



— THE —
UNDERBOSS

PIPER STONE

THE UNDERBOSS



PIPER STONE

CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Books of the Ruthless Empire Series](#)

[Books of the Tainted Regime Series](#)

[Books of the Carnal Sins Series](#)

[Books of the Kings of Corruption Series](#)

[Books of the Sinners and Saints Series](#)

[Books of the Benedetti Empire Series](#)

[Books of the Merciless Kings Series](#)

[Books of the Mafia Masters Series](#)

[Books of the Edge of Darkness Series](#)

[Books of the Dark Overture Series](#)

[Books of the Club Darkness Series](#)

[More Mafia and Billionaire Romances by Piper Stone](#)

[Books of the Missoula Bad Boys Series](#)

[Books of the Montana Bad Boys Series](#)

[Books of the Eagle Force Series](#)

[Books of the Dangerous Business Series](#)

[Books of the Alpha Dynasty Series](#)

[Books of the Alpha Beasts Series](#)

[More Stormy Night Books by Piper Stone](#)

[About Piper Stone](#)

Copyright © 2023 by Stormy Night Publications and Piper Stone

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Published by Stormy Night Publications and Design, LLC.

www.StormyNightPublications.com

Stone, Piper

The Underboss

Cover Design by Korey Mae Johnson

This book is intended for *adults only*. Spanking and other sexual activities represented in this book are fantasies only, intended for adults.

CHAPTER 1



“We were doomed from the start. A lost cause. A losing battle. And yet, in that narrow instant I didn’t give a single fuck.”

—Julie Johnson

Francesco

“My man!”

“Look who the cat dragged in!”

I laughed as I strutted into the bar through the private entrance, glancing around at the garish interior. I hadn’t been inside Gone Wild, the exclusive men’s club catering to the wealthy, powerful, and fucked-up kinky men in New York in almost two years. I’d forgotten how enticing the darkened club had become, the owner encouraging his customers to indulge in their darkest proclivities.

Thankfully, I knew the man well.

From the selection of the best-looking dancers and strippers, and the incredible food creatively prepared by a world-renowned chef to a dance floor rivaling the best clubs in the city, Gone Wild had everything a hungry boy was looking for.

“Woo hoo!” Joey yelled as he stormed toward me, pushing two of our friends out of the way. The loopy grin on his face indicated he’d already had a few. Well, it was his bachelor

party. He certainly deserved to have more than one adult beverage.

My buddy, the brooding groom, was the illustrious owner, a guy I'd known for years. We'd run together since high school, both attending Columbia University, ruling the streets in our neighborhood like kids on a mission to tamp down anyone trying to assert control over us. Joey Trelista was an aggressive son of a bitch, his entrepreneurial spirit rivaling mine.

He'd parlayed the once small, seedy club into a showplace, along with three other locations and a national chain floating cash in front of him in an effort to buy him out. He wasn't selling.

I turned in a full circle in style, doing a few dance moves until the other guys surrounding the oversized table groaned, even tossing peanuts in my direction.

"About goddamn time you got here," Joey huffed.

"Nah, we don't need him!" one of the other guys snarked.

"What?" I countered, running my fingers through my slicked-back hair. Tonight I was the epitome of an Italian stallion, a famished man ready to feast on whatever tasty treats were presented. I was also the best man, the wedding less than twenty-four hours away. His beautiful fiancée had just finished threatening me on the phone that if we were late to the church then she'd have our balls kept in a glass jar.

I believed her.

Which meant I'd have to cut Joey off at some point.

Almost as soon as I'd walked in with Dominick Saltori and Mark Cosner in tow, scantily clad female employees giggled and headed in our direction.

"Be careful, ladies," I told them as two girls rubbed their hands on Dom's chest. "He's a man of God. He could condemn you for all eternity."

Dominick rolled his eyes, snorting as he threw me a hateful look. "Feasting with the eyes is allowed."

“In what good book, Father?” Mark asked as he punched Dom’s arm.

“Yeah, yeah.” Dom pushed away from the rest of us, heading toward the private bar set up for the bachelor party. Then I headed toward Joey, clapping him on the back.

“I never thought I’d see the day you’d finally settle down,” I told him as I surveyed our other friends. There were six of us, all dangerous men from important families. We were the cream of New York, likely to rule the city at minimum, Carter Franklin determined to rule the country one day given his father was a state senator.

“What day was that? The one I’d become richer than you, my friend?” Joey teased. Then he lifted his beer toward Cayman, the man not only considered a friend by the rest of us, but my Capo was well. Wherever I went, so did he, the Jamaican becoming a confidante after all we’d been through together.

My family was well known in New York, the Arturo–Powers crime syndicate an absolute powerhouse. That meant we had our share of enemies. While no recent threats had been made, that didn’t mean I could allow my guard to fall.

Cayman shook his head. “Ya, man. Joey is a wild man at heart. Just ask anyone he pays off to say so.” The man’s accent was heavier than normal on purpose. He stepped back and threw his arms up before Joey could punch him in the gut.

Everyone laughed.

Joey did as well, then his expression turned somber. “The truth is I never expected to fall in love. I wasn’t even sure I deserved it. You know?”

I knew exactly what he was talking about. Maybe he’d cleaned up his act, but we were still bad men at heart, undeserving of normal lives, my sister and her fairytale romance aside. “I hear you, brother, but you’ve worked hard to get where you are. Now you can take some time and enjoy that beautiful woman of yours.”

“I plan on doing just that,” Joey said, grinning. “We’re headed to Europe for a month, somewhere I never thought I’d want to

visit. I tell you what, falling in love changes a man.”

