disappear...just for a moment. Until this is all over.

My father knows the wedding dress he chose for me will cover my back, so he'll do as much as he can for as long as he can. Nothing will stop him. And I don't know how much more I can take.

He lands another blow, and my breath hitches, catches in my chest, and I can no longer bite into my lip. There's a pool of blood in my mouth, and I can't keep swallowing it. I'm so nauseated I can't see straight.

Be his good little girl again. End this. Tell him you'll do better.

A small, timid, and quiet voice battles against me.

Another ghost.

The scared little girl I was for so long...before Dante. Before that taste of freedom showed me that there was more to life than obeying and playing by the rules. She's pleading with me to put an end to this. To promise my father I'll be good.

But as much as I should take her advice in this moment... she's gone.

My father continues to whip me with his belt, and I go somewhere else. Somewhere far away. I sink into those memories, and I stop feeling. My mind floats above it all, and I no longer feel the belt. Or the pain. Or the blood trickling down my throat.

Or how my heartbeat has slowed to a dull, low thrum in my chest.

"Did you know our minds can't truly distinguish pain from pleasure?"

My mind drifts to those stolen moments in the restroom. Dante explaining the pain-versus-pleasure principle to me while he had me in a choke hold. I use his words to my advantage and pretend this is pleasure. My mind has it all wrong. The pain doesn't exist.

Come on, endorphins, do your goddamn job. This is a fucking high.

"Father."

My brother's words cut into the memories, and suddenly, I feel it all. My skin burns, and I can no longer hold it in. I throw up, the contents of my stomach spewing from my mouth like a waterfall and landing all over my legs, my feet, and the floor beneath me.

"I knew you'd give in sooner or later. You're not strong enough to withstand my fury, little girl."

"Father."

Niccolò's voice cuts through the chill in the air again, and I swipe at my mouth with the back of my hand. I do my best to stay as still as I can, but suddenly, all of the pain I've been avoiding and blocking out hits me like a goddamn tidal wave. I crash to the floor. My face hits the cold concrete, and I wince.

Just fucking stop this!

The inner voice, my ghost, is getting angrier and angrier as my father's wrath spirals out of control. He strikes me again, and I wince, rolling away from him.

"I don't mean to disrespect you," Niccolò says, "but the wedding is only a few days away, and we can't give her to Martínez looking like this."

My father hums. It's his consideration tic. The sound of leather against polyester is like some form of fucked-up music to my ears as I realize he's threading his belt back through his pants.

"Suppose you're right, son. You're free to punish her as you see fit. Try to keep the evidence to a minimum."

My father's footsteps thud against the floor, vibrating my cheek as they approach where I'm lying.

Once his feet are next to my face, he grips my hair and harshly brings me to a sitting position, yanking a handful of hair out of my scalp and dropping it at my feet.

Tears gather in my eyes, the burning in my scalp painful but no match for the pain in my back. I force the tears away before looking into my father's eyes.

He looks down his nose at me, and the anger in his dark eyes is palpable. There's an unmistakable fire burning in the depths of his stare. One that tells me he may be ending this now, but this hell is in no way over.

"You are going to wish you'd have died that night with your brother by the time I'm finished with you. And then"—he pauses dramatically and kicks at the dark-brown handful of hair between us—"the fun will really begin. Santiago will see to it."

His words aren't only a threat.

They are a promise.

And my father always delivers.

He turns and leaves the room, and I inhale a jagged breath. It causes my chest to spasm, and pain ricochets in my back.

"Giana, I am so sorry," Niccolò whispers to me, checking to be sure my father is gone and bending down to get on my level. "Fuck, G." He winces, shirking away from me, and shakes his head. "How can I fix this?"

He places his hands on either side of his head and stands, looking around the barren room. My father had his workers clear the room out so the only thing in here would be me and my fucking thoughts.

I try to take another deep breath, but the excruciating pain in my back only intensifies.

"I'm going to get some first-aid supplies, and we can at least treat it, even if I can't dress them."

I nod in understanding.

He can't act like he helped me or he risks my father's rage, too.

"We've got a couple hours before he comes back. There's a meeting with a supplier downtown, and he has to show face. Let me go grab a few things. I'll be right back, I swear."

He flees from the room, and I lay face-first on the concrete.

It's the only position that's even mildly comfortable...and still...it isn't comfortable at all. Just less painful than anything else.

I'm grateful for Niccolò. For his willingness to help even though he's risking his position in our family. In more ways than one. He's the one brother I've been able to count on, and he isn't even blood. Lucky him.

He's the only person in my family who has ever come to my defense, and multiple times. If it would've been my

mother or anyone else who walked in here...I don't know when my father would have stopped. Matteo doesn't go against my father, and the two of us have never been close. He's ten years older than me, and he's never come to my rescue like Niccolò, but he also never hurt me like Gabriel Jr....

Thank God Gabriel Jr. is gone... He would have only added fuel to the fire that is my father's fury.

Niccolò bursts through the door and slams it shut behind him by kicking it, his arms full of medical supplies.

"This is gonna hurt like a bitch, G," he says somberly.

I shrug and immediately regret it. It's unbelievable how many small, everyday movements come straight from your back muscles. Pain radiates from the top of my spine and downward, and I groan, finally letting my tears get the best of me and spill down my cheeks. I ignore his words, nodding to him. I'll be fine. There's no way it'll be worse than the lashes.

I focus on the ground. The musty smell that swirls all around me.

And I try not to think of him...but it's no use.

I've had plenty of time to think about my every move since the night Remi and I went to Dante's club. From the very first time I locked my eyes on his, and we set this whole deadly game into motion.

He knew.

He must have known from the very beginning. The first night.

He knew I wasn't Giana fucking Carey. And I felt bad for lying to him, for being so deceitful, but the whole time...he knew.

I have grown up with these men. They are methodical. They move carefully, like their lives are an organized game of chess. The man I was falling for was using me. To get to my father. To get to my brothers. Who knows what he wanted or what he planned to do with me? But there's no doubt in my

mind that he knew. And yet, here I am...thinking of him. Wanting him. Craving him in my goddamn bones.

What does that say of me?

That I'm just another fool blinded by the possibility of falling in love with the first man she let inside her?

What a stupid little girl.

My father is right. Stupid little girl indeed.

Niccolò presses something wet and warm to my lacerations, and I inhale a sharp breath, causing yet another spasm in my chest and more pain in my back.

"I need your help, Nico," I tell him.

He's my only option.

He gently pats my wounds and then rubs a thin layer of something over my open flesh.

"Anything, G."

I think about exactly how to approach this. There's no good way. There can't be.

He continues to spread the cool cream, and I do my best not to flinch, but it hurts so badly my stomach spins again. There can't be anything left in it. I look over to where my vomit lies soaking into cracks in the concrete, surprised my father didn't send someone in here to clean it.

Do I ask him to contact Dante?

That's what I want him to do. Questions are festering like sores deep down in my bones. I want answers.

No.

I need answers.

"I need you to get to Dante."

His movements on my back come to a stop. "You want me to take him out, G?"

Oh, Niccolò. If only it were that easy.

“No,” I rush out, not wanting him to get any ideas and take things into his own hands. “I want you to find him. See if you can get to him on neutral territory or just call him, please,” I tell him, using words I’ve heard thrown around more times than I can count. “I don’t want you going on their turf and getting yourself hurt. If you can...just please. Tell him about the wedding. Tell him who I am marrying... Maybe he knows all of this. Maybe I’m just putting unnecessary work on you, but I want to be sure he knows.”

Dante acted like he gave a shit. He listened like he cared, saved me from that asshole in the alley, made me believe he wasn’t just like all of the other men I’m used to.

But what were lies, and what were truths?

We’re naturally deceptive creatures, quite literally wired to deceive.

Please let there have been some truth there. Somewhere. Especially because the memory of him is what’s been keeping me going. Each time the pain becomes too unbearable, I just... I think of him. And his words. And those conversations that felt so effortless. It can’t have all just been a lie. I may be naïve, like my father tells me, but I’m not a moron. He felt this, too.

I’ve never been surer of anything in my life.

Nico’s movements start again, and he continues to apply the ointment as I shiver. I just want to put my shirt back on, to cover up, to not look like this wounded little girl. My bra is the only piece of fabric that guarded my back from my father’s anger, and it didn’t do a very good job of it.

“I want you to tell him that I deserve answers.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Yante

“WHAT IS it with all of you fuckers touching shit that doesn’t belong to you?”

It’s a rhetorical question, one I don’t want an answer to, but I ask him anyway.

“Marshall Benton. Thirty-four. Two kids and a pretty little thing for a wife.”

Benton starts frantically shaking his head as I rattle off the information I’ve dug up on him and his life since that night in the alley. I walk toward where he’s sitting on the basement floor, blood staining the concrete from Marty—the Amato man I finally killed just the other night. He suffered about as long as I typically let them, and he was no longer fun to torture. He was too catatonic. Too dismembered.

Too far gone to be a good plaything.

I undo my cuff links and roll the sleeves of my shirt up to my elbows as I keep my eyes trained on the man cowering in the corner. I’ve kept one of my soldiers on him since I brought him in earlier, and I’m impressed with just how well he’s kept the fucker in line.

Benton moans and groans, thrashing around as best as he can, but I’ve got him chained to one of the structural elements in the floor. His wrists are bound behind his back with zip ties,

and I can only hope they're digging into his flesh. Maybe that's why he can't sit still.

Fucker can't handle even an ounce of the pain I'm going to inflict on him.

"Oh, I forgot," I lie. "You've got a rag in your mouth. Would you like me to take it out? You got something to say?" I ask with a chuckle.

He nods, his eyes growing wider as I take another step forward.

I'd actually love to hear what this piece of trash has to say. Any excuse for me to make this an even slower death is good enough reason to allow him to talk.

I rip the fabric from his mouth and toss it to the side. He immediately starts rambling on about his family, how I can't hurt them, how they aren't part of this.

He doesn't need to know I won't make good on those promises—that I won't touch his family. He just assumes I will because it's second nature for men like him.

These men *would* hurt women. They'd stop at nothing to hurt or kill everyone I love before finally killing me. So they don't know I won't do the same.

I'm a better fucking man than they'll ever be—even when I'm leaving them gasping for their last breaths.

"That's where you're wrong, Benton," I grit out. "I can and I will. I will rip your wife limb from fucking limb—but only after I fuck her brains out. Guarantee I'll fuck that pussy better than you ever could with that shriveled-up thing you call a cock."

Benton is naked, too.

It's just one of the things I like to do.

Strip them of their dignity. Strip them of their manhood. Strip them of their lives.

It's incredible how much weaker a man is when he's left with nothing to hide the monster he is.

“Don’t fucking touch them. You’ll be fucking sorry. I know peop—”

With one swift movement, I pistol-whip him, and his head flings to the side like he’s a rag doll. I laugh but try to regain my composure as blood pours from his nose and down his temple from the impact. A bruise already starts to form, and a perfect welt the shape of an egg rises as he cries out.

“Fuck! Please!”

“*Mendicare è per i deboli!* Begging is for the weak,” I spit out before kneeling him in the face. “Do you make a habit of putting those filthy, greedy fucking hands on women? On stealing from them? Or worse? Does your wife know you don’t just take their money but you also rape them in those alleys? I bet she wouldn’t like that, would she? I wonder how many other children you’ve got out there.”

“Please. I mean, no. Come on. I don’t rape them!” he screams and starts to cry.

Then I notice a stream of piss filling the cracks in the concrete.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding. You put your hands on my woman, and then you piss on my floor?”

I let out a chuckle because I’ve scared this man enough that he has literally pissed himself. I wasn’t going to take it to this point so soon, but now he’s really pissed me the fuck off. I grab the pliers from a drawer in my workbench and practically skip over to the fucker. Damn, I love working with my hands.

The moment his eyes lock on the tool in my hands, he starts back up with the pleading again. I should’ve just kept the damn gag in.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I’ll never do it again!” he screams.

“The thing is,” I start, “I really don’t believe you.”

I position the pliers in front of his mouth, but the fucker refuses to stay still.

“You’re going to make this so much harder on yourself. Mind over matter, buddy boy. You act like a real big, tough man out on the streets, but the minute you’re faced with some real shit, this is how you act? It’s fucking pathetic,” I grit out and slam his head back into the wall.

Holding it in place, I secure one of his front top teeth in my tool’s hold.

More moans. More grunts. More muffled pleas.

Ripping it out quickly would be easier, but he doesn’t deserve it. So, instead, I peel the tooth back slowly, feeling it grind beneath the weight of my pliers as blood starts to pool in his mouth.

“Ah nah pwe pwe!” he tries screaming around the pliers but chokes on his blood.

I finish plucking the tooth out before dropping it down his throat for him to swallow.

I remove the pliers, and he starts to scream and wail, and I feel zero guilt for this piece of shit in front of me. My father is the coolheaded one. I’m in a rush to react and feel remorse later.

But I know I won’t feel remorse for this fucker.

Not when he would’ve done who knows what to Giana in that alleyway had I not stepped in.

“Never again!” His words are a bit easier to understand now that my pliers are no longer in his mouth. “I won’t do it again!”

“Liar,” I taunt him. “Liar, liar, liar.”

I ball both of my hands into fists and use Benton as a punching bag, hitting him first with my right fist, and then my left, and repeating. My shoulder is screaming at me, sharp pains shooting up and down and begging me to end this. The wound is too fresh to be up to my shit, but I wasn’t going to let this fucker continue on after what he did to Giana—and I wasn’t about to allow anyone else to punish this fucker.

Blood and spit fly from every hole in his head as I punch him harder and harder until he passes out, and I finally let up.

“Piece of shit.” I spit on his body as he lies motionless on the ground.

His chest is rising and falling, but it won’t be for long. Just need to let him wake back up before I start round two.



After I clean myself up and get my soldier back in place to keep an eye on Benton, I try to come up with a plan to get to Giana. I’ve been beating anything with a pulse since I woke up from the shooting incident in the club, doing anything I can to try to get my mind off her. But it’s fucking useless. For whatever reason—*many* reasons—she’s gotten under my skin. Before I even realized she was embedding herself into my heart...she was.

I’m a fucking goner for her.

The woman I never saw coming.

The one who could very well be my goddamn undoing...

Giana fucking Amato.

I won’t allow her to be married off to that fucking worthless trash. She thinks I have no idea, but there’s nothing I don’t know about her now. No more secrets—on her end—and I need to move and get her out of there before she’s in The Blood Syndicate’s hands.

Things will only get more difficult once she’s married off to Santiago Martínez.

It can’t happen.

Ai mali estremi, estremi rimedi.

Desperate times call for desperate measures.

I've been ignoring these fucking ruthless feelings, shoving them away and pretending like I'm just confused. Like I'm fucked up from Julissa and Sofia and finding a connection for the first time with a woman since my wife...and then having her be the enemy.

But really...she isn't the enemy.

She isn't who started this war.

She's a fucking casualty in her own right, too.

Giana Amato is mine. Right or wrong, she is mine. And I have no doubt I can make her see it, too. But I need to get away from all of those fucking idiots before I can do anything about it.

"Uhhh, we got a problem, Dante." Leo meets me in the back hallway of the club as I come around the corner, ready to get home and start plotting out how to get to Giana.

His words give me pause, and I narrow my eyes as he continues.

"Niccolò Amato is on the line. Went up to help one of the ladies with an unruly customer and happened to answer the phone, and he announced himself, saying he needs to speak to you immediately."

We move toward the entrance, and I put my hand on the gun at my side on instinct, knowing he isn't here but needing to feel my weapon at the ready.

"Did you ask what he wanted?" I question Leo.

I look at Leo out of the corner of my eye, waiting for his answer as we round the last corner of the narrow hallway before the entryway comes into view.

There's a slim chance that Giana's brother would *actually* be a halfway decent man, although I haven't had any interactions with him. Gabriel Jr.? Yeah. I've had my fair share of run-ins with that fuck—and all of them added up to me being fucking happy he's no longer in the picture.

But Niccolò? He's one of the Amatos I've never even met face-to-face.

I pick up the phone, and his voice greets me.

“Listen, Dante. I know you won’t be happy to see me, and I don’t blame you. Not for a fucking second. But there’s a lot you don’t know. And I promised my sister I’d get a message to you.”

“Is she okay?” I ask. The question slips out without even really fully thinking of it. But I need to know. “What does she want to tell me?”

I need to hear her words, even if they are coming from her fucking brother. I want something of her, even if it’s just a broken piece. Something is better than nothing.

There’s a short pause, and for a second, I think he hung up.

“My sister wants answers. She said she deserves answers. And she does. Whatever you did to her, however you pulled her under, got her here...”

I want to interrupt him and let him know I didn’t pull her under shit. But I don’t. I try to portray my best Romeo DeSantis vibe and remain calm.

“You owe that to her. She’s special, you know? If you played her...” Another pause. “If you played her, and she’s suffering for nothing right now, I’ll fucking end you myself. I don’t give a fuck if she doesn’t want you dead or not.”

Before he can get ahead of himself, I stop him.

“Give her a message from me, too,” I say, wishing I could just go to her myself. Knowing there’s no way in hell I’d make it out alive, and then I really would never see her again. “Tell your sister I’m coming for her.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Giana

THE PIT in my stomach swells in size as the dress is carefully lowered over my head.

Today is the day.

The first day of the rest of my life.

And I hope it ends as soon as possible because I cannot go from what I had—what was ripped away from me—to the likes of Santiago fucking Martínez. I refuse.

“Such a beautiful bride,” my mother says, a fake smile plastered on her face as the rest of the people skitter out of the room, leaving only the two of us together. “Giana, I never wanted this life for you, but it’s your destiny. I never wanted it for me, either, if it’s any consolation. But this life has been good to us in more ways than one. Look around you.”

Now is not the time to try to become a decent mother.

Where was this faux-caring motherly figure when I needed her growing up?

I look around the expensive suite, but all I feel is disgust as my eyes skim over the beautiful room. The four-poster bed, the gold vanity, the French paintings on the wall and the thousands of dollars in champagne chilling on a side table.

“Then my destiny is bullshit,” I tell her, forcing my tears to stay put. “If I ever had a daughter, I’d run. I would never allow a child to be brought up around such death and decay and destruction. Father? Father cares only about blood. He has no respect for women, especially not either of us. Do you know how many layers of makeup are caked on my face to cover the bruises he left?”

My mother looks at the floor, and it’s the first time I think I’ve ever seen shame cross her face.

“I have been a good daughter to you, Mother. I’ve done my best to be obedient, but enough is enough. How could you give me over to The Blood Syndicate? The cartel, Mother! I want to believe you didn’t have a say in this, but I don’t.”

For a moment, I think she’s going to slap me, but she just tightens and loosens a fist at her side, her eyes flashing to mine, anger brimming in her stare.

“Your father and I didn’t have a choice, Giana. The cartel takes. Your father owed them, and the price was you. It was marrying you off or death. Which would you rather?”

“Death!” I scream, unable to keep the tears from flowing. “Get out. I want a few moments alone before I walk down that aisle.”

She scurries out of the room, her heels clacking against the wooden floorboards, and I sink to the floor. My makeup is done for, but I don’t care. Nothing matters anymore, not at this point.

I meant it. I’d rather die than be married to Santiago.

I frantically search the room for anything I could use to end this pathetic, sheltered excuse for a life. Nothing but dark thoughts cloud my mind as I think about each everyday thing that could become a weapon. The glass mirror, the shower curtain. Anything could do if I tried hard enough.

Hope bloomed in my chest when Niccolò told me Dante was coming for me. But then...he never came. I don’t want to believe Dante only said that to get Niccolò off his back, but the more time goes by...the more that hope disintegrates.

I never even got to tell Remi about any of this. Not about the wedding, not about the cartel, not that my father is a goddamn mafia boss. He's had me so under wraps since the night at the club that there hasn't even been a chance. And I know she's probably worried sick right now.

Just as I go to peel myself away from the floor, I hear it.

The faintest of noises. One I'd miss had I not stopped my sobs.

The en suite bathroom.

It sounds as if someone is in there.

Suddenly, my fight-or-flight instincts kick in, and although just moments ago I was thinking some of the darkest thoughts I've ever thought, now all I can think of is if this is a threat, then I need to eliminate it.

I carefully walk to the en suite and gently peek inside using the small crack in the door. It's open only a bit, so it's hard to see, but a flash of a man in a black suit entering through the window catches me off guard. I shriek.

In one fluid motion, the man is yanking open the door and grabbing me, and the scent that envelops me is nothing but comfort. Whiskey and aftershave, liquor and pine.

Dante.

"Dante?" I pull back to look him in the eye, unable to believe he's here.

He's standing in my bridal suite.

He cups my face in his hands and shakes his head. "I couldn't get to you. I fucking tried."

I do nothing but nod.

The past few days have been hell on earth between Father's beatings and the isolation in our cellar.

"Fuck, angel." The crease above his brows deepens as he stares into my eyes, his own amber eyes boring into mine.

I have so much I want to say, but nothing comes out.

“I’m sorry. I am so fucking sorry.”

I don’t even know what he’s apologizing for, but somehow, I forgive him.

I don’t want to forgive him so easily, but just knowing he kept the promise Niccolò told me about—that he’d come for me—it’s somehow enough to erase the rest of the shit. At least for this moment.

This is the first I’ve felt at ease since I was ripped away from him that night, a feeling I’ve been holding on to—craving—in hopes I’d feel it again.

“I never thought I’d see you again.” I yank him closer to me, closing the distance by pulling on his dress shirt.

I cry into his shirt as he soothes me, running his hands up and down my arms and telling me everything is going to be okay.

“Nothing will be okay, Dante. Don’t you understand? I have so much to ask you, so much I’m confused about. But in ten minutes, I am marrying Santiago Martínez. Nothing will ever be *okay* again.”

Dante leaves me for only seconds to engage the lock on the bridal suite door. He turns sharply and walks back to me in a way that tells me talking is not what he intends to do right now. The dark stare, his foreboding presence. Somehow evil and comforting all in one. He lifts my chin with his thumb, and my pulse skyrockets.

“You’re not fucking marrying him,” he says, looking at me so intently I swear he can see inside of what’s left of this soul of mine. “You’re no—”

“And you were fucking playing me like a damn fool!” I try to control my voice, but it’s damn near impossible. Seeing him again brings back all of those feelings that were building. “It was all fucking fake, was it not? Fuck, Dante. I’ve had a hell of a lot of time to think, and you’re a smart man. A mafia man. You knew who I was from the beginning.”

“No,” he says, gripping my face. “No, I didn’t. Don’t tell me what I knew and didn’t know. I had no fucking clue who

you were that first night. All I knew is a woman walked into my club, and she made me fucking feel. Made a man who felt dead on the inside finally fucking feel again. And I tried to ignore it. I tried to figure out what your angle was, Giana, but I couldn't. And fuck! It didn't matter anyway because I was falling for you from the moment I laid eyes on you."

He claims my mouth the way only he can. The kiss is forced, rushed, nothing about it soft or kind. He takes control and devours me until I'm nothing but a slack body in his arms. His tongue tangles with mine as he rips down the bodice of my dress and palms my breasts before leaving my mouth to suck on my pebbled nipples.

"I need you," I moan, and he's already a step ahead.

He hikes my dress up as I hastily undo his belt buckle, allowing his hard cock to spring free. There's a drop of precum beaded on his tip, and I ache to lick it off, to finally taste him.

"Fuck me like this is the last time, Dante."