“Yeah, I can’t believe Julie can put up with you.” I couldn’t help but tease him. He’d been the guy considered the least likely to settle down. I was a close second.

He huffed then motioned for the bartender to get me a drink. “She has the patience of a saint. I do admit that.”

“She must.” I nodded at the man behind the bar. The long-term employee didn’t need to ask what I preferred to drink; my favorite scotch slid across the bar only seconds later. “I’m really happy for you, man. Shocked she can tolerate your sorry ass, but happy for you both.”

His laugh and the excitement on his face was really something. His exuberance had made me question what I wanted out of life.

“You know what’s funny?” he asked as he sipped his beer. “Eight months ago, I would have punched you in the face if you’d told me I’d be getting married. The day I met Julie, I knew she was the one. True love hits you like a ton of bricks.”

“You forget that I was there. I almost fought you for her.” Which wasn’t true. The look on his face when the beautiful redhead had walked into the restaurant was something that only happened in the movies. To say he’d been smitten was ridiculous but the goddamn truth. He’d tripped over his tongue and both feet after being pushed into opening up a conversation. Cayman, Mark, and I had watched him behaving just like he’d done with every other woman, swaggering up to meet her then putting his foot in his mouth.

When she’d slapped him, we hadn’t been able to stop laughing. How he’d managed to go home with her that night was still a mystery and one that would go down in the books.

They’d been inseparable since, the whirlwind romance the shit romance books were made of. Or least that’s what I’d heard from my sister. I certainly couldn’t confirm since women were nothing more than arm candy for a bad man like me.

“I would have put a bullet in your brain,” he snarled.

Dominick made the mistake of walking up at that exact moment. I still found it hard to believe the newly ordained Catholic priest continued to run with the old crowd. His fake look of horror was following by a lift of his arm for a toast. "To true love."

"Hear, hear." I lifted my glass, encouraging the other boys to form a circle around us.

Once they all clambered around, Joey grinned from ear to ear like a kid, his eyes dancing with happiness. He even puffed up like I'd seen him do a thousand times, a showman through and through.

"To Joey and Julie. May love, light, and happiness bring them joy, peace, and a huge family," Dominick continued.

Joey tossed me a look then placed his index finger across his mouth. "Interesting you should suggest that. I might have a secret." His voice was almost singsong, which made us all laugh.

"Uh-huh. I'm not sure we want to know," Mark said through gritted teeth.

"He's right," Steve added. "Too much overload of icky-sticky."

"What the hell is that term?" Carter snorted, making a face.

I gave Joey a hard look. "Confess or we'll tell Julie about every second of your debauchery tonight."

"Them's fightin' words." Joey fisted one hand, taking a fighter's stance. Then he slipped his hand into his suit jacket pocket. When he pulled out cigars, I stumbled backward.

"No!" several of the guys shouted at the same time.

"A baby?" I asked, more shocked than ever.

"Hard to believe, huh?" the father to be grinned and finished handing out the Cuban cigars. "We're as shocked as you guys are."

"Well, you do know how that happens. Right?" Dominick teased.

“How the hell would you know?” Steve pushed.

Dominick shook his head and grabbed one of the cigars. “I wasn’t always a celibate man. This really is a celebration. God is good.”

I backed away, trying not to dampen his spirits. We were all at the age we’d started to think about settling down, something I’d witnessed with my sister over the last few years. Marital bliss.

It was difficult to stomach the thought. Every time my sister pushed me into finding someone, I started to shut down. Which I felt like doing right now. The pomp and circumstance of the wedding and reception was enough to deal with. After placing my drink on the bar, I yanked out my phone, double checking there weren’t any issues with the two recent acquisitions.

Joey slid beside me seconds later, slowly tipping his head in my direction. “No business tonight, remember?”

I shifted against the bar, shoving my phone back into my pocket and surveying the party. The music was blaring, the liquor already flowing, and the amount of food being served could feed three dozen people. “Yeah, just a quick check. I feel something brewing.” There’d been unrest on the streets, the chatter indicating one of the lower players in the world of crime syndicates was making threats to various customers of our regime and others. That wouldn’t bode well for overall business, whether legitimate or our more profitable side.

“That’s your problem,” Joey taunted. “You never take a break. You never do anything for you.”

“I’m here, aren’t I?” I smirked then pulled my glass to my mouth.

“For me. It’s something you’ll likely never let me forget too. I’m surprised you agreed to wear the monkey suit. I thought you were going to choke the tailor.”

“Hey. I look good in a tux.” My buddy was right. I’d almost smacked the older guy after being scolded for not standing still enough to suit him.

Joey's laugh was boisterous, cutting through the thumping beat of the bass drums, the music louder than normal. Or maybe it was just because I had a headache behind my eyes. Anxiety and anger did that to me.

"Yeah, you do. Better than I do." He patted his belly. "You should find a good woman, my man. That would do your surly attitude a world of good."

"Maybe but it ain't happening. I'm far too busy."

"That's what I said, but once you're with your soulmate, everything you think is important just fades away. All you care about are the little things. Walks. Picnics. Dinners. Hell, movie nights."

"My god, my friend. What happened to the tough guy who preferred dumb blondes?"

He shrugged then glanced toward the doorway when we both heard a hard thumping sound. "I'm telling you to find a sassy lady. All the shit we used to do will mean crap. I'll be right back. I guess you were right in that we should have picked a different place for the party."

"You want me to check it out?"

"Nah. It's still my place. I gotta watch out after the girls. Ya know?"

He was a damn good employer.

After placing his glass on the bar, he headed toward the main part of the club. I rubbed my jaw and polished off the scotch, thinking about what he'd said. I wouldn't admit it to anyone, but I wouldn't mind coming home to a beautiful woman every night.

Cayman walked over, still scanning the room. The man was always on call. "You have that look on your face, boss."

"What look is that?"

"The one where you'd be eager to wrestle an alligator."

Chuckling, I shook my head. "This kind of event pushes my buttons."

“He’s your best friend. Don’t forget you’re creating memories. At least according to my mother.”

We both laughed but another sound caught my attention. When I took a step toward the doorway, Cayman flanked my side, immediately ready to draw his weapon if necessary. The fact there was so much unrest in the streets had us both on edge.

“What is it?”

“I don’t know,” I told him as I popped the snap on my shoulder holster. “But I’m going to find out.” Taking long strides, I headed toward the main part of the bar, my eyes taking several seconds to get used to the pulsing neon lights. Then I noticed Joey actively involved in an argument. I could tell by his body movements, the tension easy to see. I headed toward him, the table he was fronting masked by shadows.

The closer I came, the easier it was to see the argument was heated. When I moved closer, four of the five men at the table rose to their feet. The fifth remained seated, his grin shifting from my buddy toward me.

Stefano Fucking Son of a Bitch Bianchi.

The lowlife Italian mafia family had only recently started to make a play in New York, shifting their home base from Jersey where they fucking belonged. The ruthless lowlives were suspected of being the ones issuing the clandestine threats as well. In our world of brutal crimes, the one thing that had passed down through the generations was a sense of honor. While there would always be clashes between mafia families, blood spilled in the streets, you owned up to your mistakes even more so than your accomplishments. You also didn’t hide in the fucking shadows like a coward.

In my mind, Roberto Bianchi and his spawn were the epitome of classless thugs. The fact they were hoping to gain territory anywhere in New York was a testament to their stupidity.

“Do we have a problem?” I asked, keeping my gaze locked onto Stefano. While Joey was a smart man, keeping up with the various gangs, cartels, and syndicates who called the Big Apple their home, he had no understanding how dangerous

sparring with the Bianchi family could be. Their suspected brutal and bloody attacks on the Armenians and Irish had made for a chaotic last three months. Even our businesses had suffered because of the continued threats.

“Maybe. They were causing an issue with a couple employees of mine and were asked to leave. They refused, but I think they’ve seen the error of their ways.” Joey was still puffed up. He folded his massive arms across his chest, glaring from one man to the other.

Stefano crossed his arms, easing back in his chair. “It’s a free country, Italian pig. We’re staying.”

Bristling, I unbuttoned my jacket, allowing the entire table to see the weapon I had secured in a holster. “And the club belongs to my buddy. I tell you what. Why don’t I help escort these... gentlemen to the door?” By that point Cayman had arrived with the others from the bachelor party. Not a single one of my buddies weighed less than two hundred fifty pounds, even if two of them had never been in a fight in their lives. “That can either happen of your own free will or you’ll be tossed out. The choice is yours.”

The other men fanned out around the table, crossing their arms as they glared at Stefano and his soldiers. What the hell was he doing here? Testing the waters or providing a warning?

“Don’t make me ask you again,” I stated calmly as I planted both hands on the table, leaning over and staring Stefano in the eyes. It would seem I’d need to provide a separate warning to his father.

Stefano glared at me then rose to his feet, adjusting the lapels of his suit jacket before snapping his fingers. “Let’s go, boys. This is a dump anyway.”

I sensed Joey had enough liquor in him he wanted to start a fight, but I stepped in front of him, preventing my buddy from doing something stupid.

Stefano pushed his chest against mine as he tried to leave and I gave him an amused look, forcing him to take a step to the side in order to get around me. His bullying technique when he

shoved me with his shoulder pissed me off, but he was merely hoping for a reaction.

I refused to give him one. Instead, I threw my head over my shoulder, waiting until Stefano and his men were halfway to the door before exhaling.

“Do you have trouble with them often?” I asked.

“They’ve never been in here before,” Joey answered.

In my mind, it was no coincidence. “Let’s go back to your party, my man. They’re gone.”

“Yeah, I know you’re right. I just won’t let bastards like that hurt any of my girls,” he snarled.

“Understood.” I gave Cayman a nod and he knew what to do, ensuring they left the premises. I had a bad feeling about their appearance. I managed to push my buddy through the other guys, heading back into the private area. “Now, where were we? I think a round of tequila is necessary.” I motioned toward the bartender, hoping Joey would forget all about it.

Joey remained disgruntled but headed for the bar, our other friends trying to get him back in the celebratory mood. I stayed on the outskirts, constantly shifting my attention toward the doorway for any sign of additional trouble.

Five minutes passed then another ten or so and Cayman hadn’t returned. When I noticed Joey was in the middle of telling the story of how he’d met Julie for the second time of the evening, I backed away, heading toward the entrance to the club.

Cayman was walking toward me with purpose, He pulled me aside, glancing over my shoulder toward the private area we were in. “The bastards are still outside,” he said. “It’s like they’re waiting for us to leave. I don’t like it, boss. I think we need to call in reinforcement.”

“That’s not necessary. This is all about sending a message. That’s exactly what I’m going to do. Let me handle it.”

“Yeah, well, I’m going with you.”

I pulled out my weapon, keeping it out of view and pushing my hand against the exterior door. Once outside, I waited as

Cayman nodded toward where the assholes were lying in wait. I eased against the side of the building, taking careful steps toward the edge.