The words physically hurt, forcing my breath to hitch and more tears to fall.

"We don't have time for this, angel," he says, but he gives in to me anyway.

He shakes his head but fucks into my pussy, holding me against the wall and giving it to me rough and fast. He's out of control, and I can't even form thoughts right now. He fucks me so good, his cock pulsating as he pumps in and out of me.

One hand reaches up to grasp my throat, and I savor his strong touch. His fingers wrap around me as he tightens his grip, crashing his forehead into mine, looking deeply into my eyes and relentlessly fucking me like he owns me.

My mind is seeing words, and my eyes are seeing thoughts. I swear on all things holy that I'm near to speaking in tongues from this man's touch, from his thick cock and his unbelievable way to make me unravel.

"This cunt is mine, angel." He grunts as he takes me like the needy man that he is. "You didn't think you'd get away

from me that easily, did you? Be a good girl and take this fucking cock like it's yours."

And I do.

Dante fucks me until I'm spinning over the edge, my orgasm hitting like a tidal wave, making me scream his name, not caring who can hear. None of it matters—not anymore.

Seconds later, Dante is filling me up, his body finally slowing as he pumps into me, groaning and grunting my name as his orgasm peaks, and then he starts to come down. He plants a kiss on the neck he was just choking, as if he wants to bring pleasure to the area he just caused pain.

Slowly, Dante pulls out of me, and I immediately feel the loss of him. The subtle twinge of pain grows into a full-blown ache for him as we both try to catch our breaths.

"I've missed you, angel," Dante manages through panted breaths. "I've missed this beautiful pussy and these perfect lips. Your unbelievable mind that pulled me in from the first night."

He sticks two fingers inside my pussy, and then to my surprise, brings them to my mouth. I part my lips on instinct as he watches me, and I look down at his soaked fingers, traces of both of our orgasms all over them.

He sticks his fingers into my mouth, and I gratefully lick him clean.

I finally taste him—taste us.

My eyes roll back as I savor this taste, the taste of our mutual release, the salty evidence that he was here. That this was real. That this moment in time happened.

I'm so sick and tired of missing things before they're even gone.

I finish, and he pulls his fingers from my mouth and falls to his knees. I part my legs for him, and he settles one of my legs over his shoulder as he dives face-first into my pussy, sucking and lapping our juices.

He comes up for air only long enough to mutter, “You’re coming with me.”

Coming...or *coming*?

“Fuck, Dante. You can’t just...” I shake my head, everything inside me combusting with the opposing thoughts inside my head. Knowing what I want to do, but contradicting thoughts creep in, telling me we need to figure this out. “We have so much to talk about. You can’t just—”

He shushes me, and I let my head hit the wall, moaning and writhing under his touch. Once he’s finished sucking me clean, he slowly circles my clit with his tongue, sending shockwaves of lust throughout my body before he stands up and scrubs his hand over his face.

“You are mine. This”—he gently rubs my pussy—“is mine.”

I don’t understand. I’m so *not* his, it’s painful.

“Do you trust me?” he asks, and I don’t.

Not fully. Not right now. But would it be so bad? To go out like this?

No.

Not at all.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Giana

“THERE’S no way we’re getting out of here. Have you lost your mind?” I ask him, completely serious. “How’d you even manage to get in? This place is like Fort Knox.”

He dismisses my comment but takes me by the hand, leading me to the window he crawled in from. His touch is enough to make everything else fade away, and I know we’re playing a dangerous game right now.

We both carefully look out the window and focus down on the ground. He points from one direction to the other.

“I’ve been studying their patterns all day.” Dante keeps his eyes focused on the men below, the guards hired by my father and my future in-laws.

I gulp down my fear as my mind drifts to Santiago.

“There’s two on this wall here, right?” He nods his head, motioning to a man who’s east of us and one who’s west, each walking back and forth. “They walk the perimeter nonstop. They cross paths right in front of your window, and each continues on until they’ve walked the entire wall. Once they reach the end, they turn and walk the same path again. They’ve timed it impeccably and are in perfect sync, always crossing paths right under your window.”

I follow the first guard with my gaze, who walks east from my window. He stops just as Dante said he would, where the wall ends. He turns around, meets the west-side guard under my window, and continues on until that portion of the wall has ended as well.

Repeat, repeat, repeat.

“The Amatos and Martínezes have a total of eighteen external guards just waiting for something like this to happen. Each is on a very tight schedule. All I had to do was time it perfectly.” He cocks his head to the side and smirks, and for seconds, my despair and nerves are replaced with the butterflies that always accompany his presence.

“I ran up and climbed the bricks when the two who walked below this window were on opposite ends. The window ledges helped, and the fact that the bricks jut out.” He stops before adding, “They should be below us in five, four, three, two—”

I look down and see the two guards walk past each other and set off in separate directions, leaving the space under my window unguarded.

“I had thirty seconds before they turned around to repeat their pattern. No room for error.”

He sighs and cracks his knuckles, and then he pauses for a couple of beats and points down at the ground outside of the window again as the two pass each other yet again.

“You could have been killed. That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard of. Eighteen guards. One of you. Come on, Dante. You scaled a goddamn wall? What were you thinking?” I ask him, borderline scolding him for being such an idiot.

“Hey, I got up here, didn’t I?” he asks. “And I’m getting us out, too. But I’m going to need your help. I can’t get both of us down there and run in the thirty seconds we’ll have to take cover in the tree line.”

He plants a quick kiss on my lips, and I quickly change out of what’s left of my ripped gown and into the pants I arrived at the estate in. I don’t think. I just act. In this moment, I don’t care that Dante and I have a lot of talking to do. I don’t care

that I'm making one of the biggest decisions of my life by running.

These thoughts run rapidly through my mind as I strip, but I shove them down.

Because there's exactly two things I'm sure of right now: Dante is the only person in this world who is going to get me away from The Blood Syndicate, and I want him more than I've ever wanted anything in my life. Consequences be damned.

Dante's eyes don't leave mine as I finish changing, and I can't help but let out a laugh, even in a moment like this.

"Calm down, boy."

His face turns from playful to serious. "Listen, I need you to poke your head out and tell me how many men are out on this floor. I studied the floor plan online last night, but that didn't help me know how they'd be set up today. And then I need you to be a good girl and follow my lead. Do you understand me?"

I nod, knowing right now is not the time to disobey him. He steps to the side of the room as I unlock the door and poke my head out.

"Ms. Amato?" a guard, one I've known for years, one who is a trusted man of my father's—one who I witnessed beating one of our servants—calls out to me.

I do a quick sweep of the floor—all the doors are shut, and he's the only one here on the third floor.

I risk a look back at Dante before focusing on the guard.

"Thank God it's you," I say to the guard, watching as Dante's brows furrow. I look back at the guard. "Wedding day jitters, I guess."

"You better get in your dress, miss. Ceremony starts in fifteen."

The man in front of me is nothing but trash. A woman beater. He's just as awful as my father.

Someone I shouldn't care about taking down to get out of here.

And I don't.

Something snapped in me when I killed Gabriel. Like my "give a fuck" for these fucking monsters disguised as men is now broken.

"Maybe you could come in and talk to me for a few. I'm so lonely." I play up the sad-girl act by pouting my lips and batting my lashes. If he notices my makeup is messed up, he doesn't care. "I can't imagine only being with one man for the rest of my life..."

The guard looks at me, finally understanding what I'm hinting at.

I wouldn't touch this greasy fool with a ten-foot pole. Not after what I've witnessed him do to countless staff members and even his own wife at one of my father's parties. He doesn't need to know that, though.

The guard steps forward, glancing around the floor with his hands tucked behind his back. A smile spreads out across his face. He's got a mole the size of a penny on his cheek, and there's tiny little hairs growing from it. His face looks oily, like he hasn't showered in weeks, and his uniform only accentuates a pronounced beer belly.

"You thinkin' what I'm thinkin', Ms. Amato?" He takes another step forward and adjusts his cock in his pants, growing hard from just the thought of getting to touch me.

Sick pervert.

This man saw me when I was in diapers, for fuck's sake. He's been in my life as long as I can remember.

He deserves what's about to happen.

He deserves all of it and more.

I beckon the guard through the doorway, enticing him with my stare and turning around so he can get a look at my ass in these yoga pants.

Makes me sick, but it's worth it.

The moment he steps foot through the door, Dante pounces. In milliseconds, he has the guard by the neck, cutting off his air supply and his ability to call for help with his belt.

“You fat fucking slob,” Dante whispers into the guard's ear as he struggles against him.

He outweighs Dante by a ton, but Dante's muscles are incomparable to his. This man has grown lax with age, and it's about to be his undoing.

“You really think you'd ever have a goddamn chance with what's mine?”

The man tries to shake his head, his eyes bulging out of his skull as his face turns a plum shade of purple. He gurgles as his eyes start to roll back in his head.

Dante only tightens his grip on the belt. “Where are the rest of the guards posted? You tell me, and I'll think about letting you live.”

He's going to let him live?

I didn't take Dante as the type who would allow loose ends.

Dante loosens the belt just enough for the man to squeak out that there's two on the second floor guarding Santiago's room.

Then, he glances down at where his watch wraps around his wrist, the guard thrashing and making it hard for him to read the time, I assume. But then, as he quickly looks back up at me and speaks, I realize he doesn't give a shit about the time.

“I think that's enough time to think about letting him live, don't you, kitten?”

Before I can agree, in one swift motion, Dante snaps the guard's neck. The sickening noise when the fragile bones break sounds like a tree trunk being split in half by lightning.

So much for letting him live.

We're naturally deceptive creatures, quite literally wired to deceive.

“Let’s move,” Dante grits, quickly regaining control of his breath as he slowly lowers the body to the floor. “We need to be as quiet as we can, Giana. The quieter the better. Stay behind me until I see what we’re working with. We don’t know that he hasn’t lied to us. He’s a fucking pig. I wouldn’t actually trust a word from his mouth.”

I shake my head as Dante goes to step around me and reach a hand out to grab him. “Listen. Two men plus Santiago against you, Dante. Not happening. We need to find another way.”

My chest feels like it’s going to explode. I’ve gone from thinking I’d never see him again to having him back, to being on the verge of losing him all over again. I refuse to lose this man. Not before I even have the chance to have a decent conversation with him after all of the madness that’s unfolded.

“We’re going to draw them out and get them one by one. This isn’t my first time in a position like this. You need to trust me.”

There’s that word again. *Trust*. Trust a man who has no doubt been deceptive from the start...? I wish I could fully give him that right now. I just can’t.

His words remind me that he’s a mafia man. Just like my father.

Something I had no clue about until the night I shot my brother.

Dante has blood on his hands, too. I just don’t know how much.

Am I really about to trade one mafia family for another?

Does the price of freedom outweigh all that comes with it? I don’t know the answers to any of these burning questions, but I do know I don’t have time to think about all of this. Not right now. I tuck it away for later. There will be a later. There has to be.

We start to descend the stairs, and I'm thankful for the white carpet beneath my feet, allowing us to go unheard and not draw attention to ourselves.

"Can you get one of them over here?" Dante's voice is barely a whisper against the shell of my ear.

I nod as his words sink in, immediately knowing what I have to do. Not thinking, just doing.

In this moment...I am my father's daughter.

I have to be.

After a quick reminder to my conscience that none of my father's men are without guilt or fault, that I'm not assisting in killing innocent men, I straighten my spine.

None of us are innocent.

Not in this world.

Dante nods at me to go ahead, a knife in his right hand, and he winces when he moves his left shoulder. I haven't even asked him how his wound is healing. There's been no time for small talk. He reaches to his side and yanks another knife out of a holster before flipping it to me.

I stop as one of the guards speaks, his voice halting my movements.

"You gotta admit, you'd love to get some Amato into your bloodline, wouldn't ya', Charlie? Some action with that beautiful fucking Amato girl wouldn't hurt anybody." His voice is cheery and light as he talks about my potential future children, and my fists clench with an undeniable rage.

That gross asshole.

"Fuck yeah. I'd love to get some of that," the other guard says before letting out a whistle.

I steady my shaky limbs, begging my body and mind and mouth to behave. I am so sick of men and their futile beliefs that women are for their enjoyment. I unclench my jaw, and pain shoots through from my jawbone to my ear.

“Excuse me,” I call to the two guards posted in front of Santiago’s suite, stepping forward. “We need two men to help hold the dress so I can get in it. My mother isn’t answering her phone. I only have one man upstairs. Can one of you please assist? I’m running out of time, and I don’t want to be late for the ceremony. My father won’t be happy if I keep him waiting.”

Both guards move to come toward me, and I glance over as Dante sneaks back up the stairs we just descended. It’s probably better that we get back upstairs prior to attacking him in order to avoid the other guard hearing anything.

A dark-haired guard pushes the other backward, much to his dismay, and comes to follow me up the stairs.

“Well, beautiful, I guess today is my lucky day, isn’t it?” he says as we reach the top of the stairs.

“I don’t know about that,” I say quietly, just as Dante shoves the butt of his gun into the side of the guard’s head with immense force.

Before he can fall, Dante catches his slumped-over body and lays him on the floor. Then, he shoves his blade directly into the man’s heart before yanking it out and wiping it clean with the guard’s own handkerchief.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Giana

THE IMMENSE GRATIFICATION I have the moment I shove the blade into the poor bastard's chest fills me with a sense of satisfaction that can only come from revenge. The sweet feeling of the blade breaking through skin, flesh, and muscle. Piercing the beating heart of one of my enemies, sucking the life from him with just one simple movement—it's unrivaled.

After I've finished wiping my blade clean, I toss the handkerchief down onto the man's body as he gurgles out his final breaths, blood slipping down from mumbling lips as his eyes dart back and forth like a ping-pong ball, his nerves having one last dance.

"Jesus Christ," Giana whispers, looking from the man to me. "I'm never going to get over this, am I?"

It surprises me... This, coming from the woman who murdered her own flesh and blood.

"These men deserve all this and more," she rectifies as her lips twist into a frown. "But feeling that way and actually being the one to kill them... It's two very different things," she says. "Gabriel Jr. terrorized me for longer than I can even remember. He may have been blood, but it was easier..."

The look on her face is quickly erased as I right myself, and she follows suit. Whatever she's currently feeling, be it dismay or fright, she's blocking it all out so we can continue on.

She's strong as fuck. I'll give her that.

And somehow, she's even more fucking beautiful in this moment.

Her features mirror mine, determination taking hold of her, mixing with her adrenaline to get the job done.

She was made for this life, after all, whether she wants to admit that or not.

I quietly descend the stairs once more, latching onto her cold palm and pulling her with me. We can handle the last guard on this floor in one of two ways.

One will be much cleaner.

The other will be less noisy.

I opt for the latter and signal to my woman.

"One more," I mouth to her, pushing my forehead against hers. Savoring her smell, her touch.

Things that calm me even in the most fucked-up of situations. It's dangerous. Deadly. But it's so fucking pure and unexpected. She's it for me. And if I fucked this up, if what I've done is too much for her to handle...I don't know how I'll let her go.

Actually, it's simple.

I won't.

Dark thoughts, thoughts of chaining her to my fucking bed so she can't escape, cloud my mind as Giana nods.

"Let me do it," she mouths, and I immediately shake my head. "He won't suspect me. I'll catch him off guard, and then you can come up once he's down."

Her voice is barely a whisper against my ear, sending a shiver throughout my body. Even in a time like this, my cock

strains against my fucking pants, begging for her.

She motions to the knife I gave her, and I rethink my choice minutes too late, unsure if I've handed her a death sentence.

I shake the thought from my mind. I'm right fucking here. I'm not letting another woman die because of me. Giana is mine to protect, and I'd rather die than let anything happen to her.

She holds the knife behind her back and saunters away from me. I position myself in such a way that I can see just enough of the man as his eyes lock onto hers, greed and hunger seeping from his stare. He doesn't take his eyes off her, so my position is safe. For now.

“What're you doing back down here, miss?” he asks, leaning backward against the door. “Where's Jensen?”

He looks around her in anticipation of seeing his friend, and I dart back around the corner.

“He's upstairs, but I wanted to run back down for you...” she says, a sultry tone to her voice.

Not even a beat later, I hear a small scuffle, and I'm around the corner in a flash as she holds the knife to his neck. She's shorter, so much shorter. But he obeys with his life on the line. I'm not naïve, though. All it would take is one swift movement from him, and the roles will be reversed.

“Stay still, or he'll put a bullet between your fucking eyes,” Giana spits out, fury lacing her tone.

Miraculously, he listens as I point my gun at him.

Giana doesn't take her eyes off him as she quickly stands on her toes, getting into a better position, and then she slices the man's throat.

“How's that for some Amato action, asshole?” She lets him fall to the floor with a thud, unable to set him down quietly, and I rush toward her and cup her face in my hands.

I am so fucking proud of her.

I notice the slightest tremble roll through her body before she collects herself.

“You’re fine, angel. You did great,” I tell her, looking around and then down at the guard as blood pools from his wound.

The sound his body makes as he starts to lose all sense of life is muted from my hand slapping against his mouth.

I fucking knew that was going to be too messy. I can’t say no to this woman—especially when she wants payback... especially when she fucking deserves it. I couldn’t stand in the way of her taking that fucker down. Not after how he spoke about her.

He gurgles out his last feeble breaths while blood runs like water from his neck and down his chest, and then suddenly, the door he was guarding swings open.

Santiago Martínez stands in the doorway, his face twisted in complete horror as I back him inside with my bloodied knife pressed to his chest.

“In, fucker,” I grunt out. “Now.”

I scan the room quickly as Giana’s footsteps follow us, and she shuts the door.

“Who else is in here?” I ask, moving him with me and checking each room within his suite.

“Fucking no one, you imbecile. Put the weapon down, or you won’t even live to regret your next move.” Santiago’s thick accent punctuates each word; he’s unwilling to back down in the slightest. But if he has a weapon, he doesn’t show it. His hands stay at his sides as he eyes up Giana. “The fuck are you doing, bitch? Should have known you’d pull a stunt like this. You can’t just sit back and look pretty, can you?”

I punch the fucker in the side of the head, delivering a hard-as-fuck blow that cracks something in my hand. Pain ripples through my shoulder, and I wince but immediately shake it off.

“Now, now, Mr. Martínez,” I say calmly, picking him up off the ground where he landed when my fist collided with his temple. “We don’t talk to women like that. That worthless daddy of yours never taught you manners, huh?”

While I’m stepping backward to stand him up, he catches me off guard, spitting blood from his mouth and shoving me to the ground with more force than I expected from him.

“You fuck!” I yell. “Giana, get over there!” I nod to the corner so she’s out of the way of our scuffle. “You surprised me once. You won’t get another chance.”

I roll over on top of him as he lands a blow to my jaw, hard enough to hurt but not faze me in the slightest.

“Guess your daddy did teach you something, though,” I taunt him. “Taught you to punch like a fucking little girl.”

I laugh like a maniac as he sends another blow crashing into the side of my head. I don’t retaliate since I’ll lose the upper hand. My position looming over him is all I need to finish him off. I’ve got my knife in one hand and his collar in my other, and I bring him toward me before slamming him against the floor.

“Fuck you,” he spits.

Blood from his mouth, probably from biting his tongue with my punch, stains his teeth and trickles down to his lips.

He tries and fails to get the upper hand, and just when I think this is too easy, he knees me in my fucking sac.

“Fuck!” I seethe as I struggle to hold dominance over him.

Finally, I headbutt him, and his head knocks backward against the floorboards.

I know we need to get out of here, and fast, because there’s not a doubt in my mind people are coming. We’ve been much too fucking loud in here with this bastard. I want him to struggle, want to make this painful and twisted and fucked up, but there’s no time.

“Dante, hurry, please,” Giana says, making a move to come toward me.

Grabbing a tight hold on my stained knife, I push Santiago down one last time as he continues struggling. Finally, I position myself just right and slit his throat ear to ear. I'm instantly sprayed with blood splatter, and I scrub my hand down my face, spitting out what liquid got into my mouth as I quickly stand and grab Giana.

I yank her to the window of the suite, which is on the second floor of the building, and peer outside. I signal out the window just as planned, and my men start firing from the tree line, taking the guards below us out.

I descend with Giana in one arm and the other just barely grasping the bricks to get us down from window ledge to window ledge. I let go and allow us to fall once we're low enough to withstand the fall, and the gunfire intensifies, more guards running to our side of the building, more guards falling to their deaths as my men take them out one by one.

My men cover us as I run with Giana in my arms and my head down, praying a bullet doesn't blow through me and hit her.

I'm getting her out of here if it's the last fucking thing I do.

Getting her out and taking her home with me.

Where she belongs.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Giana

THE MOMENT we got into Dante's blacked-out SUV, I collapsed onto the seat and passed out from sheer exhaustion. My adrenaline plummeted as I relaxed into his arms.

Safety.

Such a foreign and usually fleeting emotion.

But in his arms, cocooned in all that he is, safety felt almost like an understatement.

I'm completely incapacitated for God knows how long, until a crackling fire starts to stir me awake. The warmth from the popping embers heats my face and my chilled body, bringing me a warmth I don't deserve.

Not in the aftermath of what we just did in order to escape my wedding.

"Sweet angel." His voice beckons me as his touch lights something else inside me. Something only aflame when he's near. "You're waking up. Finally. You've been out all day. It's nearly midnight."

My eyelashes flutter open in anticipation of seeing him again.

Dante.

God, Dante.

“I thought all of this was a dream,” I say, fully awake now as I sit up.

In the strange in-between of asleep and awake, I replayed today’s events in my head, thinking the takedown of the guards and Santiago was just a fantasy...assuming Dante crawling through the window of my bridal suite was some fever dream that could never happen in real life.

Could never happen in *my* life.

Dante’s been sitting next to me this whole time. Or at least now, as I wake, he’s sitting at the end of a love seat, where my feet were draped over his lap. He’s changed his clothes and is now out of his bloodied suit and into a dark-black suit jacket, a white collared shirt, and a new pair of black pants. I immediately look down at myself and realize I’m in a nightgown, my skin washed from where it was previously stained with the blood of the man I mercilessly killed. The man whose blood was quite literally on my hands.

Did he have a wife?

Children?

I shudder, gulping down the terror rattling my bones.

“How did I—”

“I cleaned you up and changed you, princess. Had the gown from...”

My heartbeat falters.

“Your wife,” I finish for him, feeling dirty in a dead woman’s lingerie.

Dante nods, and I squirm, unable to get a woman I don’t even know out of my head.

“We have a lot we need to talk about, Giana,” he says, as if I don’t know that.

As if I don’t know the past two weeks of my life have been nothing short of absolutely insane. One would think growing

up in a mafia family myself, this wouldn't all be so fucked up to me. But the way my father has kept me sheltered...

Little bird, little bird...

His voice echoes in my mind, and on instinct, my hands cover my ears, trying to drown out the sound that will never be silenced.

“Your back, Giana. Has he always done this to you when you've defied his orders?” he asks, but I can't even begin to explain the intricacies of my father's rage over the years.

“Giana, talk to me. Please.”

Dante's voice is softer than I've ever heard it. His eyes, crinkled at the corners as he looks at me, make him feel somehow more human than the night I met him. Like he's more than just a tough, strong, unbreakable man. His feelings run deep. He cares.

“What's happening, Dante?” I ask, ignoring the abuse. I'm genuinely so confused I can't see straight, and I don't want to talk about the time I was locked away in the cellar. “Why did you come for me? Why didn't you tell me you were part of the DeSantis family? Were you really just trying to use me to get closer to my father? I don't understand. Make me understand, Dante.”

He scoffs, his demeanor flipping like a switch. He stands and runs his fingers through his hair as he walks toward the crackling fire, the scent of pine lingering in his absence.

“The night I met you, I didn't have a clue who you really were. Every second of the time I spent with you was real. I was drawn to you in a way I can't explain because words wouldn't do it justice. All I can say is I knew I needed more of you then. Before I knew anything more.

“Did my motives switch once I found out who you are? I won't fucking lie to you. Yes. Initially, yes. I thought I could use you. Could make your father pay through you for what he's done to my family. But I couldn't. I can't be the type of man your father is. I fell way too fucking fast for you, and fuck, I wasn't supposed to, but I won't apologize for it. The

only thing I'm sorry for is my early intentions with you. I fucking regret it with every goddamn breath."

He brushes my hair out of my face and shakes his head.

"I was a fucking fool for thinking I'd ever be able to hurt you. I am sorry, Giana. I hate that I ever had those thoughts, but I can't lie to you and tell you my intentions were always pure. What I can tell you is that now, I'd kill any man who thought they could even come near you. I want to skin your father alive for the shit he did to you."

I close my eyes and try to fend off the subtle sting of his betrayal. His words hurt. They cut into me in a similar fashion to my brother's blade. But that was before. He didn't know me then. He was plotting his revenge, and I was going to be a casualty in the process. And I believe him when he says he wants to hurt my father. His eyes are somehow an even darker shade than normal as he speaks the words.

I don't want to hate Dante for his actions in the beginning. Don't want to hold him in contempt of the shit he did when this was nothing more than a game to either of us. Because wasn't my plan to leave him in the end, too? This was never supposed to be a forever thing. On either of our ends.

"Why did you lie to me about your last name?" he asks. "Was there more to that?"

I'm reminded that I deceived him in the beginning, too. Had I used my real last name...would we even be here right now? Probably not. We've both been untruthful.

"I know my last name is one that holds power in this city. I live under my father's thumb. Don't you understand? For Christ's sake, I told you the night I met you that my life isn't my own." My body shakes uncontrollably as I work to get my nerves under control. "I couldn't risk the news of me being in a sex club of all places getting back to him. You don't even know what he would have done to me...or...I guess you do."

My cheeks heat with the embarrassment of Dante seeing my wounds. Wounds my father put on my body. Should I be

insecure about this? No. I know that. But it doesn't change the feelings from washing over me.

He comes back to me, walking over, erasing the distance between us in three long strides and falling to his knees.

The big, bad mafia man is on his knees for me.

And all I feel right now is anger.

"I'm fucking sorry. I didn't mean for this to happen." Dante places his head in my lap, on the fabric that was once draped around his wife, and my anger is replaced with something else entirely.

"I get it. I really do, Dante. This was never supposed to be anything, but suddenly...it just was. But I don't know where I am. And I don't know what's about to happen to me. My father must know I'm with you. Are you prepared for the rage of the biggest and oldest mafia family? Because I know Gabriel Amato, and he will not stop until I pay—until we both pay—for this."

He looks up at me, the whiskey in his eyes matching the one sitting only two feet away on an end table in a rocks glass.

"I will kill every single man who threatens to come between us with my bare fucking hands. That includes your father. I will gut him like the bastard he is, and I don't care what comes of it." His words are gritted out from behind tight lips, and they hit me in a way I don't think I've ever felt before.

The man I'm falling for...

The one who rescued me from the cartel...

Who risked his life in so many ways, and for me...

He's threatening the life of the man who created me.

And I don't think this feeling swirling in my gut is one of terror or resentment. It's of relief.

Relief floods through my body from my head down to my toes, sparking every fiber of my being to life once more, waking me up and energizing me in a way that both calms my

senses and sets them on fire. Sights and sounds and feelings... Everything becomes intensified when I think of my father finally getting the death he deserves.

So many innocent people, dead by his hand or his command.

“In the beginning, once I realized who you were, I vowed I would figure out a way to get back at your family. That’s the truth. But now, the only thing I can even think straight about is keeping you safe.”

He shakes his head and lets it fall into his hands.

After a few seconds, he rights himself and looks into my eyes again.

“Every time I saw you, I got closer to you. You were this fucking colorful slice of heaven in my chaotic world of death and destruction, and no matter how hard I tried to ignore my feelings for you, those feelings just hit me even harder.” He shrugs. “So yeah, maybe we both deceived each other in the beginning, but these feelings I have are really fucking real. I’ve been fighting them since the night I met you, and I’m done trying to ignore what I want. And that’s you.”

Everything in my body works against me in this moment. My brain goes fuzzy and my limbs weak. He’s saying all the right things, and goddammit...I believe him.

I believe him.

“I will never allow someone to hurt you again, angel. Never. I want you by my side. I need you by my side. I’ve tried ignoring it, and it doesn’t go away anyway. You are so deeply etched into my fucking mind, and I can’t quit you.”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep,” I tell him. We share a look and he stands, pulling me up and into his arms.

I wrap my legs around his core, pressing our bodies together until I have no idea where he ends and I begin. Our lips crash against each other with such vigor my head is knocked backward as he forcefully takes what’s his.

What’s been his from the night I met him.

We are a tangled mess of teeth and lips and limbs, and I've never felt so alive.

My heart races with the possibility that there's so much more here—races and then stutters and then clenches in my chest before regaining its normal rhythm.

“Fuck, angel.” Dante pulls away from me and brushes my hair from my face before cupping my cheeks in his large palms. “I want you so fucking bad right now. I want to throw you down on this floor and show you exactly what you do to me. Fuck into that perfect cunt and make you mine all over again.”

He pauses, leaving me wanting and lingering on this high from his touch, from his words.

“I wasn't supposed to want you,” he says, as if our conversation won't let him move on yet. He sets me back down onto the love seat and then runs his hands over his face before cracking his neck from side to side. An internal war waging inside him, no doubt. “You are the daughter of my greatest enemy. The daughter of the man who killed my wife and sister.”

My breath catches, and I search his eyes for something, want to beg him to continue but stop at the same time. My father? I knew he was a horrible man. I know he's done vile, despicable things. But he killed them? He's the reason Dante is in this pain? A pain that can't be cured or healed...not with time...not ever. A pain I'll never be able to imagine. He left Dante's son without a mother...

“I'm so sorry, Dante.”

He sits down next to me, and I pull him to my chest, wishing he would be soft again for me. I'd let him fall apart in my arms. I'd welcome it.

“I didn't know. I had no idea...”

No wonder this man wanted to use me in some way in the beginning.

My father is responsible for killing two of the most important people in his life.

He told me of his wife and sister the night we met. Told me he had a son and was a father. I knew his wife and sister were gone. Dead. But I didn't know it was my own father who caused it.

How can this man ever want me when I am part of the monster who killed his family?

Tears flow down my cheeks as I struggle to regain my breath, but Dante just shakes his head. "You are not taking responsibility for the actions of your father."

I cling to him, and he wraps his arms around me, enveloping me in a safety I have never felt in all my life. And suddenly, I realize how much a man who I barely know has become like home to me. And I know how much that's saying for my own family. For the life I've lived for twenty-one years. He's shown me more in two weeks, in just a handful of interactions, than most members of my family have ever shown.

It kills me...but somehow it also relieves me of something that's been weighing me down my entire life.

"That night I saw you for the first time," he says, "you were like the most vibrant color I'd ever seen, Giana." He looks at me with tears in his eyes that he's not letting fall. "This black-and-white world of chaos and destruction... It's all I've ever seen, all I've ever known. And then there you were. This beautiful burst of fucking color. And suddenly I could see more than just black and white. I could see every fucking color. They were all in you."

Dante kisses me, hard, and I miss him the moment he breaks free.

"I have never, and I mean never, felt that way before. Not with anyone." He emphasizes the words as if to assure me.

"I want to keep discovering you inch by inch, kitten," he says, his playful nickname for me letting me know his mood is slightly lifting.

But I'm still so conflicted.

"What's wrong?"

I laugh, although it feels like the noise belongs to someone else.

“You mean aside from the obvious?” I look at him and shrug. “My family has ruined your life.” I take his head in my hands the way he does to me, feeling the rough, dark scruff beneath my fingertips and searching his eyes for a sign of anything that makes me believe he could want me after this. “That man created me. His blood runs through my veins,” I emphasize, willing him to understand he’s making a mistake no matter how much I want to discover every inch of him, too.

I just know I’ll be nothing but a broken mess when he leaves—and how could he not?

When he comes to his senses, I’ll be just another piece of collateral damage.

“He may have created you, but I wish you could see you’re nothing like him. I’ll spend every single day making sure you know you and your father are nothing alike.”

A thought sparks to life inside me as deep-seated hatred flows through my veins. I know my father is a terrible person, but it’s only magnified now. He’s deeply scarred the man I care about. He’s hurt me throughout my entire life—and in so many ways.

He’s hurt so many people for far too long.

“I want to fucking destroy him, Dante.” I shake with each word that falls from my lips. Tears stream down my cheeks as my anger continues to boil inside me, my entire body growing warm with a quiet rage. “Your wife and your sister... I want to pay my respects to them, to you, by doing whatever I can to take him down. Let me help you get the closure you need...by any means. I am here,” I tell him. “I am here, and I want to help. One day, my father will pay for what he’s done. And I hope to be standing right there with you, if you’ll let me.”

I know what I just agreed to do.

By any means.

And I mean those words.

A fire stokes in his eyes, almost as bright as the flames alongside us, and he gives me just enough of what I need as he places his hands over where my palms rest against his cheeks.

“I was not supposed to fall for the enemy.” He repeats the words he’s already said, the words that have been cemented into my brain. “But you’ve gotten under my skin, Giana Amato. And if you’ve done this much damage to my self-control in just a couple of weeks, I can’t imagine what you’ll do in a lifetime.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

Giana

“DANTE DESANTIS, do you even know how much trouble you’re in?” A woman bursts through the door, and I move to cover myself with a blanket on the back of the love seat.

She strides over in a beautiful red dress and Louboutin heels. Her hairstyle reminds me of some old-fashioned Hollywood starlet, the long onyx locks wavy and pinned back in perfect place.

“Mother.” Dante stands and meets the woman halfway across the large room, which I’m only just now really taking in.

He never told me where we are. It looks like someone’s study, with ornate wooden bookshelves and a beautiful mahogany desk on one wall, this love seat sitting just in front of a grand fireplace, and dark Victorian wallpapered walls.

“You and your father are going to give me a heart attack. You’re lucky my grandson was preoccupying me, or I would have marched there and stopped your stupidity.” She looks over at me, and a sad expression crosses her face. “I don’t mean to be crass, darling. It isn’t that I don’t think you’re worth getting out of that situation... Marrying a cartel member? *Buon Dio*. Gabriel Amato truly is a rare breed.” She rolls her eyes and pauses. “I just wish my son and my husband would have gone in with a more rational head about them.

Normally, Romeo is good about that, but after I heard the details...

“We are fine. Believe it or not, we’ve been in much more dangerous situations.”

Dante takes her in his arms while I wish the couch would swallow me whole.

“Don’t tell me anything else. I’ll just keep pretending your jobs are safe.” She smiles at him, but it doesn’t reach her eyes. “I came in here to tell you that your father wants you. He’s in the front room.” She looks at me. “Go on. I’ll keep this beauty company.”

“Mother.” Dante gives her a stern look, and she bats him away with a flick of her hand. “I like how the two of you just waltz in here like you own the place. Apparently, I need to up my security.”

He gives her a kiss on each cheek before turning around to me, and I motion him to go ahead and see to his father. He walks out the door, and I catch myself admiring his backside before I snap myself out of it and look at Dante’s mother.

She steps closer to me before pulling a chair up from the desk and sitting in front of me. I sit upright, adjusting my posture, feeling like I’m once again in the Twilight Zone.

“I suppose I should have had my son introduce us before leaving,” she says with a small smile, her mauve lipstick in the perfect place on her thin lips. “My name is Vittoria DeSantis. I’m Dante’s mother. My husband is Romeo, Dante’s father, and he’s the head of our family.”

So Dante’s father is the boss of the DeSantis family.

And mine is his rival.

His biggest rival, apparently.

My mind flashes to what Dante briefly told me about Sofia, his sister. And I realize this woman has enough ammunition of her own to hate me. If what Dante said is true, and I do believe him, my father is responsible for Vittoria’s daughter’s death.

“Giana,” I say, realizing I’m just staring at this beautiful woman with my mouth hanging open instead of introducing myself. “I can’t begin to apologize for what my father has done. I didn’t know about any of it. I mean, I still don’t really... Dante hasn’t explained—” I’m cut off mid mumble as Vittoria holds her hand up, signaling me to shut up.

“Sweetheart,” she says, scooting closer to me. “My son is a man who has always struggled to find the right words to say. After Julissa and Sofia, a light inside him went out.”

She rubs her arms as if she’s cold, but I have a feeling it’s more about a false sense of security than a chill.

I sit back and wrap myself in the blanket, nodding to the other one. “Would you like a blanket?”

Vittoria shakes her head. “My husband, Romeo. He didn’t get the mafia blood born into him. He’s more his mother. He’s kind, gentle. Not what you think of when you think of the big, bad mafia men. But it’s him. And he’s led the DeSantis men toward a life that certainly isn’t law-abiding or by the book. They are criminals. I am a criminal by all regards.

“But from what I hear, our family is one of the most upstanding. And I’m not just saying it because these men are mine. They don’t dabble in drugs. They don’t hurt women or children. They are, by the standard definition, good men. Yes, they deceive. And they lie to authorities and to the taxman. They make money off people below them. But they stay away from the really bad parts of *the life*, if you understand.”

I nod as I try to maintain eye contact, feeling as if I may shatter at any second.

My family has no regard for women and children. The bruising on my face can attest to that. And obviously, they hang amongst the cartel...so that tells me they are very heavily into the drug side of things. It isn’t surprising at all. Gabriel Jr. was always high on something.

“Do you know much about Sofia and Julissa? I’m assuming he hasn’t let you in much on that. He doesn’t talk about them. I don’t think he’s said a word about it since the

day of Julissa's funeral. It was the last time it had to be real for him." Vittoria's face falls, and she wrings her hands in her lap.

"All I know is that my family had something to do with their deaths."

"Death," she says, and I'm immediately taken aback.

She draws in a long breath before speaking again.

"Julissa, Dante's deceased wife, was murdered by someone in the Amato family. At least, that's what our men have been led to believe. My daughter, Sofia, is still missing. We've never gotten her back, alive or deceased. But it's been nearly a year now. A year since the two of them were taken. Julissa's body was left here, on Dante's doorstep, only a month later. But Sofia..." Pain etches into each of her features. "Sofia hasn't come back."

I didn't realize only Julissa was actually confirmed to be deceased. Dante made it seem like they were both dead. I can only assume part of that is due to mourning them both and his assumption Sofia's fate was sealed in the same way Julissa's was, but I'm unsure.

"I don't know what is bound to happen next," Vittoria says on a sigh. "But whatever does come, please know my son wouldn't have done what he did... He wouldn't have sacrificed himself for you if you weren't important to him. I trust him with my life. Even if he's quick to act sometimes, he knows himself, and he knows those around him. If he says you aren't my enemy, I believe him. My son is taken with you, Ms. Amato. *Amor di madre, amore senza limiti.*"

A mother's love has no limits.

Italian isn't my strong suit, but I know enough of the language to know she thinks incredibly highly of her son.

"I don't see how he could have any mercy on me when my family is the cause for so much of his pain—so much of *your* pain. Of your husband's pain."

She smiles, and it's kind, and I can't help but feel like she's a better woman than I'll ever be. I don't know if I'd

forgive the family of someone who caused me as much heartache as mine has.

“Because you are not your father, sweet girl,” she says, reaching out to pat my hand. Her palm is warm, and her expertly manicured fingernails are the same shade as her lipstick. “If anyone knows about how different a father and daughter can be, it’s me.”

Her words hint at something I know must be much larger than she’s making it out to be, but at the same time, she has the same comfort over me as Dante, and I wonder what I did to deserve to be in their good graces. Her words, though. They linger in my mind.

I am not my father.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Giana

DANTE DIDN'T COME BACK that night. He brought me into his world and then left me alone in his bed.

After Vittoria and I chatted a bit more, she showed me to Dante's suite and told me her son would probably be out for a while. I got as comfortable as I could in a bed too big for just me, all the while thinking about the dead woman's nightgown I was wearing and wondering if I was warming her spot on the large bed.

The sun peeks through the blinds of Dante's room, and what started as a small ache inside my stomach swells in size, like a cancer that's spreading by the second. I have no place now. At least before, I knew where I belonged, as fucked up as it was. I could toe the line or shrink into a version of myself that fit the norm of my household.

Now all I have is a vacant room and a void that doesn't sit well with me.

I didn't want to be with my family when I was there, but there was a strange comfort, a false sense of security about being with the people who raised you. Who clothed and fed you and protected you more times than not.

But if I know anything, it's that the people who protect you are often the ones who can cut you the deepest, too.

I roll over in bed and look at the clock on the nightstand. Nine in the morning. I have no cell phone, no clothes, no sense of self at all. Sleep evaded me throughout the night, but when it did come, it came with nothing but nightmares of Gabriel Jr.

His eyes rolling back. The blood spurting from his mouth.

A faint knock comes from the door, and I sit up, wrapping the white comforter around my body.

The moment he steps in, I know something is wrong.

Somehow more wrong than before.

I don't even know where the edges of wrong and right blend together anymore, but the look on his face is more than enough to clue me in.

I haven't known Dante DeSantis long, but he's not as tough of a read as he'd like to be.

"I'm sorry I left you," he says, stripping out of his clothes from last night until he's only in his boxer briefs.

My eyes are automatically drawn to his abs. The sharp edges and valleys of his muscles contort and flex with each movement. His olive skin only enhances how cut he looks, his muscular frame seeming to have not even an ounce of fat on it.

"Had business to take care of. I assure you, I had extra men posted everywhere. I'm not going to let anyone hurt you."

Memories of yesterday come flooding back like a nightmare I can't wake up from. Blades piercing delicate flesh. The scent of blood and death. Survival, but at what cost?

"It's not even about being in danger. It's about being whisked away and left alone in a house. I don't even know where the damn kitchen is. I refuse to be shut out, Dante. I'm not going to live like my mother and be a bystander in my own life," I say more confidently than I feel.

"I'll tell you anything you want to know, angel." He tries to force a smile, but there's exhaustion on his face. He gulps down whatever anxiety he's currently feeling and licks at his bottom lip before scrubbing his hand over his face. "There hasn't exactly been much time. My family needed me last

night. I'm a capo, Giana. I have men who I lead and also people I answer to. This is not only a job for me. It's my life, my livelihood."

I know that the mafia comes first to every made man. I don't need it explained like I'm an idiot.

"What are we going to do, Dante? How are we going to get out of this? We've just pissed off so many people, and I feel like we need a plan. Why come for me and then leave me wondering what the hell is happening?"

These are arguably some of the most important questions in my arsenal.

He draws in a long breath before exhaling and taking my hands in his own. His rough, calloused thumbs stroke the backs of my hands, and a small fire stokes to life inside my chest. I want to be angry, to throw water on the flames that are kick-starting these feelings for him, but part of me understands, too. Even though I hate it.

"Let me and my men figure that out. You don't need to worry about it. I will protect you."

I sigh. I don't like that answer.

"I'm not a man who is good with words. Or feelings, for that matter. But I told you this... I am drawn to you like I have never been drawn to someone else in my life. It's..." He falters and searches my face as he thinks. "It's as if there's this force field between us, like you, your body, your mind... You're magnetic. You are light and pure, and I'm nothing but darkness, but I am so compelled to be near you that if I'm not, I think I might go fucking crazy." He pauses, and then says, "*Sei la cosa più belle che mi sia mai capitata.* You're the best thing that ever happened to me, Giana."

I squeeze his hands in understanding, knowing what he means because I wanted to be near him the moment I was pulled away from him the night I shot my brother. The night I *killed* my brother.

As I was kicking and screaming and trying to break free from the grasp of the man who took me from the club, all I

could think about was that swelling ache of mine. The one that begged me to go back to him, to find him, and to press my body against his again, even if just to feel weightless for one more moment, like I did in his arms.

But it doesn't answer my question. It doesn't tell me we'll make it through this.

“I came for you because I *feel* when I'm with you. I'm not the monster dead set on revenge. I'm not stalking my prey and dying for a taste of the blood of my enemies. I'm not chasing a high that's unattainable or on this fucked-up quest that I know will never bring back the women I love.” His words fade out as he lets go of my hands and clasps his own together, bringing them to his lips as if he's saying a silent prayer.

“If I tried to explain this to anyone else in the world, I don't know if they'd understand it. Do you know when you read stories? And there are two people, and they find each other, and they just click. There's a feeling that passes between the two of them like...this is what I've been missing. This spark of electricity that ignites you and energizes you and makes you believe again. Believe in what, I don't know. God? Heaven? Hell? Doesn't fucking matter. You just believe in something, and that kind of shit gives you power.”

I look down at my hands in my lap, palms up, exactly how he's left me. My body trembles with shot nerves and the aftermath of adrenaline, and I look back to him as he stares so deeply into my eyes that small fire bursts into ravenous flames.

“You, for me? You're like the part in a love story where the man looks at his life and thinks, damn...I don't wanna picture this shit with anyone but her.” Dante smiles at me, and his words put me in a choke hold. “And so it's simple. I came for you because I don't wanna miss you in the end. When all of this is over, when it's all said and done, you're not something I want to miss.

“I've got a long list of things I regret, and I'm not willing to let you be one of them. I need you right here, next to me, like I need my next fucking breath. And maybe none of this is

coming out right. Maybe I sound like I'm talking in fucking riddles or something because hell, words aren't good enough to describe what I feel for you. *Sono pazzo di te,*" he says. "I'm crazy about you."

I breathe in his aftershave as it wafts over me, and I savor his scent while it encases me, making me forget the magnitude of the hurt over the past two weeks.

"I'm going to keep you safe even if it's the last fucking thing I do. And I can tell by the look on your face it isn't enough. That you won't let me out of this, and that you're already planning on how you can scheme your way into any future plans I have to protect you."

"You're right," I tell him. "I want to be in on this. It isn't enough for you to tell me that you've got this shit figured out. I need you to show me. I need to know what's going to happen. I'm not staying in the dark anymore."

I stand just as he reaches me, and I envelop him, locking my arms around his neck and standing on my toes to plant a kiss onto his mouth. I try to move away, but he quickly takes control, commanding his entry of my mouth before relenting once more.

The moment his lips leave mine, I can think somewhat clearly again, the loss of his touch leaving me with only the ghost of a high I crave so deeply that it feels like it's ingrained into the very walls of my chest. Wanting him.

"Then that's what you'll get, angel. I swear to you, you'll be let in. I won't leave you in the dark. You'll know everything."

I have a strong feeling he'll want to protect me from the knowledge that he'll do his best to keep me in the dark—but he'll think it's for my safety. I plan on making sure he follows through with his promise, though.

I look to the photographs on the dresser again, and I can't resist asking him about them now that I'm satisfied with the conversation. I want to know more about him, about his life. About the people he's closest to.

“Those photos,” I say, nodding to the photos in frames on his dresser that I discovered last night before bed. “Is that your wife with your son?” There’s a woman with a young boy. She has long blonde hair and beautiful, big brown eyes. And another one of a woman who looks similar to Dante, also with dark features—she’s in a photo with what appears to be Dante’s whole family. “And the other... Is that your sister?”