Then I heard a sound, Joey cursing as he took long strides past me. “What the fuck is wrong with these assholes?”

Fuck. Grumbling, I trailed behind him, only realizing seconds later that he had a weapon in his hand, pointing it directly at Stefano.

“Get the fuck out of here!” Joey yelled as he waved his Glock back and forth.

While Stefano hadn’t raised a weapon, his soldiers had. They’d wanted nothing but to goad us. Goddamn it. This had everything to do with threatening my family and our regime. They’d known I was coming here, the bar far removed from my usual secured locations. Which meant someone close to me had shared my itinerary. Someone who worked for me had betrayed me.

“It’s okay, buddy. They were just leaving,” I told my friend, trying to push my way in front of Joey but he was having none of it this time.

Stefano stared in amusement, rubbing his jaw as if he had all the time in the world.

“Get out of here, Bianchi. You were told to leave politely,” I said in a commanding tone. Cayman moved slightly to the side and into a position of protection if necessary. The last thing we needed was a standoff.

“The last time I checked, this was a free country,” Stefano retorted.

Seconds later, Joey turned toward me, grinning as I’d seen him do so many times over the years. He was a big kid, happier than I’d ever seen him, but he was also the kind of man who refused to allow anyone to threaten his family, his friends, or his place of business. But something was different tonight, as if the intelligent, prudent man I’d known had been replaced.

“I said,” he yelled, snapping his head toward Stefano. “Get the fuck off my property.” He threw up his arm, pointing the

barrel of his weapon at Stefano.

In the next few seconds, I couldn't react fast enough.

“No!”

Pop! Pop! Pop! Pop! Pop!

Gunfire popped all around me, pinging off vehicles as well as hitting the targets. After I launched myself at Joey, tossing us both to the ground, I twisted my body, firing off shots indiscriminately. In the split-second decision, I was responsible for putting several bullets between Stefano's eyes.

There would be repercussions from my impetuous decision, a potential war brewing in the streets, but that didn't matter to me.

No one fucked with my friends or family.

After targeting another one of Stefano's soldiers, his agonizing cry followed by his drop to the ground, I fell back against the pavement, taking gulping breaths. Footsteps sounded all around us, customers clambering to find out what the hell was going on.

Then there was nothing but silence.

“Boss. Jesus fucking Christ!” Cayman snarled as he dropped to the ground beside me.

“What the hell happened here? Jesus. Call 9-1-1!”

I heard Dominick's voice from behind me as well as the hard pounding of additional footsteps. Everything remained in slow motion as I tried to sit up, gasping for air as I dropped my head, staring at Joey.

And blood.

So much fucking blood.

“Joey,” I yelled, shaking him. “Joey! Jo-ey!”

CHAPTER 2



*C*hristiana

“The world owes you nothing, my baby girl. You’re very special but you need to grasp onto your life with both hands never letting go. We’ll get through this.”

It was perhaps the last thing I remembered my mother telling me before she was gunned down in cold blood on my fifteenth birthday. It had been a festive event, the vivid memories of the party like indelible ink in my mind, staining the forefront of my brain just like visions of her lifeless eyes and the pool of blood under her broken body continued to do. I’d never found out what she’d meant, but her eyes had held a haunting vacancy as if she’d given up on life.

I hadn’t known it then, but I had a feeling it would be the best piece of advice I’d ever be given.

I’d been driven close to madness after she’d been taken, my mother my best friend. But I’d survived the horrific, paralyzing tragedy and the lonely task of going on without her. My father had been a shell of a man for months, ignoring his only child. I’d had a nanny taking care of my needs, something I hadn’t wanted at that age. Then he’d rallied around me, pretending as if everything was still normal even after our lives had been ripped apart.

And here the two of us sat in the back of a posh SUV, our soldiers driving the rental vehicle to an unknown designation on yet another birthday event. I’d been excited at first, the

announcement of a surprise coming out of the blue. Now there was nothing but a sick, foreboding feeling, my mind playing tricks on me. Would this turn out to be just another tragic event?

My instinct was screaming my father was up to something and that his announcement was a ruse of some kind. Maybe I wasn't being the good Catholic girl I'd been raised to be, but the intense gnawing inside my stomach refused to go away.

I leaned forward, wringing my hands.

"Turning eighteen is very special, Christiana," my father said quietly, his usual vivacious tone devoid of any emotion.

He'd been somber since announcing our trip to New York, where I'd been excited, full of raw energy. I was no longer a child, now considered an adult and in celebration, my father was taking me on a trip of a lifetime to the Big Apple. I'd always wanted to go, but he'd refused up until now, reminding me a dozen times of the danger crawling in the darkened bowels of what he called the violent, ugly city.

One day I planned on living in the vile location, although I'd yet to tell my father. I had plans on attending Columbia University for my law degree. I was already attending community college, just finishing my second year. My father had been so proud I'd graduated from high school at sixteen, his raucous applause and deep shouts heard over every other parent. Now, another milestone. Yet my gut told me something was tragically wrong.

"You still haven't told me where we're going, Papa," I said to him as I glanced out the side window. As usual, we had a driver, two of our soldiers making the trip on the private jet. We were never alone, my father always requiring security. I'd grown used to having men trail behind me like lap dogs over the years, ignoring their presence as I went about my typical daily routine. But today I wished I could be alone with my father.

We were all each other had. There were no siblings, no grandparents still alive. My mother's unsolved murder remained a shadow in our lives that had never left, never

ceased to cause pain. In the world of the mafia, danger was always present. At least that's what he'd told me several times. As if that was an excuse for why justice hadn't been served.

He'd been the one to protect and nurture me, keeping me safe while fulfilling my every wish. To say I was a princess was an understatement, but I understood the value of human life and money more than most. Maybe because I'd seen so many horrors, so much bloodshed over the years. I shoved the ugliness aside, still curious why we'd headed out of the Big Apple toward the suburbs.

For some reason, I'd thought he'd honored my wish of seeing a Broadway play, but my father was full of surprises, keeping me on my toes.

He was also a businessman, his world revolving around cash flow and keeping our enemies at bay. As of late, they seemed to be crushing down on top of us.

"You'll learn soon enough," he told me. "Just remember that this is an important day. For both of us."

A slight shiver drifted down my spine. There was something odd about the way he stated the words, his entire body tense. I knew he'd been under a lot of pressure, various enemies breathing down his neck to the point he was having difficulty controlling his multiple businesses. However, I'd never seen him so anxious.

I noticed a flash of lightning in the distance and cringed. I'd worn a fancy dress, forgetting to bring an umbrella with me. I only hoped we made it to our destination in time before the storm hit. After taking a deep breath, I sat back, trying not to fidget in my seat. I noticed Paulo, the driver and my father's Capo glancing in the rearview mirror more than once. I could swear he was 'talking' with my father through his quick glances. Seconds before, he'd driven into a gated residential neighborhood, which wouldn't ordinarily be a surprise except for the fact we were over a thousand miles away from home.

When Paulo began to slow the vehicle, I leaned forward again. The houses in the gorgeous neighborhood were stunning, acres of pristine landscaping surrounding ten thousand square foot

plus homes. Our beautiful mid-century modern house paled in comparison. I could only imagine what kind of royalty lived behind the closed doors.

Maybe my father was taking me to see one of my favorite actors. Another wave of excitement as well as dread pooled in my stomach. I only hoped whatever he'd gone out of his way to surprise me with wasn't something I'd hate. Paulo slowed down and I tensed even more, noticing the oppressive-looking estate just up ahead.

When Paulo pulled through already open iron gates toward the massive building, my curiosity continued to climb. There were at least twenty cars parked along the massive stone driveway and as we approached the house, I could see lights coming from almost every window of the two-story structure. If I had to guess, I'd say an active party was already ongoing.

My father took a deep breath and the ragged sound drew my attention. When I glanced over, I noticed his expression had changed to one of blankness, his jaw clenched. Suddenly, my hackles were raised for a second time. I thought about the whispered conversations he'd had both over the phone and with Paulo and his other most trusted man.

My father had never kept anything from me. I'd learned at an early age just how dangerous he was, the Don of the most powerful Chicago crime syndicate. I'd heard about his enemies and the various battles he'd fought, had seen acts of violence so brutal that nightmares were a regular part of my sleep. But something was different, off in a way I couldn't put my finger on.

He'd paid a hefty price for his position, his acts of violence against anyone who crossed him almost making me an orphan more than once. Then time had passed, his business dealings had become vitally important, his actions more controlled. However, I'd known something was off for months, my father almost always on edge. Our relationship, such as it was, had suffered.

Paulo stopped the car, immediately cutting the engine. Within seconds, he'd climbed out, the other soldier as well. As I

looked through the windshield, I noticed both were wearing arm holsters, their weapons visible for a few seconds until they buttoned their jackets. The act wasn't unusual, but I sensed my father's tension increasing.

"What is going on?" I asked, immediately unfastening my seatbelt. My tone was unusually terse but there was no doubt something was very wrong.

"We have a party to attend, Christiana. You will be on your best behavior so as not to embarrass me." He opened the door himself, ready to ease onto the driveway.

"Hold on. I have no intention of walking in through the front door until you tell me what to expect. I thought this was about celebrating my birthday."

I was shocked when he fisted my hair, yanking me toward him. Pain tore through me and I yelped, my eyes immediately filling with tears. My father had never done anything to hurt me before, not once.

"You will do what I say, Christiana. You are now a woman, worth a great deal to me. It's time you measured up to your value within this family."

What in the hell was he talking about? "I don't understand."

"You will. You're more valuable to me than you know. Get out of the car and keep your mouth shut. Do you understand me?"

"I... Yes, Papa." He flung me backward as if I was a piece of trash. I fisted my hands, rage sweeping through me. I wasn't used to anyone treating me with such disrespect. My father had insisted I learn how to protect myself, allowing me to take martial arts training from a very young age. What in God's name was going on? Why was he treating me this way?

My father cursed under his breath then climbed out, immediately slamming the door, but I could tell he was giving orders to Paulo and the other man.

Marcus, my father's other soldier threw open the door, yanking me out by the arm. I almost tottered to the ground given the tall heels I'd chosen to wear. I glanced at the

malevolent sky, trying to keep from crying. I wasn't weak, almost never weepy, but I was completely out of sorts.

My father flanked my side seconds later, pressing his hand against the small of my back, pushing me toward the front door. Another flash of lightning was followed by a booming rumble of thunder. I shivered as the wind picked up in intensity, but not from the temperature of the air but a horrible foreboding feeling.

Something was terribly wrong, my life about to change. My instincts were almost never wrong.

I jerked away, shaking my head. "Papa. Please tell me what's going on. I'm your daughter. I deserve to know."

"Get over here. Now!" he snarled.

"Not until you tell me what's happening. I want to go home." I continued to back away, throwing my arm out as Paulo took long strides in my direction.