He nods. “I can put them somewhere else if it makes you uncomfortable.”

“No, of course not,” I tell him.

I’d never want him to put them away. I was just curious if I was right. The women were beautiful. And it makes it somehow more real, putting their faces to their story.

“If we’re going to do this, we’re going to do this right,” I tell him, straightening my spine as he falls to his knees for me. “I’m serious. I will not be a woman who sits on the sidelines of her life. I’ve been forced into that life for twenty-one years, and I make my own decisions now. I am not my father’s child anymore. I want to know what’s happening. I don’t want surprises. Women in the life not knowing anything is old and tired, and I refuse to be part of that.”

Dante smiles as he looks up into my eyes, his open lips revealing beautiful white teeth. “I wouldn’t have it any other way, angel.”

I nod, hoping I can trust this.

“I have only one request,” he says, running his palms up my thighs and dipping them under the lace of the nightgown I desperately want to take off. “You are mine, Giana. You. Me. Us. I want you, and I know I’ve made that abundantly clear. But you need to want this too.” He seems to think about his words and shrugs. “Hell, even if you don’t, I’m keeping you anyway.” He squeezes the delicate flesh he’s palming, and my core aches with need. “You are mine, angel. *Anima Gemella.*”

Soulmate.

“I’m yours,” I tell him, nodding. “I am yours in every sense of the word.”

Even if I wanted to deny this man, I couldn't.

Everything inside me aches for him. For his touch.

For the safety I feel with him.

I pull him to me and kiss him passionately, hungrily, my need and desperate want for this man on full display as I allow him to shove his tongue inside my mouth and claim me all over again. His hands make their way farther up my legs, and his fingers meet my center. He teases me just enough to make me break away from his kiss, needing to fill my lungs with more air.

"I'm falling for you," I tell him, the words coming out so fast and hurried and jumbled together that I don't even know if he could possibly understand.

He kisses me, claiming my mouth and sending me over the edge of desire and spinning out into the unknown. Only when we have to come up for air does he respond.

"I didn't expect you," he says. "And we've got a long fucking way to go, angel. But you are it for me. And I may feel like a total fucking softie when I say this, but I've already fallen, angel. Fuck, it would be so much easier if these feelings belonged to anyone else. But you're the one thing I can't deny."

My big, bad mafia man is getting soft?

For me?

He fingers my wet slit, finding my clit and working me in the way he did that night at the club, and the morning in my bridal suite. I buck into him, and for moments, I forget. I forget we've started a brand-new war. That we've made new enemies and pissed off old ones.

Dante shoves two fingers inside my greedy pussy, and I clench around his digits, craving the way he makes me come alive under his touch.

"God, Dante."

"No, angel. Far from it," he grits out as he dives face-first into my pussy, licking and sucking and lapping up my juices,

my desire for his cock.

He removes his fingers, and I snap out of my bliss long enough for the impending doom to sink into my bones.

“They are going to come for me. For us,” I say with panted breaths. “The cartel. My father. This isn’t over.” The words send my stomach swirling, and my heart palpitates as my anxiety skyrockets just thinking about the detailed plans of attack both are probably constructing right at this very minute. “They won’t let us get away with what we did.”

“As soon as I’m done feasting on this pussy, we’re coming up with a plan. No one will ever take you away from me again. I’ll die before I allow anyone else to touch what’s mine. *Farei qualsiasi cosa per te.*”

I would do anything for you.

He pauses to slowly lick my slit, which is already so wet and ready for him.

For only him. Despite everything.

“*Non posso vivere senza di te,*” he whispers before kissing my center. “I can’t live without you.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Giant

SHE'S RIGHT. We have enemies from all sides closing in on us. The Amatos. The Blood Syndicate. Both are going to be scheming and devising their attacks on us, thirsty for blood.

And I know more than anyone what a thirst for blood does to a man.

Giana wants to be let in on all of our family business, and while I have no problem letting her in, because my father was never a traditional man when it came to keeping my mother out of the loop, I need to protect her.

My father always let my mother in. She demanded it. So I'm not a stranger to a strong woman in my presence, but it doesn't mean I can just flip the switch off. I need to protect her.

Thoughts of her vowing to stand next to me to avenge my sister and my wife only serve as another reminder of what an unbelievable woman Giana is. She's willing to take down her own father for the sins he's committed against my family.

And that just only further cements how much I care about her.

Sundays are for family dinner; this means all of the top men in our organization come together at my father and mother's house for dinner, and no mafia talk. However,

tonight, capos like myself, our consigliere, our Underboss, and my father, will absolutely be talking business. We can't sit on our asses and wait for our enemies to come to our door. We need to move first and figure out how to fucking get out of this mess I've created.

Sleeping with the enemy.

Falling for the enemy.

I would expect this of a soldier or a low-tier made man, but never of myself.

I'll never regret it, though.

I'll never regret her.

"I'm nervous." I open the door of the SUV and take her hand to help her out.

She stands and smooths her palms over the form-fitting red dress, and my heart fucking falters. No one has ever brought me to my knees before. Not before her. But for her, I'll gladly fall. I'll fucking gladly worship and beg for this woman.

She's a walking wet dream. Those hips, that perfect waist, and those plump, gorgeous tits of hers, which are just begging to be set free from the fabric.

Later.

Her long, dark hair is swooped back from her face, and as she adjusts the new purse I had delivered, I see the large clip she has holding her hair in place. Two small strands of hair are loose on either side of her face, curls that frame her beauty like the art she is.

I had a personal shopper deliver countless formal wear pieces, pajamas, lingerie, everyday clothes, jewelry, shoes, and purses to the house this morning. She was happy with most of the pieces, but I'd love to take her out and have her pick out her own things. She deserves that, not to be locked away in fear someone will steal her from me.

In time, I hope we can go places together.

Dates. Dinners. Her on my arm.

But we've got to figure out our shit first.

I run my hands up her body, my cock already springing to life again, despite the fact that I just took her only an hour ago. Sank my cock deep inside her and came in that pussy like I owned her.

"You're beautiful," I say. "*Potrei guardarti tutto il giorno.* I could look at you all day."

She smiles and kisses me, running her own hands up and down my chest as if she can't get enough of me, either. My perfect, greedy girl.

We walk into my parents' house, and the noise from chatter leads us straight to where I assumed they'd be, all sitting around the great room in the various chairs, sofas, and couches. The scent of my childhood home lingers in the air, always fresh-baked bread and lavish floral arrangements, as I walk hand in hand with Giana into the room, all eyes focused on us.

I may have the blessing of my parents, because they are a rarity in this world, but I'm afraid we'll have to work to win the rest of the family over.

I start where I think it'll be easiest, and we walk over to Leonardo Gallo, our family's consigliere, the designated advisor of the family; the one we go to when we need help dissolving feuds or solving disputes between ourselves or others. He's the most levelheaded man I know, and I think he'll be the easiest to win over.

We approach, and I can tell Giana is nervous as her hand tenses in mine. Most people are intimidated around Leo. He's a brute, spends hours in the gym each day, and is thick as a damn slab of premium meat. His heart is good, though, and it's another reason his job is what it is; he wants to solve problems before they get out of hand. He isn't quick to grab for his holster, and he keeps his wits about him.

"Mr. Gallo," I say, using a formality to greet my long-time friend just to gauge where I am on his shit list.

Leo grabs my hand and gives it a firm shake before pulling me in for a side pat.

“You fucking little shit, DeSantis,” he says as a snarky smile crosses his face. “You got a death wish, don’t you?” He looks over to Giana, and his features soften slightly. “Care to introduce me to your woman?”

Giana unclasps her hand from my own and reaches out to meet his halfway. I wrap my arm around her waist as the two exchange pleasantries, and Giana tells him it’s nice to meet him.

“Leo here is the family consigliere,” I tell her, trying to read her expression and find out if her family let her in on the ranks of made men.

Giana nods and does the little head-tilt thing she does that’s cute as fuck.

“I’m not incredibly well versed when it comes to the inner dealings of the families, but I do know some things—namely titles and ranks and all that. You’ve got quite the job on your hands, Mr. Gallo.” Giana looks from Leo to me and settles into my side.

“Somebody has to make sure all these assholes don’t get themselves killed.” He chuckles and excuses himself when my mother calls him to help her with something just as I realize we’re about to face one of the few people I think could really screw things up for us.

My brother, Lorenzo, walks up, liquor wafting off him like he’s been drinking for days straight. Maybe that’s why he didn’t show up to the wedding the day I got Giana out of there. He didn’t bother to show up last night either. Fucking drunk.

Antonio is right behind him, and I’d rather introduce Giana to my son than to my brother, who no doubt is going to fuck this up.

“So this is the girl you got us into another fucking war over,” he says, slurring his words as he stumbles forward. Antonio yanks him back up by his collar, but Lorenzo shrugs him off. “I’m fucking fine. Knock it off, little DeSantis.”

It's a nickname my son fucking despises.

"Come on, Uncle Renzo. Let's get you some water."

"Is this your son?" Giana asks, a smile lighting up her beautiful face.

"Oh, we're all a big fucking happy family, just accepting the Amato trash for what it is, getting the fucking cartel's leftovers and—"

My fist connects with Lorenzo's jaw with so much force that a loud *crack!* reverberates in the air. Blood flies from his mouth as his head knocks to the side, and I grab him by the collar and haul him up against the nearest wall.

"You will not talk about her like that. Do you fucking understand me? You fucking worthless fuck. Can't even stay sober long enough to attend family fucking dinner. You're more of a liability than she will ever be. You ever say another goddamn word about her, about us, I will make you pay. I don't give a fuck if you're my blood. You haven't been my brother in a long, long time."

I squeeze the collar of his shirt, and it constricts his airway, causing him to try to break free of my grasp. Antonio tries to reason with me, but he's all background noise.

"Have I made myself clear, little DeSantis?" I throw the nickname out at him in the same condescending way he does to Antonio and wait for him to nod before shoving him into the wall hard and letting him slide to the ground.

"Anybody got anything else they wanna get off their chests?" I ask the room, holding my arms out as I walk to the center underneath the grand chandelier and baiting anybody who has a thing to say to me about Giana.

Antonio walks Giana out of the great room, and when no one else objects, I leave the rest of them to deal with my shithead of a brother and follow my girl out of the room.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Giana

WHAT A TOTAL DICK.

I mean, I'm not naïve enough to believe there wouldn't be objections amongst the DeSantis Family. I'm an outsider, and even worse, I'm an Amato. An enemy. I know I'll have to work for it if I want to give this thing between Dante and me a real shot.

And I do.

But Lorenzo is a jackass, and I'm pretty sure he was heavily intoxicated on top of being a dick. But to see the way Dante all but annihilated him in front of his entire family both shocked me and made my affection for him grow even more.

And I'm pretty positive my panties are soaked.

A man who is willing to die for me, willing to set his brother straight and put him into his place, and look like the sexiest devil walking? Yes, please.

Dante's son is a spitting image of his father. The only difference is he's not quite as filled out and muscular yet, but his features are purely Dante.

"My name's Antonio," he says, and he's definitely around my age, more boyish than his father, but his voice is deep and

gritty—almost like it's too old for his body. "I'm Dante's son. It's nice to meet you, Ms. Amato."

This is one of the first times I've heard my last name, been called *Ms. Amato*, and the person doing so isn't shrieking or making an automatic expression of disgust. My last name feels so ungodly tainted now...so despicable, unfathomable that I have something of this caliber attached to me. My father killed innocent women.

I shake the thoughts of Gabriel Amato out of my mind and extend a hand to Dante's son, feeling a bit awkward that I'm definitely closer in age to Antonio than Dante. It's strange, but at the same time, it doesn't feel wrong.

Nothing between us could ever feel wrong.

Maybe in the beginning, but *now*?

Now being anything but his feels like it could rip my heart from my chest.

"It's nice to meet you, Antonio," I say with a grin. Doing my best to forget about the embarrassment in the other room. The room we're in now is smaller, more intimate, and I feel like I can breathe again. "Your father says wonderful things about you."

"He's a pretty okay guy," Antonio says with his own smile.

His face turns stoic quickly. Stoic and unreadable.

I focus my attention on Antonio but feel Dante's presence not far away. This home reminds me so much of my own, just from the little I've seen of it. So many rooms, so many places to sit and discuss business.

Dante's house isn't nearly as big, thank God. He showed me around this morning, and I think I finally have the floor plan down enough to not get lost. It's not mansion huge, but it's still large.

"I'm sorry about my uncle. He can be a fucking douche. But I want you to know that most of us aren't like him. He's a fucked-up seed, you know? He's got some pretty big wounds,

and he's been through some dark shit. No excuse for his behavior, but just giving you some background.”

Antonio excuses himself as Dante walks up and puts his arms around my waist. Antonio pats his father on his good shoulder before leaving the room.

I'm thankful he's so welcoming, but at the same time, a large part of me wonders what his real thoughts are about this. He's lost his mom. I'm here a year later, and his father is invested. I can't imagine it's easy for him.

“I'm sorry about the way Lorenzo acted. Antonio nailed it. Lorenzo's fucked in the head. Been that way for a while now. More so than me, if you can imagine.” He smiles, something dark lingering behind it as he presses his forehead to mine. “I put him in his place, and I won't be letting his behavior go. He and I have unfinished business, which I'll be taking care of after our time here. I'm sorry he acted that way, and especially in front of everyone.”

Dante kisses me, reaching his hands down to my ass and squeezing me in this barely there fabric.

He growls in my ear before nipping at my skin. “I'd love to bury my face in this perfect ass, angel.”

Someone clears their throat; it's a deep, masculine noise that immediately pulls me from my lust-induced haze.

“Sorry,” Dante mutters, turning us both toward the noise stemming from the people who must've walked in as Dante showed his appreciation for my...assets.

“Evelina?” I question, my eyes growing wide with complete disbelief.

She smiles and nods, her long, beautiful white-blonde hair in perfect place, just like always. She's gorgeous as ever. Porcelain skin and perfect cheekbones.

“I couldn't wait to come to dinner once Enzo told me about you and Dante. I can't believe it. It's crazy, isn't it?” She pulls me in for a hug, and I'm still in shock that my boss is here.

“I had no idea...” I manage to get out. “Dante, why didn’t you tell me?” I ask, knowing he’s obviously already put two and two together.

Dante just mumbles something about wanting it to be a surprise once he realized Child Meets Book is run out of Evelina’s bookstore. Something tells me he wasn’t aware of me being anywhere near Evelina prior to when I filled out that questionnaire.

I’m still in shock that Evelina’s standing here. This whole time, the sweet bookshop owner has been part of the mafia family I’ve now come to find myself part of as well. I would’ve never believed someone if they told me.

“It’s definitely not something that comes up in volunteer interviews or shop talk,” she says with a laugh. “But I’m so glad I’ll be seeing more of you. You’re so good with the kids, and now we have an excuse to get together for coffee and complain about these guys.

“It was all by design, you know. You came in to interview for the volunteer position, and when I ran your background, I immediately told Enzo about you. He agreed to allow it only if I kept you at an arm’s length. I had a good feeling about you, despite who your father is. Plus, my shop is a no-mafia zone. As much as they want to be involved, it’s on neutral territory, and it was mine before I was part of the life, and I like it that way.”

With that, she motions to both Dante and the man standing next to her.

“Giana, speaking of, this is my husband, Enzo.” Evelina beams up at the tall man at her side.

Enzo... I look at his piercing light-blue eyes and see something I can’t quite register. It’s more of a feeling, I guess. The blue hues remind me of someone, something, but it’s too far out of reach. He smiles a dazzling smile, bright white, beautiful teeth on full display as Evelina reaches her arm out and places her dainty fingers on my shoulder. I bat the feeling away, convincing myself I’m just being paranoid.

Enzo and I shake hands before he and Dante start talking about Lorenzo acting like a dick.

“Anyway, I’m super excited to get to know you more, babe. Outside of work. I need more friends around here.”

Babe. Ugh. My heart throbs. Her use of the word babe triggered the memory of Remi’s favorite term of endearment.

I can’t even imagine the hell she’s going through having not heard from me. She’s so out of the loop it’s unreal. I got my new phone this morning when the personal shopper delivered me a huge variety of necessities. I just haven’t been able to set it up yet. I have to get word to her.

“There aren’t many wives yet. Not many girlfriends either. I don’t have friends anymore, not since I made the choice to enter the life with Enz,” she says. “When we got married, I left my family, worried for their safety. Not that the DeSantis crew would ever hurt them, but this life isn’t one for common people. It’s taken me years of getting used to the way things work here.”

She smiles when I ask how long she’s been with Enzo, as if she’s remembering something she holds dear to her, maybe their first date, or their wedding.

“We’ve been together since I was twenty-three. A bit unconventional since I wasn’t in a mafia family, but Enzo wants what he wants. I guess Dante is very similar.” She grins. “I’m twenty-six now, and Enz is thirty. It’s been three years with my best friend.” She smiles warmly. “And I look forward to becoming friends with you, too.”

I tell Evelina it’s great to see her, and she makes me promise we’ll get together soon and have girl time—outside of her shop.

I look over at Enzo again as he and Dante switch gears and start talking about some kind of negotiation coming up. I hear bits and pieces about a gas operation they need to expand, and Enzo cracks his knuckles, a scowl on his face. I wish I didn’t have this *off* feeling about him. He seems as normal as

everyone else I've met so far, but I can't shake the twisting in my gut.

His eyes flash to mine, and for a split second, I feel like I almost have it, like I know what the feeling is stemming from, but it's gone as fast as it comes.

I divert my attention as Evelina is called out of the room by yet another beautiful woman, one I haven't been introduced to yet.

The wallpaper in here has small cherubs with little arrows. Gray, white, and cream ornate details decorate each inch of the square space, and it makes me think of one of the rooms in my childhood home. An office my mother used for charity and fundraising meetings.

Part of me misses her, but an even bigger part realizes I can see my parents for who they are much clearer now. I don't forgive them. I never will. And even though I still have unanswered questions about both my past and my future, and even my present with Dante, I'll never regret getting away from them.

Dante and Enzo part ways, and my beautiful, damaged, and damned man comes up to me and grabs hold of me, forcefully gripping me by the hips and yanking me into him. He grows hard against my stomach, pushing into the fabric of my red satin dress.

"We have a few minutes before dinner, angel. You can't expect me to be teased with the sight of you in this dress and not do something about it."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Giana

HE GRINDS the heel of his hand against my clit as two fingers curl inside my drenched pussy.

“Anyone can walk in here at any time, and they’ll see me fucking the soul from your body, kitten.”

There it is. The playful nickname I’ve missed since the last time it fell from his lips. When he uses “kitten,” I know it’s time to play.

And play we shall.

“Do you think that’s going to scare me, Dante?” I ask him, bucking my hips, pushing my clit against his palm and forcing his fingers to fuck me harder. “It only turns me on more.”

His eyes shoot to mine, surprise written on his face.

“The things you do to me... Turns you on for someone to see me claiming what’s mine, does it?” Dante pumps harder into me, expertly curling his fingertips and making my orgasm more and more attainable with each thrust. “Ride my fingers like a good girl.”

I moan his name, my high reaching a brand-new level as I grind into him. He bites the tender flesh on my neck, no doubt leaving his mark, claiming me as is.

As if he even has to.

He assaults my clit, flicking and rubbing and swirling the pad of his thumb over my sensitive bud.

“Dante, fuck!” I do my best to whisper the words, but I’m unsure of how quiet I truly am as I come so hard and fast I get lightheaded and fall against his chest.

He only laughs in response as he pulls my breasts free from the fabric of my dress.

“These fucking tits have been taunting me all damn afternoon, angel.” He pushes against my clit with his rock-hard cock and then yanks it free from his pants so he can use his tip to play with my throbbing clit.

We both look down as precum leaks from the head of his cock, and he runs his tip up and down my drenched slit, combining the two of us. The effect of my orgasm and his precum swirl together, dripping from my pussy. It’s so fucking hot, I have to remember to breathe.

He brings his mouth down to one of my pebbled peaks, groaning into my skin as he bites just hard enough to elicit a response that sends shockwaves from my chest to my pussy, coaxing a second orgasm from me.

“My fucking turn, angel.”

Dante moves down to my pussy and eats me like he’s a starving man. I thrust my hips into his face as he laps my juices, his face covered in the mess he’s turned me into. My body fights against me, exhausted from the back-to-back orgasms but needy and somehow ready for more. He moves his tongue in a pattern that has to be some form of religion, sending my eyes rolling backward and a shiver rolling down my spine.

Before I can move to stop him, to force his mouth back down where it belongs, on my aching center, he comes up to my mouth and kisses me. His tongue plunges between my lips, and I taste him—a mixture of both of us that I greedily suck down.

He breaks our kiss, palming my shoulders before pushing me to the floor. I settle onto my knees and look up into his

eyes. The whiskey orbs reflect pure lust and malevolence. As if he wants to punish me for the sins of everyone before me.

I'll gladly take it, too.

“Suck on *your* cock, angel. Show me how much you want me to come for you.”

I don't know the first thing about sucking a cock—let alone a monstrous one like this.

I move my gaze from his eyes to his thick shaft. He's curved just the right amount, and I relish in that curve each time he fucks into me and hits spots I didn't know existed. I wrap my fingers as far as they can get around his thick shaft, and I pump up and down.

“Finger your pussy and use it as lube, kitten.”

I've never liked an order more than this one.

I reach down with my free hand and glide my fingers up and down my wet slit before sticking my fingers inside my hole and then rubbing my juices all over his cock. He's now as sloppy and wet as my pussy, and each time I run my hand up and down his length, his muscles flex and ripple.

“Mouth on my cock. Now,” he grits as his abs twitch, pushing my head toward his cock with his hand.

I open wide and lower my head onto his thick cock until my mouth is filled.

“Hollow your cheeks and suck me like your life depends on it.”

I suck my cheeks in and move my mouth up and down on his cock, being sure to not allow my teeth to graze his skin. I've always heard cocks and cum taste salty and just...not good.

But Dante is like a sweet candy. Something I'd gladly suck for hours. His skin is so smooth, and he tastes like the perfect mixture of salty and sweet.

He bucks his hips into me, keeping his hand on my head as he guides me up and down in a rhythm that elicits nonstop

grunts and moans. “Good fucking girl, Giana. Fuuuuck.” His cock pulsates in my mouth. He rips my mouth from his cock. “Not yet. I’m coming in that perfect little cunt of yours.”

He moves me to a standing position and shoves me against the wall. It’s so rough, so hard, so...fucking good. I love the way he manhandles me like I’m his little sex doll. I have to be fucked in the head, considering my past, but a little voice in the back of my mind urges me to forget. To replace *that* pain with *this* pleasure.

I shouldn’t like this...being controlled. Dominated.

But I would be lying if I denied the feeling growing deep in my core once again.

I’ve got one cheek pressed against the wall as he uses his knee to spread my legs apart and slaps my ass so hard it stings.

“Fuck. Yes.”

As soon as he has me positioned where he wants me, he fucks into me like he never has before. The intense pleasure climbs from my pussy and upward, shooting tiny sparks of pure ecstasy throughout my body. He ravenously fucks me, chasing his orgasm as the sounds of our skin slapping together provide a soundtrack for the moment.

In what feels like only a minute or two, he’s falling apart for me, into me, unleashing his seed deep inside me.

“Take all that fucking cum, angel. All the way up in that sweet little cunt of yours.” He bites my shoulder as he starts to come down, his movements slowing.

After seconds, he’s pulling out, leaving me craving the high.

He spins me around, his cock still hard, making me salivate for it all over again.

“Look at those pretty fuck-me eyes,” he says as he gently pushes me down this time.

I fall to my knees and lick his cock clean before climbing back to my feet with a little still on my tongue.

“Let me see your tongue,” he says, his devilish smile on full display as he moves his thumb to my bottom lip and tugs downward.

I stick it out for him, and he licks it clean before kissing me ferociously, like he can't get enough. He palms my ass and then pins both my arms above my head as he breaks free for air. Both of us panting, he plants one more kiss on my sore swollen lips.

“You, angel, are a goddamn drug.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Giana

SETTLING into my new life has been a bit of a culture shock.

Gone are the days of being chained to my house, aside from when I convinced my father to let me go to Remi's. It's been three days since the big family dinner, and I'm finally meeting up with my best friend. I couldn't give a concise summary of the events that have unfolded even if I tried.

The nightmares are more frequent.

The ones with my brother.

They all typically end with me shooting him or sometimes just with nothing but him covered in blood. I always wake up drenched and out of it, ruined for hours after I've woken up.

Dante has been great to me, keeping to his promise of letting me in and not keeping me in the dark. I don't know heavy details of what he and the rest of his men are up to, but I do know when he's leaving, when to expect him back, and when I should be worried.

Yesterday, he and a few other capos finalized a move to buy up six gas stations across the city, in DeSantis territory, and the plan is some kind of tax-evasion deal. The math Dante was spitting at me while we were showering was astronomical if he and his men can pull this off. I don't mind being in the

dark about certain things, but I definitely enjoy knowing when I can relax and when I need to be on edge.

He came home with a deep gash on his forehead, and I finally got it out of him that their family doctor diagnosed him with a concussion after an altercation with somebody who owed the family money. I know better than to tell him to be careful.

It's not in his blood.

"Ms. Giana." One of Dante's employees finds me in the kitchen.

I've requested to be called just plain Giana, but most of them refuse, so I've put in another request: no more Amato. I'm no longer one of them, and I don't want to remember that life.

"Your friend has arrived. I've sat her in Mr. DeSantis's living area."

I thank the employee. I'm fairly certain his name is Joseph, but I'm still learning names and don't want to mess up.

I travel down two separate hallways, each with very different décor and style, and wind my way into the one Remi is waiting in.

The minute she notices me, she's on her feet and running toward me.

"You bitch!" she cries out as she crashes into me, her familiar scent of amber enveloping me. Remi grabs onto my arms and pulls back to look at me, and I swear she looks a year or two older in the time we've been apart. "I was so fucking worried about your ass, Giana."

She's rocking a no-makeup look, beautiful as always, but she's changed up her hair. The pink is gone, and it's been replaced by a vibrant blue.

"Just my ass?" I joke, and she playfully slaps my arm.

"I swear to God, G, if you ever do this to me again, you're paying for my fucking Botox."

I laugh and pull her in again, squeezing her tightly.

For the next three hours, we sit together on an oversized black leather sectional, and I update her on how I got from point a: my almost wedding to the cartel, to point b: the sex club owner's living room. We laugh, and we drink cheap vodka she brought from her house, and we laugh some more.

It feels so normal. I left out a lot of the dark parts, like me taking part in the killing and how we're now going to be constantly looking over our shoulders, but I told her the parts I felt comfortable with.

"I don't know if I'm more annoyed that I just thought your dad was some big-time jewelry dude or that you kept that you were a goddamn mafia princess from me for years. My best friend is a badass babe."

I clutch at my stomach, as it physically aches from our hours of laughter and catching up.

"This DeSantis fella must be really good down under...or maybe you have a magical pootang. First man who sleeps with you scales a freaking building and picks off cartel members... Cartel members, G! Whatever you have, I wish I had more of it."

I deflate a bit because Remi is pure magic in a freaking walking body. She's the fiercest, most badass woman I know.

"What's wrong? Things aren't good with Tobias?" I ask her. "I've given you all the dirty, gory details of the past few weeks of my life. Spill the tea, bestie."

I have to pull it out of her with a little sucking up, but she finally tells me that they've called it quits.

"It's shitty, but I think he was embarrassed of me. Do you know, one of the nights we were at the club, one of the women he knows who we ran into asked if I was an escort... A fucking escort."

My body heats with rage for her. "What a bitch!"

She shrugs. "I mean, I put a laxative in her drink, so."

We both burst out in giggles. I expect nothing less of my best friend.

“My, my, my.” A deep voice interrupts our laughter, and I look to the doorway to see Enzo. “To what do I owe the pleasure of not one but two beautiful ladies in my company?”

Dante didn't mention Enzo was stopping by.

“You just missed Dante,” I tell him as both Remi and I stand. I smooth out my sweatshirt, although there's not a wrinkle. It's the first time I'm even wearing it. “He's out with his father and Antonio. They had something going on today. I'll tell him you stopped by, though.”

I smile warmly at Enzo, still wishing I could place the intensity of those blue eyes of his.

“No need!” he says, crossing over to where we stand and doing a little bow. “I've been summoned by your dear boyfriend. He'd like to treat you to a fancy-schmancy date night. He said he had something for you to wear?” he asks as if I have any idea at all. “I don't know all the details, but apparently, you can change once you get there.”

“Awwww!” Remi coos, elbowing me. “This is so romantic that it's kinda gross.”

“Shut up,” I say before turning to Enzo again. “Did he say when we need to leave? Where's Charlie?” I ask, referring to one of Dante's drivers.

“No idea on Charlie, but we gotta go like five minutes ago. I may or may not be a little late,” he says with a shrug before rubbing the back of his neck. Those blue eyes of his twinkle under the lighting in the room. He runs his fingers through his blond hair and adds, “He just asked if I'd grab you on the way. Evelina and I are going to meet up at the place next to where he's taking you.” He holds up a palm. “And don't even ask where it is. I promised I wouldn't say a word.”

Shit. While I love the idea of a date night with Dante, I was so not prepared for this.

“I'm so sorry,” I say to Remi. “I was hoping we could make a whole night out of this.”

I pout but try to not let Enzo see, not wanting him to think I'm ungrateful for the unbelievable treatment Dante's given me so far.

"I didn't see your car out front." Enzo motions toward the front of the house as he looks at Remi, but she just shakes her head.

"Oh, I used an Uber. My car is in the shop, and I don't live far."

"Well, we can drop you off on the way if it isn't far. Come on, ladies. Giana, your suitor awaits."

He winks, and butterflies take flight in my stomach.

I just can't tell if it's from Dante surprising me or my mixed feelings about Enzo.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Giana

ONCE I'VE CHANGED into a bit more formal of an outfit, just in case Enzo has it wrong, the three of us pile into Enzo's vehicle and get on the road. Remi tells him about a few side streets he can take to get to her place faster.

"Now that you have a phone again, I want all the dirty details from this little mystery date." Remi whispers so her words stay just between us.

We turn onto one of the streets close to Remi's house when Enzo snaps.

"Shit!" he grunts out. "Fucking engine is overheating again."

"I know nothing about cars, so I can't help you there, buddy," Remi playfully jokes as Enzo pulls over.

"I just need to let it cool down. Give me two seconds, and I'll pop the hood and make sure nothing else is going on," he says while batting at the steering wheel.

I dig in my purse to find my cell phone so I can tell Dante we've been held up, but it isn't here. I retrace my steps and realize I don't think I even checked before we left. But I thought I last had it in there from earlier, when Charlie and a couple of Dante's guards took me to a corner store to pick up a few necessities.

“Damn. I forgot my cell at home,” I say as Enzo pops the hood and exits the car.

Almost as soon as he rounds the front of the vehicle, I hear the squeal of brakes and realize a white cargo van has quickly come to a stop right next to us.

Suddenly, three men jump out and yank open both my and Remi’s doors. A scream rips through my lips as I’m picked up from my seat and thrown into the back of the van, Remi tumbling in after me. It all happens so fast that I can’t even make sense of the sheer panic coursing through my veins.

“What the fuck?!” Remi screams, pounding on the floor of the van.

“Are you okay?” I ask her, crawling over to be near her just as one of the men hops in back with us.

Then the van takes off, skidding the tires and lurching Remi and me forward into a heap.

“Oh my God,” I cry out, my head spinning, my brain working a mile a minute trying to figure out what the hell is going on.

But deep down, I know.

And part of me wishes I was blind to what’s happening right now.

But I’m not.

My blood runs cold as soon as I turn to stare at the man who helped capture us and threw us in here. He looks unkempt, his white shirt half tucked in and half haphazardly out, covering a belt he doesn’t need. He has a black mustache, and his tan skin is clean-shaven.

“Like what you see, girly?” he asks, and I want to punch the smug look off his face.

A shiver creeps up my spine as I drag Remi to the opposite side of the van with me, and both of us sit with our backs against the side of the vehicle so we can keep a watchful eye on this bastard in front of it.

She takes my hand in hers and squeezes my palm—I squeeze back.

“You need to let her go. Now,” I tell him. “She has nothing to do with this.”

Remi turns to look at me, and I just shake my head.

“Please!” I scream. “Please,” I try again, more calmly this time. “Please, just take me. Leave her out of this.”

“Giana, what the fuck is going on?” Remi speaks up, and I shush her as the man appears to be considering his options.

“Hey, boys!” he yells to what I can only assume are the men up front.

There’s a metal-cage type of barrier between whoever is up there and the three of us, and I can barely make out what’s beyond it. My skin grows clammy, and I struggle to get a full breath of air down into my lungs. I gasp, trying to calm myself as Remi places her head in her hands.

“The princess is already making demands. Whaddya’ think of that?”

A burst of laughter comes from the front seat, and the man across from us shakes his head with a chuckle.

How the fuck did this happen?

One minute I’m on the way to have dinner with the man I’m falling head over fucking heels for, and the next...

“What’s on your mind, pretty girl?” the man says, interrupting my thoughts as he sits on the floor of the van and scoots over to us.

The minute he gets within range, both Remi and I kick our feet out and catch him in the balls.

“You fucking cunts!” He backs away, seething as he grabs at himself.

His face grows red, and his top lip starts to twitch.

“You fucking bitches are gonna pay for that,” the man says, standing and walking over to the two of us.

He rears back with his leg and kicks me so hard in the stomach that I double over on impact, a forced groan leaving my throat. He does the same to Remi, although she tries to block his foot, and he ends up making contact with her arm. A sickening crack echoes in the van, and Remi lets out a scream that shakes me to my core.

She clings to her contorted arm, doubled over in pain. A sob leaves her lips, and I immediately grab onto her, not daring to speak another word to this man.

“Remi, God. I am so sorry.” I repeat the words over and over again. I say the words until they don’t even sound like words anymore. I hold her head in my hands and kiss her forehead and ignore the muttering from the man who just broke my friend’s arm.

What seems like hours but are probably only mere minutes pass with little to no conversation between any of us, and I’m just grateful the man hasn’t come back over to me. He announces we’ve reached wherever we’ve been traveling to.

There are no windows in the back of the van, so I have no idea where we are, unable to get even a glimpse of our surroundings. The man gets up and pounds on the rear door three times in quick succession, and they open up, revealing the bright sun. It takes my eyes a minute to adjust because it’s so damn dark back here.

Remi and I huddle together, scooting toward the back of the van again, but once we’ve made a bit of progress, I’m tugged away from her by my arm.

A yellow cloth is placed over my mouth just as Remi screams.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Giant

I STEP through the underground garage door and into the house, then take the elevator that feels like it's taking its sweet-ass time.

Giana has refused to answer my calls and texts for over two hours. At first, I waited patiently, assuming she was working on making our suite a bit more hers. She's been making over the walk-in closets—assisting with organizing mine, and turning the other into hers.

The one that used to belong to Julissa. I don't have time to think of Julissa right now.

My scars run deep for both her and Sofia.

But I've finally found a slice of fucking happiness, and I've found myself to be quite the greedy asshole about it.

The second I step off the elevator and onto the main floor of my house, I call out, "Where the fuck is my woman?"

My voice echoes in the hallway. A few of my employees scurry by and out of sight, but as I make my way into the kitchen, my blood boiling and pissed at her for making me worry, I find Kenneth, my estate manager.

He's holding his cell phone in one palm, the other scrubbing over his face. "I was just about to call you. I just

arrived and found Charlie knocked out by the service door. Camera footage is down, but there's no way he's been there long. Someone would have seen him."

I cross the kitchen to where Kenneth stands and grab him by the shirt, yanking him upward until he's resting against the wall and I've got him inches from my face.

"Where the fuck is Giana?"

I throw him to the floor and immediately start running through the house, scanning each room until I hear Kenneth behind me.

"*Dove cazzo è Giana?*" I direct it at Kenneth, but he doesn't reply.

He coughs as he gasps for breath, but I don't stop to check on him.

And I feel zero remorse.

Not right now.

"Giana!" A primal scream rips from my throat. "Giana!"

I bound up the stairs, taking them two at a time as my blood flames beneath my skin.

"She's gone, Mr. DeSantis. I've searched. I've called your father, and he's on his way."

I stop in my tracks and spin around to face Kenneth.

If I thought I was fucking pissed before, now I'm next-level batshit crazy.

"You called my father before calling me?" My feet stay rooted in their spot as I sway, feeling nauseous. "You fucking called Romeo before you called me when my girlfriend is missing?"

As if right on cue, my father's voice carries up the stairs. It's faint, and I can barely make it out, but I know it's him.

"I swear to fucking hell," I spit at him. "If even so much as a hair on Giana's head is out of place when I find her, I will cut your heart out and shove it down your son's throat."

I shoulder check him on my way to find my father. Kenneth is a lucky bastard that I don't have time to waste on him.

Not when the inevitable has finally happened.

I was stupid to think I could protect her.

A real fucking piece of shit for assuming I'd do anything but fail her just like I failed Julissa and Sofia.

"I will fucking gut every motherfucker who stands in my way," I grit out as I reach my father and slam my fist into the wall of the entryway.

I yank my hand free from the hole in the drywall, feeling nothing but fear.

"The cartel or the Amatos?" my father questions, and I shake my head, hooking my fingers behind my head and trying to get oxygen down into my constricting lungs.

Leo and Antonio burst through the door, wild expressions on their faces as they approach me. Antonio reaches me and places his hand on my shoulder, and I desperately want to shrug him off, but somehow a bit of clarity reaches through to my brain, and I don't push my son away.

"I came as soon as I heard, Papà," Antonio says. "We're going to find her."

He gives me a lukewarm smile just as Leo steps forward, cracking his knuckles as he focuses his intense gaze on me. "What are you thinking, Dante? Who's behind this? We've got two options. Our enemies aren't what they used to be, and the timing is perfect for either her father or those syndicate fucks."

"Fuck!" I let out a guttural scream that shoots daggers in my throat.

It's the first time I've felt anything but pure panic since I spoke with Kenneth. I squat down and place my hands in prayer position, resting my head on my fingertips. Fuck, fuck, fuck. I can't think straight. Suddenly, I'm spinning into those first few moments after we found out Julissa and Sofia were targeted and kidnapped.

Beads of sweat roll down my temples and fall to my cheeks as I clench my jaw until the point of pain, until I feel anything other than what I felt then.

What I'm feeling now.

"Listen," my father says, bending to my level as he takes my face in his hands and forces me to look him in the eyes. "You don't get to fall apart. You're Dante fucking DeSantis. My son. Strongest *fuckin'* man I know. You have killed men with your bare hands. You've tracked down top men in the Amato organization and forced them to give us answers about the girls."

He refers to Julissa and Sofia, and I beat my already bruised and swollen hand against the cabinet to my left.

"You do not get to be weak now. Not when she needs you most. We need you to be levelheaded, as levelheaded as a man like you can be, and you need to help us figure out our next move."

He shakes my shoulders as my hands start to tremble, my anger pulsating throughout my entire body.

"The more time we sit here trying to calm you down, the less we've spent finding her."

And suddenly, it all makes sense.

My father's words repeat over and over again in my mind as my mother walks into the room.

"Mom, where the fuck is your security?" I ask her as my father walks over to her. "You need to get to the house and set the secondary alarm system," I tell her.

The blue necklace she's wearing glints in the afternoon sun as it streams through the windows. For a moment, it reminds me so much of Giana's necklace. I falter, my mind playing tricks on me.

But it's in this very same moment that the pieces fall into place, and I feel a twinge of hope in my aching chest.

The fucking necklace.

I yank my phone from my back pocket and immediately scroll to the app for the tracking and recording software, shushing Antonio as he tries to ask what I'm doing.

Holy fuck.

The flashing signal on the screen shows me the exact route she's taken from the moment she woke up today. I scroll on the map until I find when she left the house and traveled only three and a half miles before stopping for two minutes and continuing on.

I look up and tell my family, "The tracker," before my eyes immediately zero back in on the app. "I put a tracker in Giana's necklace when I was going to use her as payback. I needed to know where she'd be and what she'd be doing... The fucking why doesn't matter anymore. It'll show us her location, and it records audio, so we can listen to it in real time, too."

"Damn!" Antonio cheers, pumping his fist in the air. "*Papà sei un fottuto genio!*"

I don't know about being a *genius*, but I'll accept the compliment.

Leo comes to my side and watches over my shoulder as I continue to scroll the app.

"She's about an hour away. Arrived about thirty minutes ago, and it looks like..." I zoom in on the location map but can't tell exactly what type of environment she's in. "All I know are the coordinates. I'm sending it to all of you now, but we need to move."

"Not so fast," my father says, shaking his head when I look at him. "You don't think we're going to go in on the cartel without a plan? Without any idea of what's happening behind those doors, do you?"

"How do you know it's the cartel?" my mother asks, fingering the necklace similar to the one that just gave us a real shot at finding my girl and getting her home.

Unless...

I refuse to allow my mind to go to that dark of a place.

I fucking refuse.

“Because the Amatos are in the other direction. Their territory expands to the south, and whoever took her headed west of the city. Sure, they could be doing it to throw us off, but if they don’t know we have tracking equipment on her, then why bother fucking around? They wouldn’t. Whoever has her took her to a place they know. And Amatos don’t know shit west of here.” My father nods as if willing us to accept his reasoning, but I’ve already assumed as much.

Save her.

Two words, and my spine stiffens.

The voice in my mind isn’t my own.

It’s hers.

Julissa’s voice. The sweet sound of her inflection, a calm, even tone in her words. A voice I’d know anywhere.

Save her.

Save her like I couldn’t save you, I think to myself, refusing to utter the words out loud.

Adrenaline pumps through my veins, but my racing heartbeat evens out, and a strange, eerie calm washes over me when I realize what I need to do.

And it’s not act like an irrational dickhead.

“Leo,” my father says. “Put a call in to the Amatos’s consigliere and tell him we want a meeting immediately. There’s absolutely zero time to waste, and they need to meet us at the conference hall on Center. Neutral territory. Where we met with the Fiore family to discuss allyship a few months back. Tell him to get his top men to the spot, and we’ll be there in twenty.”

Once my father is finished with orders, I move to unlock one of the hidden safes I have scattered all throughout my home, pull out two extra weapons, and place them strategically on my body.

Then, I heave my front door open, letting it slam into the wall behind me as I head toward my father's vehicle.

I call back toward my father as I descend the steps. "You drivin', boss?"

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Giana

MY HEART FLUTTERS as I come to. I immediately feel something foreign on my cheek, something hard against my skin. I can't touch it because my hands are tied behind my back, but my mind flashes back to when Remi and I were thrown in here and one of the men whipped me with his metal pocket watch because he thought I was trying to run.

Which is bullshit because I didn't attempt to flee. I'm not an idiot. The bastard just wanted an excuse to hurt me.

I also wouldn't ever leave Remi here to pay for my sins.

What I can only assume is a dried laceration on my face is so raw and painful that my stomach swirls. I have no idea how long we've been in this empty storage unit, but I know it feels like hours. Long enough for my blood to stop running and dry up, that's for sure.

I try to carefully reach Remi, even just to nudge her a bit to stir her, but I fail. My ankles are bound, too. Even if I could reach her, she's knocked out; a different man punched her so hard in the side of the head that she fell to the cement and was out cold, instantly. Her arm is very obviously broken—it's bent in a way an arm should definitely not bend, black and blue coloring her beautiful skin.

I check every few minutes to be sure she's breathing, that the rise and fall of her chest is happening without fail, but my mind keeps wandering to how hard his fist connected with her skull. I'm terrified she has internal bleeding. The sound of his fist hitting her head plays over and over again in my mind, making me nauseous.

I try to get a better look around the space we're in. I wasn't coherent long enough when they first threw us in here. The unit is probably no bigger than about the length and width of a sedan. Three industrial light fixtures hang from the ceiling, and for some reason, my mind focuses on how perfectly they're aligned down the middle of the unit. Even their spacing looks flawless.

I'm clearly trying to think of anything and everything to take my mind off the situation I'm in.

I'm a tough bitch. I've had to be to survive this long in my family. I may have been protected from outsiders, but from the inner workings of my family? From those closest to me? I was just another pawn in their fucked-up game.

Being tough now isn't going to get me far. I've already pieced enough of this together. Dante and I both knew either my family or The Blood Syndicate would hunt me down. I thought we'd have more time before their retaliation. Dante, his men, and his father were working on something behind the scenes. We just didn't work quickly enough.

I'm no match for the cartel.

Who is?

If my family would've got to me first, I may have survived.

But the cartel? If there's anyone worse out there than the Amatos, it's them. And I'm in no position to try to go against them alone—even with Remi, we'll be outnumbered every damn time.

I need Dante to find us. He's my only hope for survival. My only chance to break free from the cartel and regain the life I started. I feel in my bones that if anyone can do it, it's

him. And I'm sure he knows by now...and I can only imagine the complete and total rage-induced terror he's in.

I check on Remi again, and a slight twinge of comfort consoles me as I see the steady rise and fall of her chest.

She's going to be okay. We're going to be okay.

There's nothing in this storage space aside from the lights and the two of us. A door stands on the north side, tucked in the corner that butts up against the east side of the unit. The cold cement underneath my ass causes me a slight ache, but nowhere near as bad as my face. My stomach and lungs each have throbbing sensations from earlier, and if my hands were untied and I could lift my shirt, I'm sure I'd see a pretty gnarly bruise.

I inch a bit closer to Remi, trying to scoot toward her with bound ankles and wrists less than gracefully.

I search the room with my eyes since I can't move but there's nothing. I'm not sure why I think if I keep looking, a knife or gun or magical fucking sword will pop out of the ceiling and into my hands.

Nothing. No weapons. The closest thing is the electrical cord with the light bulb dangling from it, or the light bulb itself, if I could manage to break it and use it against one of the men.

But then what? A dozen more will come to stand in his place.

The squeak of the door pulls me from all thoughts of survival and leaves nothing but terror in the forefront of my mind. I place my elbow on the ground and scoot closer to Remi.

In walks Enzo.

Traitor.

My mind screams obscenities as my skin grows clammy. I do my best to screw on my best sneer and straighten my spine as much as possible to act unaffected. I don't know if I'm doing a piss-poor job or if Enzo is just that cocky.

He walks over in jeans and a T-shirt, a stark contrast to the beautiful, polished look he was sporting at family dinner. The suit he had on made him look like a young Marlon Brando, but now he just looks like another scrub off the street on the wrong side of the city.