"Let me handle my daughter." I'd never seen my father so furious, his body shaking. When he was only a couple of feet in front of me, he pointed his long index finger in my face. "You will obey me, you little bitch. This is important. If you fuck it up, you'll destroy me. Is that what you want, you selfish girl?"

A single tear slipped past my lashes, and I swore to myself that it would be the last. All the years I'd thought he'd loved me, he'd lied. All the education I'd received, his encouragement to keep my dreams alive had been nothing but deceit. I was nothing but a possession to him, just like everything he owned. His cars. His yacht. His half dozen homes.

"I hate you," I told him.

"Hate me all you want, Christiana, but you always knew your place. Or maybe your mother coddled you too much." How dare he bring up my mother right now. Something snapped inside of me.

"As nothing but a commodity. Right? What did you do this time, Papa? Who do you owe money to? Huh? I know you

gamble every chance you get. You're nothing but a pig. You fooled me once, Papa. That will never happen again."

The moment he reared back, I stood taller, refusing to back down. Then he cracked his hand across my cheek, the force from the blow toppling me to the ground.

"Fuck," Paulo hissed, lunging forward, cursing as he helped me to my feet. He knew better than to challenge my father or he'd have a bullet in his forehead in seconds. I pushed myself away, pressing my hand against my aching cheek as I tasted blood.

"You are pathetic," I managed, the ache in my heart more significant than any infliction of anguish on my body. I'd worshipped him. I'd thought he was my hero, a man who'd never let anything happen to me.

But I'd been wrong.

He snorted as he snatched me from Paulo's hand, dragging me toward the entrance.

The door was opened before we made it onto the front porch, the man standing in the entrance foyer someone I'd never seen before. At least fifty, maybe older, he nodded briefly to my father before allowing his heated gaze to fall ever so slowly to my toes. When he issued a dark chuckle, smirking as he returned his attention to my eyes, I couldn't seem to stop shaking.

He'd sized me up as someone would a fine piece of beef or bottle of wine.

Suddenly, everything made sense. The new dress. The secrecy. The attention paid to my beauty regime, including a trip to my favorite hairdresser.

I was being sold.

"Don Lorenzo. She's everything you said she was and well worth the wait. I assume she's pure?"

"Yes. As required."

Pure? Oh, my God. He'd forced me to visit my gynecologist only days before. He'd been... checking that my virginity was

intact. Oh, God. Nausea rolled into my stomach.

“Excellent. I’m very pleased.”

My father exhaled then pulled an envelope from his pocket, shoving it into the man’s hands. “The contract as discussed.”

“What is this about? Who are you?” I said tartly, trying to step away. My father’s fingers were icy when he jerked me back into position.

“Christiana, it’s time you meet your future husband, Xavier Luis. Be careful, Xavier. My daughter is a handful.”

“Don’t worry, Don Lorenzo. I will control her,” Xavier said as he laughed then pressed his finger across my lips. “Come inside, Christiana, and meet our guests. Our wedding is only a week away. There’s much to do before I take you as my bride.”

As I was pushed inside, I glanced over my shoulder, praying someone would rescue me, but I knew better.

There was no such thing as a knight in shining armor, no handsome prince waiting in the storm to take me to safety.

I would fend for myself and one day, my father would pay.

CHAPTER 3



“The strength of a family, like the strength of an army, is in its loyalty to each other.”

—Mario Puzo

Francesco

“We’ll figure it out, Francesco. There’s already been enough bloodshed. We don’t need a war on the streets of New York,” Maxwell said as he walked me to the car. Not only was he my godfather, he was also the Don of a powerful empire and I was the Underboss.

But today, we were together as a family, the powerful man marrying my sister years before.

“Maybe not, but the pig patriarch of the Bianchi family will be out for retaliation.” The chatter on the streets had become louder after Joey’s death, people terrified that a war was about to begin. Even those we considered possible allies had remained silent, refusing to take sides. Part of that was due to the Feds making a crushing blow with recent sweeps, rounding up soldiers from various crime syndicates. Fortunately, we’d been spared but it had opened the door for the Bianchis to stride through with minimal difficulty.

“Leave it to me to take care of. Do you understand?” Max was encouraging but commanding in his tone.

I knew better than to cross him, and he knew how I usually flew off the handle. He was right in that I couldn't afford to do that. However, that didn't mean I couldn't round up the fuckers who'd been part of the reason the tragedy had occurred. "Understood." I opened the driver's door, jumping inside. There was no reason to discuss this any further, at least not now. "This isn't the end. You know that."

"We'll be ready."

God, I hoped so.

After starting the engine, I hissed, pulling out of his driveway at close to forty miles per hour.

And my rage continued to increase, my thoughts all over the place.

Loyalty.

The word meant more on this night than it had ever before. Loyalty of my family and friends, of the men who worked for me and the rest of my employees.

The opposite was true as well, betrayal a heavy burden that needed to be flushed out.

I'd spent the drizzly afternoon attending a funeral instead of a wedding reception, the somber event putting me in a shitty mood.

Then I'd had to pretend the world hadn't been rocked on its axis, laughing and having cake smashed in my face by my four-year-old niece on her special birthday. All the while I'd fumed, planning a bloody revenge on the entire Bianchi family, even if it went against the express orders of Don Powers, the man wearing the crown in the empire.

Someone in my employ had sold their soul to the Bianchis for a price. And I had a feeling I knew exactly who that was. The man would pay dearly for what he'd done, the family he'd torn apart. I'd held Julie close, her emotional state wrecked. When she'd finally become hysterical, she'd been taken to the hospital given the fact she was three months pregnant, her blood pressure skyrocketing. She couldn't lose that baby too. Goddamn it, she just couldn't.