“Didn’t anybody ever teach you manners? You should say hello when someone walks into a room, Ms. Amato.” Enzo grins like the Cheshire cat and waltzes over to me.

“Didn’t anybody ever teach you that being a lying, traitorous, sociopathic bastard wasn’t in your job description?” I tilt my head and give him a look that says *come at me*.

I’m doing my best to match his demeanor, to show him that I refuse to go down without a fucking fight.

The smile falls from Enzo’s face, and he comes within only inches of mine before bending down to eye level with me.

“Being a worthless cunt will only get you offed sooner,” he seethes.

I shake my head, wishing I didn’t have these zip ties on my wrists. He smells of cigarettes and liquor, and it doesn’t surprise me he’s been drinking. He’s probably had to self-medicate in some way in order to keep up his double life.

“I knew the moment I met you that you weren’t somebody anyone should trust. I once read a study about liars. Dishonest, disloyal, filthy fucking fools who thought they could one-up the people they told their lies to,” I tell him. “People used to think you could tell by eye movement, but that’s wrong. You have a different tell—”

“Save it, bitch.” Enzo runs his tongue across his lips. “Do you think it was a coincidence that I let you work at Evelina’s store? Kept it from the DeSantis crew because I needed to keep you close in case your father went rogue. In case he tried to turn on me and go to Romeo DeSantis and let my secret out and tell him I was working for both families.” He shakes his head as he lets out a slow laugh. “Everything builds on something else, Giana. You need to realize that. There’s a

greater reason for everything that's happened. That *will* happen.”

Enzo stands and looks down at me, those eyes boring into me as I try to wrap my mind around what any of it means—if it means anything at all. Maybe he's just a shitty person who went against his family, and he's trying to make it out to be something it isn't.

“Anyway, any second now, you'll be dead, and I'll continue on my mission for your father and for Roberto Martínez, and the DeSantis fuckers will be none the wiser.” He holds his hands up in an “oh well” movement.

“There.” I smile, and a shooting pain runs through my cheek and up to my temple.

He looks like a confused idiot as he widens his eyes, so I elaborate.

“It's now believed that liars use hand movements and gestures after they speak as opposed to while speaking. Your feeble little brains are so intent on your lies and making sure people don't pick up on your deceit...so your gestures come late.” I sigh. “You did it at Mr. and Mrs. DeSantis's house when I met you. And I knew then something was up with you. You wanna know what I can't figure out, though? I know you from somewhere. And I can't figure out where. Care to share?”

It has been bothering me. I know I know this man.

I just don't know how that could be possible if he's been spending a majority of his time on the side of the DeSantis family.

A low chuckle escapes his wet lips, which glisten from the overhead lighting.

“No can do, Amato. On the off chance you survive what these men are planning to do to you, I won't say a word.”

It's my turn to laugh now. “You don't seem to mind spreading info any other time.”

In one swift motion, he reaches out and grasps my throat with one hand, his warm fingers spreading out across my flesh as he squeezes my neck and grins. “Do you need me to teach you how to talk to someone in a superior position? You’re fucking tied up right now, you dumbass. You do not have the upper hand here, and your little fucking loser boyfriend isn’t going to rescue you from us this time.”

I hate to admit it, but I am letting my emotions seep into my actions right now. I need to bide my time and not show my hand, but here I am enticing this complete psycho. I need to back off.

Remi starts to stir but still lies sprawled on the cement.

“What do they want?” I ask him, deciding to switch my method. “What do they want with me? They can’t possibly want me to marry into their organization any longer, and Santiago is dead.”

Good fucking riddance.

I don’t assume he’ll tell me, but trying won’t hurt anything.

He stands up and walks a beat away from me before turning around, and suddenly, I’m catapulted back in time...to one year ago.

Footsteps echo in the hallway outside my bedroom. I left the door just barely ajar; only a sliver of the hall can be seen, just so I could hear when my father returned. I quickly stand, press my forehead against the side of the door, and peer out into the hallway with one eye.

And there he is...

Only it isn’t my father. It’s a handsome man with blond hair and bright-blue eyes. He’s probably a few years older than me, and while he’s good-looking, that’s not what captures my attention.

He’s walking with two women. Both are handcuffed together with coverings over their faces. One woman has long

dark hair and a petite frame. Her hair fans out from underneath her face covering. The other has blonde hair that cascades out from under her covering and over her shoulders.

The man jerks on their handcuffs as he yanks them down the hall to the locked stairwell. He looks down at the carpet before slowly looking back up, and I swear it feels like his eyes latch onto mine, but he doesn't seem to have seen me.

Those eyes of his are cold. Bright but somehow...dead inside. Like their outer appearance is giving this façade of kindness, but deep down, he's a monster.

It's an indescribable feeling that washes over me as I stare at those eyes of his. Something haunting and almost demon-like. I shudder from the sheer magnitude of the force he exudes.

A creepy, crawly feeling washes over me as he yanks the cuffs again and says, "Let's go, cunts. I told Gabriel you'd be dropped off five minutes ago. You're not fucking me over today."

His voice is so sharp it stings as he bites out the words.

The women's fear is palpable, and an extremely twisted feeling settles into my stomach.

An hour later I'm in my bed, weeping for the two women, just knowing they won't make it out of this house alive. It's the first time I really understand that something much more sinister is at play than what I thought before.

I wipe my tears with the backs of my hands, sit on my mattress, legs pulled up to my chest, and rock back and forth, trying to soothe myself as I think of the beautiful women and their families. Their children.

I know they aren't getting out alive.

And it feels very parallel to my life, too.

Everything shifts, and it's almost as if my world suddenly tilts so fast I can't even see straight. The outliers of my vision

become fuzzy as my breathing hitches, then becomes shallower and shallower with each struggling breath.

Holy fuck.

Holy fuck, holy fuck, holy fucking fuck.

I gulp down the sensation to throw up and look at Enzo again.

It was him.

He was the man in my house a year ago, the one who brought two chained-up women into a room that I never heard or saw them come out of. The moment was so brief, so fleeting. I had only seen him and those women for mere seconds, but I'm confident now. That's why he looked so familiar.

And the hair. One blonde. One brunette.

The timing.

My pulse skyrockets as fear swarms inside me.

Fear and complete and total anger.

I desire nothing more than to reach out and slap the stupid smile that forms on his face right off it. Fucking bastard.

The puzzle pieces slowly start to spin, giving me a different perspective, and I'm one step closer to understanding what's happening than I was before being thrown into this mess.

I take in the biggest breath I can manage, but it doesn't fill my lungs. It's not even close.

Because right now, I've just realized something that may be bigger than all of this. And if I would've never had that flashback of the women in the hallway, I don't know if I'd remember those small, ornate details about the women...

The photograph in Dante's house, the one I admired of Julissa, the one I told him not to put away on account of me... It's her. The family photo of Dante and his brothers and his parents and Sofia that I admired...

The two women in my house that day, the ones being carted around by Enzo...

It was Julissa and Sofia.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Gante

WE APPROACH the neutral conference hall, and I immediately recognize Amato men trickling into the building. Leo's already in there somewhere, hijacking the hall from whoever the fuck is using it. A few old men walk briskly out of the doors and head toward cars as we walk in.

Nothing has helped me calm down. Not the pills the doctor rushed over or the splashing of water on my face. Not even the shot of my favorite whiskey.

My frantic mind feels like there's a fucking ping-pong match going on inside it. I see red. Pure blood fucking red. And my attention cannot divert from wanting to make every last one of these fucks pay.

If anything happens to her...

I do my best to shake thoughts of Giana out of my head for these last few quiet moments. If I go in there with her heavy on my mind, I don't think anyone will be pleased with me. I have too much to say to Gabriel about what he's done to her and even more I'd like to do to him with different weapons of my choice.

I can't shake her. Can't undo or erase the places in my mind that she's etched herself into. And I'd never want to.

I'm fucking obsessed with that woman.

With every single beat of my heart, with every single pump of blood that rushes through my veins, the desperate need for her father's blood on my hands becomes that much more.

Guilt gnaws at my skin. Guilt for getting so wrapped up and tangled in Giana that I've lost a piece of my spark to avenge my late wife and sister. The thirst is there. It's festering and bubbling under the surface, but now that I have Giana, my mind has had something else to focus on.

If I lose her, too, I will never come back from it. A man can only be so fucking strong. And three losses like that in a lifetime? Christ.

I scrub my hand over my face as we reach the double entry doors, trying my fucking damndest to erase all thought of the three women I love out of my mind so I can think clearly.

Because it's clear to me now. I do love Giana. I'm not just getting fucking feelings for her. I'm in love with her. And this gaping hole in my fucking chest is proof of it.

My sono innamorato di suo.

I fell in love with her.

I want to be able to tell her.

Please let me be able to fucking tell her that I love her.

My father, and our Underboss, Francesco, step up and into the hall, me and our other capos only steps behind. Just as my father moves to open the door, it flings open and Leo is ushering us in.

"Right this way. Gabriel and the rest of the men are in the meeting room," he says before leading the way down a series of hallways and to the room.

When we walk into the room, my gaze lands on Gabriel Sr. first. He sits at a long table that stretches the length of the room, his men all on one side of it with him and a dozen empty chairs on the other side for us. Their faces are stoic, and Gabriel has his hands clasped together in front of him on the

table, his eyes glossed over like he's being read a fucking bedtime story.

The men don't bother to stand up, so we don't bother to reach our hands out to shake theirs as we all pull out chairs and sit down, tension cutting through the air and sucking it up, making it feel difficult to breathe.

My father sits across from Gabriel Sr., Francesco sits across from their Underboss, and Leo sits across from their consigliere, who he's been communicating with over the last hour or so. Me and the rest of our capos, sans Enzo because the prick hasn't picked up his fucking phone, position ourselves across from the Amato capos, the wooden chair legs digging into the floorboards and making loud screeching noises as we sit ourselves up at the table.

"Thank you for taking our meeting so quickly," Leo starts, nodding at the Amato consigliere, who returns with his own nod.

My attention focuses not on the man across from me but on the head of the Amato family. His chest puffs out, the suit he's wearing stretching across his wide frame.

"I'd like to ask all weapons to stay in their holsters throughout the meeting. This meeting isn't one that's meant for bloodshed. It's meant to speak on our common ground and come together to find a solution for an issue that's commandeering any of our other problems or the turmoil that rests between our families." Leo looks to my father, who clears his throat before taking over.

My father stares directly into the eyes of the man who took his daughter from him, and for the first time since I realized Giana was missing and we called this meeting, I realize that my father is probably going through fucking hell right now. Facing the man he's been plotting against for a year.

He's been taking his time and gathering intel against the Amatos. We've been doing our due diligence—questioning Amato associates and anyone we think can give us information on the deaths of our women, but we've had to put this out longer than we've wanted.

And if it were up to me, and luckily it isn't, we would have just gone onto Amato territory and destroyed it all, burnt it down to the ground, and taken them all as prisoners so we could torture them until the end of time.

"We found out this afternoon that Giana Amato was kidnapped by the cartel," my father says, his eyes scanning the length of the chairs across from us. "Of course, there's an off chance that it was you, but I'm ninety-nine percent certain this is the doing of The Blood Syndicate to get back at both of our families for what happened at the wedding. Now, do any of you know anything that should be spoken of before I move on?"

None of the Amato men make a move to disagree, and my father continues.

"Were you privy to this information prior to this moment? Did any of you have a hand in this? I know your family was working with the cartel, and it wouldn't be far off to believe."

For the first time, Gabriel Amato speaks up. His voice is one of a smoker, and it makes him seem even older than he is.

"We had no part in anything to do with Giana," he confirms. "I've been waiting for their retaliation the same as I'm sure you have. It doesn't come as a surprise that they took her. She was owed to them. Contracts were signed. She was theirs. Is it kidnapping if the girl was meant for them?"

I want to wrench one of the guns from my side and blow a bullet between this fucker's eyeballs. I don't. But the urge to end him is strong within my bones.

"Giana wouldn't have been safe or cared for by them with your original arrangement, and after what happened on the wedding day, she's in an unexplainable amount of danger. Would you be able to live with yourself if—"

"I gave her to them!" Gabriel raises his voice, cutting off my father and pounding one fist onto the wooden table. "She is no longer mine to deal with, and your son is the one who fucked up the deal. If her demise is on anyone's hands, it's his."

The red I was seeing before turns into an uncontrollable, unyielding, and intensified craze that bites at my skin, causing my temper to unleash in the only way it knows how.

Chaotic. Fucking. Violence.

I stand so quickly and with such force that my chair falls to the ground. Fuck the levelheadedness I was aiming for. Now, all I want to aim for is each of these fucking fools in front of me.

“How can a man so powerful be so careless with his own flesh and blood?” I grit the words out between clenched teeth, fists balling at my sides to prevent myself from reaching for my weapon. My sanity holds on by nothing more than a fucking fraying string.

The capos from the Amatos stand in time with ours, and the only ones left sitting on either side are the top men.

“You know Giana will be tortured and killed and quite possibly left on your fucking doorstep, Amato!” I scream the words, my rage so powerful, swarming my insides like a host of wasps has been unleashed inside me. “Sound fucking familiar? You have no soul. You’ve been at this game so long that not even the death of your own daughter will faze you. *Pezzo di merda.*”

This man is such a fucking piece of shit.

“Please!” Leo says, standing and holding his palms out to the room. “Nothing will get accomplished if this becomes a goddamn bloodbath. We need to figure out our next move. Gabriel, are you going to help us get your daughter back? Do you plan on coming together for the first time in decades in order to fight for your kin? Or are you resolved to let another family fight a war that *you* should be fighting?”

Leo’s words are music to my fucking ears. Thank God somebody is on the same page as I am. Christ.

Something flashes in Gabriel’s eyes. His eyes, which are so similar to Giana’s, make it hard to look at him for too long.

“Daughters are a precious thing,” my father says.

He's always had a way with words, always able to get to the root of an issue without bloodshed—without outwardly hitting a man where it hurts.

But I, like the rest of the men in this room, know what Romeo DeSantis is getting at. And although my heart is hardened, barb fucking wire encircling it and scars running through it...there's only been four women who have ever penetrated it.

My mother, my sister, my late wife, and Giana.

Four fucking women in thirty-eight years.

Two of the four, dead.

One knocking on death's door.

“You have only one, Gabriel,” my father continues. “I, too, had only one. And they are magnificent treasures. The purest pieces of Heaven sent to rock our demonic, dark, filthy worlds. Once she's gone, once she's really and truly gone...” He steadies his voice. “You will never be the same. Because it's different, giving her away to someone and knowing she's still out there? You can sleep at night. But knowing she's taken her last breaths and you didn't protect her? Sleep never comes again. And even in the daylight...the memories will plague you—haunt you.”

Gabriel sits forward in his chair, his eyes not leaving my father's.

That's the most my father has talked about Sofia since the kidnapping; even though this was indirect, his meaning is loud and clear. The fact that Gabriel can even look my father in the face shows me what kind of man he is.

But will he bend at all for his own daughter?

CHAPTER FORTY

Giana

“SO THIS IS what being in the mafia is like?” Remi lets out a long, deep groan as she struggles to sit up, using her good arm as much as possible while being tied up. “I don’t think this is all it’s cracked up to be, babe.”

Her words come out husky from sleep. I don’t even know how long she’s been out. She moans and winces, baring her teeth as she clenches them together.

“Your arm—”

“No. My arm is fine.” She closes her eyes and sucks in a deep breath. “I’m trying to trick my brain into thinking it doesn’t hurt,” she says with a barely there smile. “I heard if you keep telling yourself something, your brain starts”—she stops to groan—“to believe it.”

I nod and do as she asks, not wanting to bring more attention to her mangled arm. My thoughts drift back to earlier.

After Enzo left and those memories clicked into place in my mind, I sat here, zoning out for longer than I can even remember. Moments from the past year that I thought were inconsequential all added up into a horrifying reality my brain worked hard at disassociating from.

I do my best to come back to the here and now, knowing Remi needs me.

Knowing if we're going to get out of here, I have to do my best to think clearly.

"Thank God you're awake," I say, the urge to wrap my arms around her so strong it stings my eyes when I remember I can't. "I was so scared," I admit.

"Are you okay?" One of her eyes is swollen shut. The left side of her head is distended, making the entire left side of her face puff out as well.

He hit her so damn hard I can barely look at her without everything inside me crumbling.

This is my doing.

"Are *you* okay?" I ask, ignoring her question because my wounds seem irrelevant in comparison. "You've been out for hours. And I hate to tell you this, but you look like shit."

I try to smile, but I'm not sure if my face betrays me or not.

Remi does smile, though. Only half of her face actually goes up, but I know she's trying to make me feel better.

"I could say the same to you. You look kinda like somebody put one of those Halloween scabs on your face. Damn, babe. That shit looks like it hurts."

She scans the storage unit we've been left in, and the distraught look on her face tells me she's realizing the same things I have. We're sitting ducks. No weapons to assist us. We're quite literally waiting on their next move.

It's a position you wouldn't wish on an enemy.

Well, maybe some enemies, but I digress.

"I know you've been cooking up a plan with that beautiful mind of yours while I've been dreaming away," Remi says, fake hopefulness saturating her tone.

She side-eyes me, and I shake my head slowly. For what has to be the hundredth time, my sails deflate, and I watch

Remi's go down right along with mine.

"Shit," she mutters.

"Look," I tell her. "If we don't make it out, I want you to know I am so sorry. I am so goddamn sorry I brought you into this. I've been putting you in danger for so long without even fully realizing it. I knew my father was trouble. I knew the mafia and its counterparts were dangerous, but fuck...Remi...I never expected..."

My voice cracks, and tears slide down both of our cheeks.

"Don't get all sappy on me, babe." She tries to wipe her face on her shirt but just stumbles and relents. "And don't apologize. There's no one else I'd rather be locked in an abandoned shack thing with."

She tries to wink, and I force a smile.

I spend the next who knows how long filling her in on the cartel and the wars that have been forged since I last saw her. It's a lot for an outsider to take in, so I answer her questions and do my best to explain things in a way someone *not* in the life can understand.

By the time I'm done, or at least as finished as I can be, Remi's right eye is practically bulging out of her head.

"I thought your original story was HBO worthy, but you left out a lot of the details. Jesus H. Christ, Giana. We're certifiably fucked, aren't we?"

I shrug. "I mean, things are a bit bleak. But like you said... we're going to figure this out. We just need to be strategic."

Remi twists up the half of her face that looks semi-normal. "I don't wanna be a Debbie Downer, but I was a bit more optimistic prior to all of those added details."

Gunfire erupts, and on instinct, we both slam our bodies to the cement. The loud blast shatters through the small space, the metal walls only intensifying the noise.

I search for the origin of the sound, but before I can find it, someone kicks open the entryway door of the unit, and a man

with an assault rifle in his right hand and a pistol in his left walks through.

A sneer crosses his face as he stops in his tracks, his eyes bouncing from me to Remi and back again.

“A two-for-one deal,” he declares calmly, and I realize it’s Roberto Martínez.

Santiago’s father. The head of the family I was promised to.

The father of the man Dante and I signed the death certificate for.

And he’s got payback, wrath, and determination carved into the features on his face.

Those shots? They were clear warning shots. Or a sick foreshadowing of what’s to come.

“Such delicate flowers, you two. What a fun little game I have on my hands.”

His words break the pit of my stomach open and remake it much bigger and scalding. The hollow throbbing inside me intensifies as his dark, beady little eyes bore into me.

I feel Remi’s terror even though I’m not looking at her, unable to peel my eyes off the man holding our lives in his palms. My hands tremble as he steps closer, and I’m thankful they’re positioned behind my back so he can’t read into the sheer panic radiating through my bones. Despite the cold, sweat trickles down my neck as I wait for his next move.

“Lay on your stomach, you fucking two-bit whore.” His words are laced with venom and pure hatred as he points the pistol at me.

I do as he says, unwilling to die today. I refuse to fucking die here.

I *refuse* to fucking die here.

Remi screams while the unmistakable sound of his zipper penetrates my ears. I can no longer prevent him from seeing my panic when he yanks my pants down in one motion. I can’t

contain my sobs as they leave my body, my guttural cries echoing off the walls.

I do my best to telepathically urge Remi to stop screaming. Not when this crazed man hell-bent on revenge has guns at his disposal.

Martínez rips my panties from my ass, and I push my cheek into the cement, searching for any kind of pain to take my mind off what's inevitably coming. I struggle and thrash beneath him, but he silently positions the butt of his gun against the side of my head.

I stop. I am willing to let him take this part of me if it means I'm buying Dante time. And that's exactly what these moments are doing.

I refuse to fucking die here.

He parts my legs as much as possible—my ankles bound—and sidles up between my thighs. My gut twists and turns, and the contents of my stomach inch their way up my throat little by little.

I refuse to fucking die here.

I stay still, unmoving, unwilling to play into his game. He likes his women to struggle, to cry, to plead and beg. I sense that deep down inside me, so I will my tears to stop flowing, and I take in the biggest breath I can manage. It may not be much, may not be satisfying, but I have air in my lungs, and that's all I need in this moment.

I refuse to fucking die here.

He runs his finger up and down my slit, which refuses to moisten for him.

And that makes him angrier.

He jams two fingers inside me, and I remain calm despite the pain. He continues thrusting, and my mind escapes, going somewhere else. Somewhere far away from this shitty little storage unit and somewhere I don't have to feel him as he slowly enters me. His small cock penetrates me, and I barely feel a thing.

I refuse to fucking die here.

I keep my cheek pushed as hard as possible into the cement as I glance toward him while he hastily shoves in and out of me. He's lying against my back, and his breath in my ear causes my chest to pound harder, and something else, something different starts to surface from deep down inside me.

And for some reason, although I've been doing a damn good job at not playing into his madness, at not giving him what he wants, I decide I'm going to give myself one thing in the midst of this fucked-up attempt at payback.

I let out a deep, psychotic-sounding chuckle, doing my best Dante impression, before asking, "That all you got?"

I refuse to fucking die here.

Not without giving this bastard a piece of what he deserves.

I buck my head backward and deliver a hard blow to the front of his face.

If this is how I go out, I'm not going to make it easy.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Giant

WHAT DOES one do when the woman he loves has been kidnapped by an unmanageable drug lord?

Bargain with the devil himself to avoid hell.

Our twelve-car caravan careens down the dirt road to the storage units where Giana's tracker says she is. I've looked it up, and it looks like it's a three-acre space of land with an endless amount of units.

This is one of Martínez's legitimate businesses, so to have immense security would be too suspicious. I'm assuming we've got a locked gate with security and guards posted by wherever Giana is. We're one step ahead of them because Martínez is more than likely assuming we're questioning the Amatos right now.

But in reality, been there, done that, and Gabriel Amato refused—or at least refused to come himself. He's sending men with us, but the man is a scared fuck who doesn't want to get his hands dirty.

We had to deal with the devil we know to try to take down the one we don't.

All we got out of that meeting was that Gabriel Amato really is a heartless fucking prick.

At least we have his soldiers and a few capos, her brothers Niccolò and Matteo included. Clearly, they are much better men than their fucking father ever will be.

I don't feel great about our limited number of men in correlation to the cartel's. I'd love to get the MC here. We've got a contract with a local motorcycle club, but they're out on a run of their own, and they can't get here quickly enough.

We'll have to make do with just our family and the ones we do have from the Amatos.

My phone rings, and when it picks up, I don't bother letting him say hello. We don't have time for fucking pleasantries.