My thoughts were all over the place, my emotions as well. I couldn't think, the need for revenge the only thing that mattered. Suddenly, thoughts of my dead father oozed into the back of my mind.

King of the hill.

My father, Tony Arturo, the former Don of the New York Cosa Nostra had once called me that years before. Before everything had changed, my world turned upside down, his murder unexpected. He'd been the strength behind a powerful family, one that been rocked by the death of a mother who'd loved her two children with all her heart. Or so I'd been told. She'd died providing life to me, something I believed my father blamed me for until his death, although he'd doted on Raleigh, their closeness akin to a freaking Hallmark card.

My sister had tried to keep our mother's memory alive, although Raleigh had been too young to embrace but so many memories of her own. Only a couple of years prior to my father's death had he finally unlocked the vault holding the vast majority of her pictures and what few personal items he'd kept. What I'd realized was she'd been a devout Catholic, an innocent woman who'd fallen in love with the wrong man. But by all accounts, their love was one for the ages.

I'd thought he'd been paying me a compliment at the time with issuing the phrase, but I'd learned during the course of the almost nine years since his brutal murder that he'd been challenging me to become a man instead of acting like the impetuous brat I'd been at eighteen.

Little had I known that he'd be dead only weeks later from utter betrayal, his bullet-riddled body far too disturbing for his children to see prior to being buried. He'd left us orphans, forced to endure a new family, a man my sister had barely known as a child placed in charge.

We'd both fought the intrusion, refusing to accept or obey his commands. We'd learned the hard way that Maxwell Powers' control wasn't to be taken lightly. As a former Marine and owner of a prestigious security company in Los Angeles, he'd been considered far too decent a human being to shift into

becoming a worthwhile leader of the merciless syndicate. We'd both treated him as inferior, Raleigh accepting him long before I'd been able to. In turn, Max had considered me a child incapable of decent decisions, refusing to promote me within the ranks until I learned my place.

That had been next to impossible for a kid who'd ruled since he could hold a weapon in his hand.

The ugly truth was that I'd wanted to be king of the hill for as long as I could remember, the top dog in what was widely considered to be the most ruthless and powerful crime syndicate in the country. I'd tried to undermine Max's decisions, fighting his control with everything I had. I'd planned his death on more occasions than I could count. I had no idea why I was reflecting on the time spent together other than given the fact I'd just left a family get-together. Maybe Max had taught me a thing or two after all.

One vital piece of information I'd learned was that being king of anything meant having a target on your back, one so large that anyone standing in your shadow could easily be struck with shrapnel. That's why Joey was dead, his life stripped away prematurely.

I was to fucking blame.

If I hadn't attended the fucking party or if I'd required additional soldiers to watch the perimeter, he'd be alive today. The guilt was killing me.

Everything I thought I'd wanted was waiting in the wings as I continued to prepare for the honorable duty of becoming the Don that would be bestowed on me when Maxwell retired. I'd earned the loyalty and respect of my father's men and of the soldiers my godfather had brought to the organization. In turn, I'd created an empire of my own, building my troops until we were considered formidable by almost everyone.

Now I wasn't certain I gave a damn. Not when I'd lost a part of myself in that bloodbath.

What I found interesting after all the hard work I'd put in building my reputation and wealth was that I'd yet to find

happiness. Christ. What the hell was I thinking? I had business to deal with, which was necessary even after a birthday celebration.

I dialed Cayman's number, my patience already tested to the point I needed some kind of release, or I'd go off the rails.

"I'm here, boss. Sadly, I don't have any good news." His voice was as tense as mine.

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning the rat has fled his cage."

"Oh, for the love of God, Cayman," I told him after hissing into the phone. "How difficult can it be to find the son of a bitch? He betrayed us." The fact the fucker had fled proved his guilt. I wondered what it had taken for him to shift sides. And how the Bianchis had gotten to him.

I flicked the wipers onto high as I made my way to the main road. Goddamn fucking thunderstorms. Even worse than the challenging weather, I'd sent my soldiers to hunt down a single man, the lowlife piece of trash betraying every single soldier in my organization. They were all incensed, searching for the prick, yet he was nowhere to be found. Hell, to add fuel to the fire, he'd stolen almost four hundred thousand dollars of product, likely giving it to the Bianchis. I wasn't entirely certain how the warehouse had been broken into, the security system recently installed worth millions.

That left the possibility the treacherous rat had additional inside help. That also meant some of our product would help foster connections for the Bianchis.

I'd flush out every single traitor later. First things first. The asshole's punishment.

That was if my men could track him down. I knew I shouldn't have attended my niece's birthday party, tracking the bastard down myself. Shit always happened when I allowed my guard to drop. When I allowed myself to indulge in what Max and my sister called a normal life.

There was no such fucking thing in the likes of the Cosa Nostra. At least there shouldn't be. This was the kind of shit

that happened when we weren't paying close enough attention to our jobs.

First a bachelor party. Then a birthday party. What was next? A baby shower? Snorting, I rubbed my jaw. I needed a bottle of tequila and a shooting range.

"We'll find him, boss," Cayman insisted, his island accent somehow more pronounced than usual. That typically happened when he was nervous. As he should be. I was finished with my men not following my orders to the letter. It was time I made an example out of at least one of them.

Hissing, I squeezed my hand around the steering wheel. The truth was I was pissed at myself for being made a fool of. That wouldn't happen again.