"She still in the same spot?" I ask my tech graduate soldier, who's been keeping an eye on the tracking software from my house.

"Sure is."

"Patch me into the audio software. I need to hear who's in there before we pull up."

He does as I command, and I hear Giana ask if that's all someone has.

All who has?

Fucking mid-conversation has me confused as shit.

The familiar sound of a palm coming down onto skin makes my blood freeze.

A thick accent weaves its way through my earbud as I tilt my head, trying to ignore the slight interference.

"You naughty little girl," the man says, and I clench my jaw. "You trying to egg me on? Trying to make this cock of mine even harder?"

"Your tiny dick couldn't please a woman if your life depended on it."

My angel's voice fills me with hope. But hope is a fucking damaging thing.

A series of grunts and moans from the man cause me to shake my head in disbelief. He's fucking raping her. He's sticking his filthy pecker into what's mine, and he's enjoying a woman who is meant for me.

Who is too fucking pure for his hands.

If I thought I'd lost it before, now the feral animal lurking inside me is really coming out to play. I throw my phone so hard it shatters the windshield as I let out a raucous cry of complete and total anguish. My diligently assembled façade shatters, and I roar out my frustration.

"Get there now!" I shout in a way I've never heard, the diabolical sound bursting from my vocal cords as the once tamed rage comes back tenfold, and every fiber of my being ignites with fury. "*Ucciderò ogni singolo uomo che si metterà sulla mia strada,*" I mutter, trying to regain control but fucking failing desperately.

We're there in seconds as we lead the pack, and my father exceeds a hundred miles an hour down the gravel road.

As we approach the gate, I lift myself from my seat as I roll down my window and prop myself up on the edge. With a pistol in each hand, I fire a host of bullets into the small glass room operating the gates, no doubt ending the life of whatever fucked soul was inside.

We crash through the barricade while my father follows the GPS in the SUV that leads us directly to Giana. Ten rows of units later, we take a sharp left, and I grip the edge of the car, still perched in the window as we rapidly come to a stop, the gravel spinning under our tires when we skid to a halt.

Two men are crouched down low, my shots having tipped them off. They fire at a quick pace and try to use a pole for cover, but it's no fucking use.

I blow bullets through each of their skulls in a matter of seconds as all of our men and the Amatos get out of our armored vehicles and rush the unit. My father shoots the lock until it combusts, and I slide the door open, revealing Giana. A

gun is to her head, and Martínez stands behind her, using her as a goddamn shield.

“Stand down!” my father orders to Martínez, and he only laughs, yanking Giana with him as he moves a bit to the side of the unit.

I scan the room as I position my weapon out in front of me, needing to dissolve any other threats.

And that’s when I spot Enzo *fucking* Greco standing behind Giana’s best friend, Remi.

I’d only met her one time, but I looked her up as well, and despite the swelling of her head and face, it’s easy to tell it’s her.

I don’t have time to think about Enzo being our rat. I just get into position, silently begging a God I don’t believe in to give me a shot that won’t kill the woman I love. Enzo needs to be dealt with later. The worthless prick. My head can’t wrap around why he’s done this. Not when I’ve got too much to lose right now.

“We’ve come to negotiate with you,” my father says, and Gabriel’s men come up and move behind my father and his. “We want to talk. Put your weapons down and let go of the girls, and we’ll give you what you want.”

Enzo’s face pales, and I notice the small shake of his weapon as he points it at Remi. The fucker is terrified, shaking in his fucking boots.

What? Did he think we wouldn’t find him out?

The rage pumping through my veins somehow reaches new heights when I see Giana without pants, her pussy on full fucking display and Martínez with his belt undone, the outline of his hard cock in his pants turning me into an entirely different beast—one even I don’t recognize.

The fucking audacity of this piece of shit. My chest pounds with the out-of-control beating of my heart. My ears feel as if they are bleeding, a strange gushing happening inside them as my heartbeat thumps away in my head.

Martínez doesn't make a move to lower his weapon, but instead, laughs. It only fuels my already dying-to-be-released fury.

I have to force myself to stand down—to keep this beast inside my body caged, although it's salivating, desperately needing to become uncaged and rip this lowlife limb from limb. My father has control of this situation, and I cannot chance any further harm to Giana.

But the moment I have a chance to down Martínez, I am going to rock his fucking world.

“What is it that you think I want?” Martinez scoffs with a subtle shake of his head.

“You want men to do your dirty work. You want your money and your drugs and your runners. Want power no matter the cost,” my father spits, his own anger springing to life on his face as his brows knit together. “Men like you don't deserve the world falling at your feet, but I guess it's your lucky *fucking* day, Martínez.”

Martínez smiles a cheesy fucking smile with a gold-capped tooth on display, and all I can think about is knocking it out of his mouth. The urge to run up to Giana and wrap her in my arms, cover her with my body... It's so strong that I'm fearful of fucking this whole thing up.

“Let the women go, and we can talk about it. I can tell you in good faith that if you want to negotiate with us, you're going to be gaining much more than without us. But I refuse to negotiate with a man who is holding women captive.” My father's words are cool and straight to the point, and I know in this moment that I will never be even half as good a man as he is.

Martínez seems to ponder on the words, letting them ruminate in his mind and keeping us all waiting.

Moments that feel like hours pass by before Martínez finally speaks up again, and I gulp down my pestering need to end him. There's a time and a place, and it isn't when Giana is standing as the barrier between him and me.

“One can go. The other stays with me through negotiations,” he says.

“Giana,” I say at the same time he nods at Enzo.

“Let that one go. She’s worthless here. Lucky, but worthless.”

“No!” Remi screams and thrashes in Enzo’s arms before he shoves her to the ground.

“Remi, fucking go!” Giana screams at her friend. “Get out of here now,” she says, this time a bit calmer. “Please.” Fear and terror and complete disarray show in Giana’s eyes as she pleads with Remi. “Please!”

Remi lets out a scream as Leo moves to pick her up and then carries her away from the unit while we all keep our guns trained on Enzo and Martínez.

I want to demand for Enzo to tell me why the fuck he did this. Why did he contribute to this fucking war? He went against us, and with the cartel of all organizations. I don’t have time to focus on how he betrayed our family. That can come later.

“We’re prepared to bend at your mercy,” my father says as I look at Giana.

She’s kept her focus on me this entire time—aside from when she was begging Remi to listen. The sadness inside those pretty blue orbs hits me like a fucking grenade. And all I want to do is feel her in my arms, console her, tell her everything will be fine.

But lying to her is something I’ve sworn I’d never do.

Not again.

Not after all of my deception in the beginning.

Not when I don’t even know if she will ever forgive me for the things I’ve done.

I focus on her, keeping Martínez in my sight as well as I try to dull the pain in my chest.

“This is too good of an opportunity to pass up. But my oh my...two feuding families with the same goal? You men love this bitch so much. I have to say, the pussy wasn't all that great. Not sure exactly what all this commotion is about.”

I step forward, and my father's hand comes out to stop me, his palm slamming so hard into my chest that the wind is knocked out of me momentarily.

“Time is ticking, Martínez. What's your price?” My father is getting impatient, and I try to figure out how I can use this to my advantage.

“I think it's me who has the upper hand here, amigo.” Martínez flashes that fucking smile of his again, and I have to remind myself that I'll get to gut him in due time.

“More!” Remi screams from behind us, and I keep my eyes on Martínez and my woman as some of our men divert their attention to Remi.

“We've got incoming,” Leo says. “Blood Syndicate are approaching on both sides out here, fellas. Get into fucking position.”

The sound of tires braking on gravel fills the space, and seconds later, the entire scene is alive with the sounds of rapid gunfire coming from all directions.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Giana

THE COMMOTION STARTS with a series of rapid gunfire as at least ten or fifteen more cars speed up and stop on the gravel road in front of the unit.

Adrenaline courses through my veins as bullets fly through men right before my eyes. Martínez yanks me into the corner as he continues holding me in front of him.

Dante moves closer, and suddenly, the world slows. Everything happening around us fades into the background, and in some ironically cinematic display of fucked up, Dante is all I see.

His eyes snap to mine as he holds his weapon in front of him. He's screaming something, spit flying from his lips, but I hear nothing besides the gunfire in the air.

My bones are tired.

I am tired.

And I know this is the moment that I have to make a decision, or I'll be taken out by Martínez. He's not going to keep using me as a shield forever, and the negotiating is out the window now.

Agony flashes in Dante's eyes as if he knows I'm about to make a choice that will alter our lives forever, but I don't have

time to think about how mad he's going to be.

Martínez whacks the pistol against my head, causing me to wobble but right myself as quickly as I can. Before he can knock me out, or worse, I rear back and hit him as hard as I can, reverse head-butt style, just like when he was forcing himself on me.

The second the back of my head connects with his face, I throw myself to the ground as his gun goes off. A loud, shrill ringing in my ears disorients me for seconds before I'm scooting away from Martínez, wishing to God I wasn't tied up.

Dante and Martínez are a blur as they struggle in front of me, and somehow, Dante gets him to drop the assault rifle from one hand. He still has a firm hold on the pistol in his other hand, and just as he goes to shoot Dante, Dante gets out a couple shots to Martínez's lower half, downing him until he's eye level with me.

His eyes are wide as the pistol falls to the ground, and gone is his cocky smile. He's not dead, but he's surprised—stunned—and that's the second best thing.

It gives Dante time to grab his pistol so Martínez is officially weaponless.

One of The Blood Syndicate men, judging by the fact that I've never seen him before and he's not in a suit, runs toward Martínez, but Dante shoots him in the chest and kicks his gun toward me.

I grab onto the pistol with my hands behind my back, positioning myself just so.

Leo rushes toward me, looking behind him and shooting wildly as he bends down to cut my ankles and wrists free of the binding.

"We need to get you out of here," Leo says as Dante fires a few more shots at approaching enemies.

I quickly grab for my pants, which are pushed down around my ankles, and run, no longer giving a single fuck about modesty. My wrists ache as I tug them on, but it's

nothing in comparison to what I've felt since stepping foot into this storage unit.

"Get her to a car, and take her to my father's house. More security there," Dante says. "Cover me."

He turns toward me as Leo stands in front of both of us, and Dante pauses from the commotion of our surroundings and plants a ferocious kiss on my lips.

"I don't have time for an apology worth listening to right now, but I swear to fucking God, angel, I'm coming home to you, and I will get on my knees and beg you for forgiveness for the rest of my life."

"Dante, we need to move!" Leo says, and I hear the closeness of the gunfire.

Dante adjusts the pistol I've got in my hands and readies it before nodding to me. "Stay the fuck behind me, Giana. If you're ever going to do anything I say, please listen this one time."

The three of us move as my heart thunders in my chest. There are bodies everywhere, blood seeping from various holes, and it looks like the unit has been flooded—but with blood instead of water.

I step through the sticky liquid and over bodies as Leo and Dante continue to shoot, forging a path for us to walk through.

I want to ask where Remi is, and I want to tell him I saw Enzo with his sister and wife, but I know they couldn't hear me over the noise, so I just do as I'm asked and follow Dante.

A man lying on the ground reaches for my leg as we step over him, and I look down to see a gold chain and jeans. I shoot him, and I'm immediately surprised by the kickback of the gun, not expecting it to be so powerful. My wrist aches from the jolt.

We reach a vehicle, and I see Remi inside.

Just as Dante tries to usher me in and Leo runs to the driver's side to get in, a shot rings out from behind me. A warm sensation blazes over my skin as I'm forcefully knocked

forward. My shoulder is suddenly on fire, and it feels like someone turned a water faucet on just beneath my skin. The burn intensifies as liquid runs down my arm, and I finally realize...I've been shot.

Shooting pains ricochet from my shoulder and up and down my arm. Gone is the feeling of a water faucet, and now all I feel is a deep, unparalleled pain like I've never experienced—and it's only growing by the minute.

“Fuck!” Dante screams, a guttural moan ripping from his lips.

He fires round after round as Remi pulls me into the car, screaming.

He uses the door for cover as he looks at me, his eyes bouncing from my wound and back to my wide-eyed stare. I gasp, and I don't know if it's from the bullet hitting something vital or if it's the terror racing through my mind. I know I need to tell him about Enzo in case I don't get another chance.

“Enzo,” I say. “I saw him with your wife...your sister. A year ago. He kidnapped them and brought them to my father.”

He stops, and for a minute, it's as if there isn't a war going on around us.

Instead of replying to what I've just said, his eyes search my face as he says, “Thank you. Thank you, angel.” Then, he hurries out, “I fucking love you, Giana. Fuck. I am so in love with you. You are going to be fine, angel.” His voice is shaking.

Even in this state, I can recognize the unfamiliar cadence.

He's scared.

“Remi, apply pressure,” he orders as he looks at her own battered arm. “Use your good arm and do your best. Please.”

I don't miss his grimace as my blood quickly pours from the gaping hole in the spot between my collarbone and my shoulder. Dante cups my face as Antonio and Lorenzo rush to cover him.

Something shifts. It's quick. So quick. Like the flick of a light switch.

But I feel it. A subtle snap, and everything dulls.

The pain still thunders through me, but it's less sharp, more heavy.

Like something is pulling my body down as the world starts to dim.

It's scary, but God is it nice. Peaceful.

Dante tightens his hold on my face and says, "I love you so goddamn much. I am so fucking sorry, angel. I swear I'm coming home to you," he says as bullets fly past him and men start running toward Antonio and Lorenzo.

He presses his mouth to mine so quickly I barely feel the warmth of his lips before he pulls away and slams the door.

Leo starts speeding away before it's fully closed, the tires spinning under the magnitude of Leo's acceleration.

Remi reaches out for me when I turn to try to get a glimpse of Dante as we drive away.

I can only hope he stays true to his word because I can't do this without him.

Please come home to me, Dante.

I collapse down on the leather seats when the men become nothing more than tiny specks in my vision, finally relenting as I become so tired I can barely keep my eyes open.

"I love you," I think I manage to get out, although I'm long gone from the man I'm speaking to.

The last thing I see is Remi's worried face as I slowly fade out, blood pouring from my bullet wound like a waterfall, saturating my left arm and hand until I can no longer tell where my skin ends and the blood begins.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

Gante

MY STEPS ARE slow as I enter through my parents' front door. I'm not trying to be quiet. I just hurt like hell.

With each labored breath, a sharp pain attacks the right side of my chest. I haven't been able to get a full breath of air deep into my lungs for the past two hours or so. Just shallow, small intakes of air.

My body hurts like a fucking bitch, but throughout the remainder of the fight on The Blood Syndicate's property, all I could think of was getting home to Giana.

"Oh, *figlio*." My mother rushes around the corner and tries to hug me, but I recoil.

"Everything hurts, Ma."

Her lips turn downward as she assesses me.

"Where is she?" I ask, knowing she's been taking care of Giana since Leo got her and Remi back to the house. The rest of us were out trying to end shit with the cartel. "Has the doctor come by?"

"She's upstairs resting. She's been out for hours. Doc made her comfortable, and she's all patched up. She's a fighter, that one. Lost a lot of blood, and Doc is doing a transfusion on her right now." She pauses and brushes her hand against my

cheek. “We need to have him look at you. You look like hell. *Signore in cielo!*”

I continue walking and take the stairs two at a time, ignoring the pain striking my body with each movement.

“You should see the other guys, Ma!” I call out to her, trying to make her feel better but knowing my satire doesn’t help.

Once I make it to the room with an open door, I peek inside and see Doc sitting in a chair and Giana sleeping.

“How does a woman look that fucking beautiful after what she just went through?” I ask out loud, not expecting Doc to answer me—and he doesn’t.

He just gives me a smile before I return my gaze to Giana. She’s hooked up to various wires, and a bag of blood hangs from a pole. Doc is force-feeding her body the blood she’s lost. There’s another bag with clear fluid in it and then a machine monitoring her vital signs.

Still, she’s gorgeous. Her dark hair cascades around her, fanned out on the pillow as if put there on purpose. Most of the color is drained from her face, but she’s still the perfect woman I’ve fallen in love with.

“You should let me check you out, too, Dante.” Doc motions to me as my mother walks into the room, but I bat him away.

“Not tonight. I need to take care of something first. We’ll see how I’m feeling in the morning. When she wakes up, call me immediately, okay?” I ask, and both my mom and Doc nod.

“How many?” my mother questions, and I know what she’s looking for.

Casualties. Surely my father has called her. He’s in a meeting with the Underboss, and he’s okay. Not a scratch on him, but he took out several of the cartel members with simple shots to their heads. He’s a lucky bastard. Always has been. I’m proud to call the old man my father. He’s a better man than I’ll ever be, and I’ll go to the grave saying it.

“We lost seventeen men in total. Mostly soldiers, but we did lose a capo, too. Leo is informing their families right now, but we will need you to reach out to their women tomorrow, too.”

My mother always calls the wives, mothers, or closest kin of our fallen members, making sure they know we’ll take care of them.

“*Mio Signore...*” Mom clasps a hand over her mouth.

I can’t think about them right now. Their blood is on my hands as much as the men who killed them. If it weren’t for me, none of us would have been there. I’ve dragged our family through hell and back since Giana walked into my club that night, and as much as I fucking hate myself for it...

I can’t say I’d take it back.

And I don’t know what kind of man that makes me.

I leave the room and head to the place my father stores captives—his basement, which is soundproofed and guarded with both military-grade armor and several armed guards.

There’s not a chance in hell I’m up for a session tonight, but I refuse to go to sleep before I at least give him a taste of what’s to come.

Seventeen men down from our family.

But most importantly, one from theirs who will never again see the light of day.

Roberto Martínez.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

Yante

“PLEASE!” Evelina begs, makeup running down her cheeks. “Please, please. You have to believe me. I had no idea. Enzo never let me in on any of his business and I—”

“Enough!” My father’s deep voice echoes in the room, effectively cutting Evelina off.

She sits on her knees in the middle of the room, looking at each of us with fear in her eyes.

One half of me hates that we’ve put that look into her eyes.

She’s someone’s daughter.

But the other half knows this is the only way.

The moment we found out about Enzo being a dirty fucking rat, we knew we needed to get to her. And we did. Before we were even done with handling The Blood Syndicate, Leo had Evelina locked in the suite on the top floor of my parents’ estate. She should honestly be grateful she’s in a fucking suite and not the basement with the other captives.

“We don’t have to believe anything,” my father says as he moves to stand in front of her. “Evelina, you know I loved you like my own, but we have no other choice. We cannot be sure you were not involved. Cannot be sure you didn’t play a part in this. You are his wife! We can’t let you go. This is family

business. And we can't allow more mistakes to be made. *Basta!* Enough.”

I look from my father to Leo and then Francesco, our Underboss. The four of us stand in a half circle in front of her as she shakes her head. She doesn't understand that our hands are tied.

I look down at my fresh clothes. It's been ten hours since everything transpired yesterday, and the moment we all woke up, we knew this would have to be our first order of business. I checked on Giana and then immediately met the men here.

“You didn't let me finish,” she says as she rights herself, wiping the tears from her cheeks. “Enzo never let me in on any of his business but I had suspicions something was happening. I didn't think he was going against you.” She hardens her stare and looks around the room. “I thought I was the only one he was deceiving at first but then I learned there was much more to his agenda.”

My father lights up a cigar. He doesn't smoke often, but I know when he does that he's reaching a breaking point.

“I'll tell you everything I knew—everything I *know*. I'll prove I had no part in it, too.” I watch as Evelina straightens her spine, and it isn't that I thought her to be a pawn before. I never thought of her as a weak woman...I just never saw her in this light. Right now, she looks like a fucking hurricane ready to destroy anything and everything in her path.

“Let me make one call and you'll have all the proof you need.”

Something tells me I should believe her.

I *do* believe her.

And I think the other men in this room do, too. But unfortunately, this is what has to happen. She has to be our prisoner now. None of us wanted this. And there's only one fuck to blame.

The only solace I have is that she will be well taken care of. My family wouldn't have it any other way. Not for a

woman. Not for Evelina, one we once welcomed into our home like our own.

Because she was ours.

But so was Enzo.

And look where that got us.

Vecchi peccati hanno le ombre lunghe.

Old sins have long shadows.



I run my blade down his cheek, digging in deeper and deeper until I get to his jawbone—and that’s when I stab upward, directly into said bone.

Enzo lets out a guttural scream that pierces my ears and, quite frankly, pisses me the fuck off. I swipe a rag from one of my soldiers and shove it down his fucking throat.

“You’re just as pitiful as all the other worthless bastards who have been down here before,” I grit out.

He kicks his legs, but it’s useless—and it only hurts him more. He’s suspended in the air with thick fish hooks that are attached to the ceiling. The skin on his upper back is stretched to its tearing point as the weight of his body is pushed down by gravity, and blood streams down his back, dripping to the concrete below his dangling body.

I’m fucked from yesterday, my body sore as fuck and my wounds barely having time to stop bleeding.

But today is all about Enzo and Roberto. And then seeing to it that my woman is resting and healing and taking it easy. I know she’ll be trying to do more than she should. So as soon as I’ve handled business, the only thing I’ll be doing is cleaning up and sitting at her side.

I flip the switch and return to the here and now.

To this fucking worthless bastard hanging in front of me.

“Such an ignorant man, Greco. Sneaking around like a fucking bitch behind your family’s back. Thought you had it all figured out, didn’t you?” I ask him, knowing full well he can’t answer in his current state.

He sobs around the makeshift gag, and I plunge my knife into his thigh, digging it around in his flesh a bit before yanking it back out, only to do it again in the exact same spot. I do my best to keep a hold of myself—to keep my emotions at bay.

I never expected it from him. Not once.

And this poses a fucking problem because it is my job to see things before they transpire.

To always be one step ahead.

“You know you won’t make it out of here alive. You may have lost your ever-loving fucking mind, but surely you know that much is true.”

I grab him by the shoulder and firmly push down, causing his skin to stretch farther, blood spurting out as it rips his flesh from his bone.

Truth be told, I thought Giana was starting to make me a little too soft. I fucking love that woman, but I’ve worried I’ll lose my touch.

Looks like that hasn’t happened yet.

I chuckle as he lets out a manic, muffled scream.

He can’t have much left in him this time. He’ll be passing out soon...

But then he’ll wake up, and we’ll get to do this all over again.

“Why, Greco?” I ask him, more out of obligation.

Doesn’t truly matter. And I refuse to ask him about Evelina. Can’t trust a fucking thing out of his mouth.

I remove the gag so he can answer me, regardless of if I'll believe him.

“Dante, I'm fuckin' sorry. Fuck, man.” His words come out through jagged pants as he struggles to breathe.

I can't find it inside me to feel an ounce of remorse.

Not after he almost got my woman killed.

He deserves everything I'll give him and then some.

“Not interested in hearing apologies,” I tell him. “I'd like to know what made you think selling your soul to the fucking devil was a good idea.”

I stand in front of him and run my fingers over the blade of my knife, sending some of the blood and muscle and cartilage flinging to the ground.

His eyes start to roll back in his head, so I knee him in the balls.

“Next time, I'll be sinking my fucking blade into your nuts,” I warn him.

His body starts to tremble, causing him to wince and cry out in pain, any slight movement enough to rip his already torn flesh.

“Money. Fu...fucking. Fucking money.”

No fucking way he did this to line his pockets.

“Fucking liar. You were compensated. You weren't fucking hurting. You're a fucking capo with men underneath you. You fucking lying sack of sh—”

“I owed! Dante! Fucking Chr...Christ! I shouldn't have done business with Gabriel Amato, but I did, and I tried to get out of it, and he blackmailed me. There's more to it,” he finally spits out as his head rolls back. “They said they'd take Evelina if I didn't pay them and I—”

Another pause as he starts to fade once more. “You're gonna fucking kill me anyway. What's it fucking matter?” He lets out a long, frenzied scream. “It was Evelina. It was my wife. It was her or Giana. I offered to get Giana to the cartel in

exchange for payment. It was the only fucking option to save her. Went behind your back and Amato's back and helped Martinez get Giana for a very high payment. I thought I could figure out how to get the money and pay off Amato and be done with this shit. Maybe both sides would be none the wiser. But here I fucking am."

I shove my blade into his groin, not giving a fuck what I hit, knowing it'll be something that'll make him squirm like the fucking coward he is.

And damn, was I right.

That wakes pretty boy Greco up. A shrill, high-pitched scream leaves his lips as his bloodshot eyes bulge, and I can't help but laugh when I pull the knife out of him and watch as the blood pours through the hole I've made in his pants.

"They knew too much," he gets out when he finally calms. "They got to me." He stops again but quickly finishes as I step forward. "Their offer was too good to refuse. I'm sorry, Dante."

I don't believe him.

I don't believe it was that simple.

I look at him in those blue eyes of his as they stare back at me vacantly, as if his life has slowly started to ascend from his body.

"Ev," he rasps out, his voice low and deep now. "Ev didn't know. If you..." He coughs, choking on his spit. "If you believe anything, make it be that, and have mercy on Evelina."

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

Giana

Three Months Later...

IT'S BEEN three months since the kidnapping and subsequent other horrifying acts that followed. My dreams have turned into nothing but recurring nightmares.

Nightmares where I can still feel his breath on my neck.

Dante and I finally stop in front of our secluded cabin. We've been winding around the hills and mountains of Colorado for what seems like forever, but we've finally made it to our destination. The website said this place has the best views of Bear Lake, and I can confirm.

It's absolutely breathtaking. The photos online didn't do it justice.

We get out of the car, and Dante grabs our luggage. We make it up to the entryway, and I enter the code we were given on the keypad and open our door.

The cabin is small and intimate, but it feels homey in a way I've been longing for. The rooms are small and filled with random items—bookshelves and art on the walls, guitars lined up on the floor, records in a bin next to an old-time record player.

Dante comes up to me and wraps his hands around my waist as he kisses my forehead.

And then my nose.

And finally, my lips.

More than any other place I could ever find, this man has become home to me.

“You know,” I say. “I’m kind of proud of us for how close we’ve become since everything happened. We definitely didn’t start off with intentions on getting deep with each other, but now?” I smile. “Now I feel like I really know you. I feel like people usually get to know each other before fucking and murdering and running from the cartel.”

Dante nods, his scar from the showdown with the cartel catching my eye. I run my finger over it, tracing the line on his neck that runs vertically.

“Are you telling me we did things backward, angel?”

He’s hit the nail on the damn head.

We move over to the four-poster bed that overlooks the lake and surrounding spruce trees, and I can’t help but marvel at the reflection of the sunset on the water. The reds and yellows and oranges bleed together, using the water as their canvas, and for a moment, I can’t peel my eyes away.

“This place is the most beautiful spot in the world,” I say to him, and then remember his question. “And yes. I think it’s kind of strange, don’t you? How we were so lost in each other in the beginning. But it was this pure, untamed, lust-filled attraction that was sexually motivated.”

I stop to ponder for a moment, to reflect on those first few days.

Dante sits up, and we sit facing each other on the bed. His legs encircle me, and I sit with mine overlapping his. I move my hands to his thighs and take a deep breath as he cups my face with his palms.

“But now? Now it’s like everything needs to be rewritten.”

I haven't been able to have sex with Dante since Martínez raped me. I haven't been able to even think about sex or want it or crave it... The desire is gone.

I know it'll come back eventually, and he's assured me he's here and not going to rush anything.

And God, I love him.

I think I knew before we declared our love after I was shot. I can't pinpoint the exact moment I realized I love Dante... It's like I always have.

It's fast, but that's what it is—love. So fucking unconventional and definitely not how I pictured falling in love for the first time, but in a fucked-up way, I wouldn't change it.

Most of it, anyway.

Because what Martínez did has left this looming shadow over me.

I feel so horrified and disgusted and ashamed that I haven't even been able to talk about it in therapy yet. Haven't even said the words out loud, but they replay in my mind constantly.

I was raped.

I was raped.

I was raped.

The very thing that I decided was mine, my body, my decision. It was still stolen—just in a different way—by a man who was completely unworthy.

What Martínez did left a hole inside me that was much bigger than the bullet wound I suffered. And I can already tell the scar will be deeper, too.

Dante's eyes search mine like I'll be able to give him answers, like I'll suddenly find the right words to say to snap myself out of this torture. Those amber-colored eyes beg mine to give him something... anything.

"I do think therapy is helping. I haven't gone...there... yet."

Dante takes my hands in his and squeezes.

“But each time I go, I get more comfortable with her. And she isn’t rushing me or trying to *fix* me. You know?”

He nods. “You aren’t broken, angel. You were taken advantage of by a man who was so sick and twisted that nothing would’ve stopped him. Not the right words or the right move. Not different clothes or messier hair. He wanted what wasn’t his to take. And he had no right. And I am so fucking sorry, Giana. I will spend the rest of my life—”

“You do not owe me an apology. Please. Stop trying to take accountability for how other people have wronged me.”

He could use the therapy too. But he’s a made man. He’s too strong, too this, too that. I’ve tried convincing him, but I haven’t got very far yet.

Dante hangs his head, nodding. I know he doesn’t believe my words, but just as he’s going to try to spend the rest of his life apologizing, I’ll spend the rest of my life making sure he knows I don’t blame him. Not for one second.

“I think I like getting to know you like this, though. Maybe we’re both damaged. Wounded. Scarred. But there’s something incredibly intimate and sexy about getting to know your future wife in such a different way.” He smiles, and my stomach spins—in a good way.

In the *butterflies* way.

In the past three months, we’ve explored every inch of our bodies, but not in a sexual way. In a way that has almost given us a new look about each other. We’ve also spent nights just cuddled up together as he stroked my cheek or held me as my sobs got the best of me. As the memories came flooding back and as those memories stirred up even older memories.

Memories of Gabriel Jr. Of what he did to me. Of my finger on the trigger ending his life.

Memories of Roberto Santiago.

“I know you miss fucking me, Mr. DeSantis,” I say with a sad smile. “You don’t have to pretend for my benefit. And for

what it's worth, I miss it too.”

He kisses my lips, the furthest we've gone physically since everything happened.

When he pulls back, he leaves me wanting, but it's different than before. It's more of a wanting him closer, needing his skin against mine...not so much needing him inside me.

“I never said I didn't miss it.” He winks as his hands run up and down my bare arms. “But you've shown me that while we work on things, while we both work on things, physical intimacy isn't the only way we can be intimate.”

Dante has started opening up even more to me, and part of me feels like if we didn't have this roadblock, we'd be fucking until we were spent, passing out, and doing it all over again like before.

“Do you know how much I just enjoy being in your presence?” he asks. “How much I love coming home to you, taking a shower or a bath with you, wrapping my body around yours, and feeling your heart beating against my chest?” He sighs. “Fuck, angel. You are everything to me, and I am here. You understand that, right? I am right here. And I'm not going anywhere.”

“*Voglio passare il resto dell'amia vita con te*, Giana. I want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

I look into his eyes, and his words fill me with a peace that's undeniable.

He's lied to me before. It's just another thing we've been working through. He told me about the tracking device...why it was there in the first place.

At first I was angry. I mean, I was really fucking angry with this man. He took my privacy away, invaded it by using something so important to me. But I got over it. Because he's worth it to me. And I could see the reasoning behind every move he made—even if I didn't always agree with it.

It reminded me of romance novels and movies where such a simple thing could drive a couple apart. You know...that big

black moment. The one where something being hidden shatters their worlds and everyone waits with bated breath to see if they'll come back together.

But honestly...this isn't a damn movie. And after I cooled down, I realized I'd rather be with someone who implanted a tracker into my necklace, who fought to get me out of my arranged marriage, who made temporary peace with his sworn enemy to get me back, and who tackled the cartel to save me rather than anyone else in this entire universe.

We're kind of the exact opposite of a romantic movie, aren't we?

But damn, does it make us real.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

Giant

I WALK over to the record player the morning after we arrive. The sun is glistening over Bear Lake, and I've made us coffee. Giana made a phenomenal breakfast, and I'm fucking stuffed, but I'm even more glad that she's eating again.

The amount of hell that we've walked through—together and apart—is unbelievable. But it's our story. And until the day I die, I will be grateful for every fucking second I have with this woman by my side.

I find an old Al Green record, and I'm taken back to my childhood when my parents would throw dance parties after a long day of my father killing and my mother homemaking like we were living in a dream world.

After I've got the record spinning, I turn toward Giana, and just as every other time I look at her, I'm in awe. Of her beauty, her resilience...her strength. I swear to God, she could make a sinner fall to his knees and pray.

She's done it to me more times than I can count.

She's also started asking me to go to therapy, and I don't know how to tell her it's not my style. Hell, I know I could use it. Who the fuck couldn't? Especially in my line of work and with a fucked-up past like mine. But feelings?

I do my best to shove them down and throw myself into work or other things to take my mind off it. Especially what that Martínez fucker did to her. He's still paying for that, and I intend to keep him paying for a very, very long time.

I feel my anger start to get the best of me, so I try to shut it off, but it's difficult. He's fucking gutted the woman I love. He's forever changed her in a way that's going to take a long fucking way to come back from. And while my promise to her is solid, and I'm not going anywhere...it just fucking kills me that she's in pain.

And just like many times in my life, there's nothing I can do to fix it.

She looks over at me and smiles, and I see the thoughtful look in her eye. I can only hope whatever she's thinking about is something good and she's not getting sucked into everything that happened.

She's wearing a teal tank top that exposes her shoulder and the scar that's set deep into her skin. It's started healing, but it's got a long way to go. I roam my gaze over her body, her face—to the other scar, the one on her cheek, which is also healing; the result of being hit with a pocket watch when she was kidnapped.

We came here to get away. To rest and not think about her family or mine or The Blood Syndicate fuckers. We came to this little spot so we could heal. Both of us, even if I am pretending I'm just a big, bad mafia man who is only soft for his woman.

I know there's shit I need to work through, but I'd rather keep my tough exterior up for a while longer.

For some reason, Enzo crosses my mind as I'm thinking of the things I need to get a handle on. And my nerves ignite. The fucking traitor. We have a whole other issue on our hands. One we're still sorting out. But he's waiting for me underneath the club. And I can't wait to decide exactly what I'll do to the bastard.

“What are you thinking about over there?” she calls out to me as she catches me watching her for the second time. “Something I can help you with?”

She cocks her head, and that little messy bun thing she’s got going on flops around on her head with the sudden movement. She’s so fucking sexy, and she’s not even trying to be.

I chuckle and hold my hand out, feeling like our timing has always been a bit off, so why not keep it up?

“Come dance with me,” I demand, and she obliges.

Fuck if I don’t miss that sweet pussy of hers. Especially when she wears tiny little panties like the ones she’s got on right now, barely there little things. But at the same time, I really did mean it when I told her I liked our relationship building up in this way too.

And I really will wait forever if that means she’s comfortable.

More than anything else in this fucking world...I just love her.

She saunters over to me after setting her coffee down, and I take her in my arms as “Let’s Stay Together” starts crackling through the speakers. I try to sing a couple words, but I’m fucking tone deaf, and although she doesn’t laugh, her smirk tells me as much.

“Keep going. I liked it!” she commands, and it’s my turn to oblige.

“*Resta com me per sempre,*” I tell her. “Stay with me forever.”

She mutters an “Always,” and I relax. The feeling of her body loosening in my arms and her hand in mine is pure fucking magic. Actually, Giana herself is magic. The best fucking kind.

I sing to her as I spin and sway her all around the cabin’s living room, and the smile on her face is so similar to the ones she had before all of this happened... It gives me hope.

Dangerous, dangerous hope.

But at the same time...it's necessary.

So fucking necessary.

The song ends, and I take a bow, hoping she'll do the same. When she does, I quickly get down on one knee and pull a small black box out of my pocket.

As she stands back up and realizes I'm now on the floor, a shocked gasp leaves her lips as both of her hands fly up to her mouth.

"Dante!"

"Shh, angel. Spotlight's on me."

She giggles, and my eyes are glued to hers as they grow glassy. Tears free-fall down her cheeks, and she's somehow even more beautiful like this.

I clear my throat and look up at my woman, who is staring down at me, her eyes not even glancing at the rock I'm holding yet.

"I meant it when I said it. *Sei la cosa più belle che mi sia mai capitata*. You are the best thing that ever happened to me, angel. And sometimes I feel like I'm the worst thing to ever happen to you."

She rolls her eyes, but I keep going.

"But for some reason, you keep me around. And I know it hasn't been long, and you've got a lot of time to kick me to the curb. But fuck, angel. All I wanna do is spend the rest of my life loving you. Holding you. Talking to you. Kissing that perfect, smart-ass mouth of yours. I am happy just being with you. No matter where we are or what I'm doing. At the end of the day, it's you. You are it for me. *Sei la mia anima gemella*. You are my soulmate."

She gets down on her knees, tears streaking down her face as she starts to nod. She takes my face in her hands and runs her palms over my cheeks.

“Marry me. I swear to you, I will spend this lifetime and the next doing anything I can to show you that you’ve made the right decision. Every day. All day. I am so unworthy of you, and this is probably selfish of me to ask. Keeping you in this life, putting you in danger...because you know the danger only goes up from here...”

“Stop talking, Dante.” She laughs and shakes her head.

I oblige, and she kisses me, putting every ounce of her soul into it and rocking my fucking world like only she can. Her lips are warmth to my ice, heaven to my hell, perfection to my sins.

“I cannot wait to spend the rest of my life with you,” she says through tears. “I’m so in love with you, Dante.”

I pull her into my chest as we both stay put on the floor. “I love you more than I thought was even fucking possible, angel.”

I bend and kiss the fresh scar on her shoulder the same way I’ve kissed her other scars these past few months. Finding out everything her brother did to her made me wish I could bring the fucker back to life and torture him just to kill him again.

I pull her into my chest and inhale her, taking in as much of her as she’ll allow before I work myself up thinking about what she went through with him.

“Do you remember how you’d always tell me you aren’t your own? How you’ve never felt like you are your own?” I ask her, and she nods. “It’s always been my end goal to get you to believe you are your own. Because it kills me when you say that.” I bend, kissing her scar again. “But now, I’ve realized if I can’t get you to accept that you belong to yourself, I’m going to just tell you that you’re fucking mine.”

She kisses me, and I breathe her in again, calming myself. I don’t want to forget one fucking detail of this moment. She smells like shampoo and cherries and her favorite body lotion—it’s a woody scent mixed with something sweet that’s incredibly her. It’s intoxicating and calming all at once.

I pull away, forcing myself to let go of her long enough to slide the ring onto her finger and watch as she marvels at it.

“This is the most beautiful thing I’ve seen in my entire life. Dante...” She kisses me, her tongue sliding between my lips.

This ring is nothing in comparison to her, but I’ll let her think it’s the most beautiful thing she’s ever seen if it makes her happy.

“I just have one request.” She looks at me with a sly smile spreading across her face.

“Anything, angel.”

“Let’s elope.”

EPILOGUE

Giana

Six Weeks Later

GIANA and I stand in her childhood bedroom as she gathers some of the things she didn't get to bring with her when everything went down.

Our war with the Amatos is far from over, especially because nothing was settled. They haven't paid for their ruthless sins against my family—still haven't even admitted to them. When we came together to fight for Giana, we called a half-ass truce that has carried us this far, but we've got a long way to go, and they have a lot of repenting to do.

"You'll have to hurry," Niccolò rushes out. "I don't want to chance anyone seeing you and ruin any progress we've made. Cameras are down on this wing, but he checks them often. I need to get them back on before he notices."

His gaze darts between Giana and me before he leaves us to it and goes to stand guard, as promised.

Gabriel and Elena Amato are throwing one of their usual extravagant parties in the west-wing ballroom. We've been waiting for a couple of weeks to get in here without being seen, and this has been our first chance. Giana has kept in contact with her brother, and he's created a diversion to not

only get us safely inside from the garage but also to Giana's old room without any eyes on us.

I just want to get in and out before something changes.

I don't enjoy being in this home. And from what Giana has told me, I don't think she wants to be here any more than I do, but these possessions of hers are important.

A diploma, other jewelry from her grandmother, photos of Remi and her when they were younger. Things she can't replace. So it's worth it to me.

Something tells me there will be plenty of other photos of Giana and Remi, though—especially now that she's living with us and under our protection. It's been a huge change for all of us, but it isn't like I don't have the space at my place.

And it's been good for both Giana and Remi—having each other so close by. They went through something so fucked up and life altering...and they went through it together.

She packs a box and signals to one of my men that he can put it out in the SUV. She looks sexy as fuck in her tight yoga pants and crop top. And I love that she never hides the scar etched into her shoulder. She calls it her battle wound, and it's true.

My woman is a fucking fighter.

And there's nothing sexier than a woman who takes no shit.

Especially when she was raised to be anything but.

We've had a long few months since her kidnapping, and she's been in extensive therapy for a majority of it. In the beginning, she went three times a week, and now she's down to two.

We've slowly started incorporating sexual intimacy back into our routine, but it's never something I push. When she tells me she wants it, I give it to her—no questions asked. But I'm not taking it from her without her consent or approval. What she went through has changed her.

And I might be a selfish prick, but I love this new version of her. The one that's no longer afraid to disappoint people, no longer afraid of what people might think of her. She's strong and beautiful and knows exactly what she wants.

I'm just the lucky fool that gets to be in her world.

I just hate—fucking loathe—what it took for her to get to this point.

Besides, I've learned there's more to life than fucking and running. And I think it's helped me grow as a man, too. All those wasted nights pounding into pussy while I was searching for something—anything—to make me forget about my dead wife. About the way my world shattered when I found her.

But the whole time...

The whole fucking time...

I was searching for the woman who's now in front of me.

And the connection we've started to grow is unlike anything I've ever known.

A simple fucking touch of her fingertips on my skin is like a drug in my veins.

"You need help with anything, angel?" I ask her, grinning when I see that rock on her finger. Knowing this woman is mine for the rest of her life.

I've saved her before, but something tells me she won't need to be saved again.

She's got it handled.

"Yes, actually!" She turns to me after she packs something away. "Remember the whole locked-floor thing?" She points to the bolt cutters I've brought with us in one of our bags. She hadn't told me much aside from the fact that she wants something and the place her items are located is padlocked. "There's a bathroom on the floor above us. My mother once mentioned she stored my baby towels in there. Can you grab them? I know it's silly, but maybe one day—"

"Say no more."

She walks over to me and wraps her arms around my neck.

“God, I cannot wait to be Mrs. Giana DeSantis.”

She nuzzles her nose against mine, and I agree with her before kissing her. She deepens the kiss, and I have to force myself to pull away, knowing we’ll never get out of here if we keep this up.

But damn, she tastes so fucking good.

We’re eloping soon. We haven’t decided where or when, but this is the last order of business needed to close out this chapter of our lives before moving on to the next. I’d marry her any fucking day of the week. And now that we’re almost done with this, we can officially move on and do it however the fuck we want to.

I grab the cutters and leave her to pack as I think about her with a swollen, round belly. The thought of her carrying my child inside her womb makes my heart thump with an entirely different purpose.

But then I think about the possibility of being caught by an Amato guard, and I realize how quickly my internal switch can flip. I may have grown soft...but only for her.

I’m ready to take somebody out if they even so much as look at me wrong.

And that’s nothing in comparison to what I’ve been doing to Martínez and Enzo.

Revenge is the sweetest drug I’ve ever known.

And nothing will ever change my ways when it comes to that.

Just this morning, I was twisting a blade deeply into Martínez’s ball sac, and I still feel the adrenaline pumping through my veins. I just need Doc to patch him up so I can do it again.

I make my way to where Niccolò is standing guard, calling out quietly as I approach so I don’t startle him from behind.

“Giana needs something from upstairs. She said it’s a locked floor.” I point upward. “Think I’m safe, or does anyone have a key? Is there a possibility of running into someone?” I ask as I show him the cutters.

He sighs and gives me a stern look that I match. “The floor is off limits to everyone but my father. Always been that way. You won’t find anyone there unless they have a death wish.”

He shrugs but points me to a doorway at the end of the hall before turning around and resuming his post.

Once I reach the door, I use the bolt cutters I brought and cut the padlock. I don’t give a fuck who this gets pinned on. I’m getting what Giana wants so we never need to be anywhere near this fucking place again.

Once upstairs, I reach the bathroom Giana told me about and see a floor-to-ceiling cupboard. Upon opening it up, sure enough, there’s a whole stack of not only baby towels but baby blankets, too.

I smile and shake my head as a softness only Giana can stir inside me surfaces again. I’m lost in the moment...

But then I hear something.

At first it’s faint, a barely there melody that sounds far away.

A creaking sounds, as if someone is walking on old, tired floorboards, and the sound gets closer. I realize it’s flowing through a vent from the room next door, and something about the melody makes me pause. I hold my breath as everything inside my body stills.

It’s a woman. She’s singing, and the words are so familiar it makes my blood run cold.

“In the morning, you’ll wake and open your eyes, but until then, my baby, sleep tight, sleep tight.”

It’s a song only we know. One my mother sang to us, one she made up one night when I wouldn’t go to sleep. It stuck around for years and was the only way we’d fall asleep if we were having a hard time.

Those words. That song.

Her voice.

Sofia?

VICTORIA'S

Socials

One of my favorite way to connect with readers is via social media. I love chatting with the people who support my art and I feel like I know my core readers more than some of the people I've called friends in "real life!"

[Amazon Author Page](#)

[Instagram](#)

[TikTok](#)

[FB Reader Group](#)

[Newsletter](#)

[Goodreads Author Profile](#)

[Bookbub](#)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Oh my gosh. I don't even know where to start with my thank you's for this book. I feel like, up until now, publishing has been a semi-lonely job—aside from a close circle of author friends. With *Ruthless Vows*, though, it truly was a team effort.

I feel like I've come such a long way in my author journey. I published my first book in 2019 and as I write this it's 2023. To some, it may seem like a small number of years, but to me?! It's incredible. I'm usually a hit it and quit it type of girlie. I get an idea in my head and do it and then drop it for the next. But with writing and publishing books it's been the exact opposite. I love this life. I love creating new worlds and the people who inhabit them, and I thank you for being on this journey with me.

Now for the never-ending list of people I couldn't have published *RV* without...

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To my friends, my family, my daughter—who is the reason I do everything—thank you for your unwavering support as I cancel plans and leave text messages on “read” for weeks at a time. I promise I love you. These characters just wouldn't leave me alone!

For you, the reader. The person who has taken even more time just to read this acknowledgments section. Thank you. I hope you realize the dreams you have are worth chasing. Even if you have to defy your family and ruin your wedding to the cartel heir and shack up with your father's sworn enemy...

Okay, sorry. Seriously though. Your dreams are worth chasing. You are worth finding the things you love and that love you in return. I truly mean this with everything I have in me. If you are doubting yourself right now, know I believe in you and you are worth it.

xO—Victoria