"Do it tonight, Cay. Because if I'm required to go on the hunt, I'll end up with additional prey to kill and clean. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, boss. Crystal ball clear." While there was a hint of amusement in his voice, he knew I was serious. He also knew he usually got a pass when I reached this level of rage. He'd been by my side through several difficult situations, those so bloody and savage that the incidents had been carefully swept under the rug. I also considered him a friend, someone my close-knit group of buddies could count on.

"Good." Another bolt of lightning lit up the night sky like firecrackers going off on the fourth of July. A holiday I hated.

"How's Julie?" he asked, and I could tell by his tone of voice he didn't really want the answer.

"Not good. They can't get her blood pressure down."

"Fuck."

"Yeah, fuck. If that baby dies, you won't be able to keep me from killing Stefano's entire family." Given I'd murdered the eldest brother, the one designated to take Roberto Bianchi's throne when he retired, there would be unrest for some time to come. The next in line, Dante, was a playboy with no ability to lead. While that would bode well for ridding the streets of one

of our competitors, that wouldn't ease the possibility that New York could have a disruptive period of violence.

Which meant the Feds would be breathing down our necks. Not possible. That's why Max wanted to handle the situation, his finesse getting us out of hot water. Goddamn, I hated this shit, the politics no different than if I was working for Congress.

I tossed my phone, staring out the window as the rain came down in sheets, drops pelting against my windshield. I was forced to slow down to the actual twenty-five mile per hour speed limit, something I rarely did. My sister refused to allow my nephew to ride with me given what she called my lead foot.

So, I liked fast cars. I also enjoyed killing people, which is what I felt like doing. It was better to get my ass home before I did something stupid.

Grimacing, I reached for the satellite radio, taking my eyes off the road for a split second. When the headlights seemed to flicker, I lifted my gaze. Just in time to slam on my brakes, almost losing control of my Maserati.

"What the fuck?" I snarled as soon as I managed to jerk it to a hard stop in the middle of the road. The rush of adrenaline pounded in my chest as I tried to figure out what the hell I'd just seen. All I could think about was the Bianchis attempting to finish what they'd started.

I threw open the door, jumping outside just as another flash rolled in front of the headlights.

Before I had a chance to rip my weapon from my pocket, I was pitched against the door. A jolt of electricity shot through me, my instinct to lash out at the person who'd accosted me strong. I snapped my hand around the person's throat, jerking forward then slamming their body against the side of my vehicle. I was ready and could easily snap the asshole's neck in seconds.

Until I saw her face.

The most beautiful woman I'd ever seen in my life.

Exhaling, I blinked several times to ensure what I was looking at was real. Then I eased back on the pressure, still keeping my hold firm. “What the fuck?”

“Please help me!” she begged. “Please. I’ll do anything. Anything!”

CHAPTER 4



*F*rancesco

It was rare that anything shocked me in my life, but as the torrent of rain pelted down on our heated bodies, a single flash of lightning allowed me to see the look of terror in the beautiful girl's eyes.

I also noticed her lip was split. Some asshole had hit her. She was running, trying to escape.

I was a violent, dangerous man, my penchant for bloodshed adding to my heinous reputation. What I couldn't tolerate in my life or my regime was violence toward a woman. Under any circumstances. I had far too much respect for a beautiful feminine creature, perhaps given how close I'd grown to my sister.

That hadn't always been the case, my dislike of my own flesh and blood almost derailing any chance at having a relationship.

However, the girl was either nuts or had a death wish jumping out in front of a moving vehicle in the middle of a raging thunderstorm.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" I barked. "You could have gotten yourself killed!"

"I..." Her entire face froze. Then a venomous look darkened her features. "Fuck you. You were driving like a maniac!"

“Excuse me?” I cocked my head and the defiance I could see in the glow of the dome light was unbelievable.

“Just let me go, you jerk!”

Her mouth twisted, but I kept my hold. “I’m afraid I can’t do that. Now, you heard me. Spill it or I’ll leave you right here on the side of the road. Now, do you need my help or not?”

“Yes. I do.”

“Help you do what, princess? Who did this to you?” I scanned the area before returning my attention toward her. Even though her clothes were soaked, I could easily tell she was dressed for a party or a festive event, the stunning crimson dress highlighting every voluptuous curve. She was also young, an innocent flower who’d appeared out of the shadows as if an angel of mercy.

She couldn’t have come but so far, especially since her feet were bare and the road was rocky. Given my brother-in-law’s home was in a protected area of White Plains housing the most powerful, influential, and ruthless families in the entirety of New York, that likely meant either her family or someone she was visiting was equally as wealthy and dangerous. Even the Hamptons didn’t compare to the number of notorious people the neighborhood held. The girl was someone of importance.

Or she was being used.

I doubted this had anything to do with the Bianchis. I knew for certain their wealth didn’t allow for a lavish lifestyle at this point.

If I had to guess, I’d say she was the daughter of someone important, the necklace she wore worth a cool half million. That didn’t mean she came from a loving home. What went on behind closed doors was certainly the things horror novels were written about.

“I need to get away from my life.” Her pleading tone dragged at the beast inside of me. The girl was trying very hard to maintain her resolve, which I admired. The fact she didn’t want to share who’d done this to her meant she was in partial shock.

I returned my gaze, cognizant the storm was right over us. What the fuck was I supposed to do with this? My gut told me not to get involved, but the primal savage inside of me said something else altogether.

“I’m sorry. I’m just scared,” she added.

“Get in the car,” I commanded.

She offered a slight smile yet didn’t move. It was obvious she was paralyzed by fear. I reached inside the sports car, unlocking the passenger door then walking her around the front of the vehicle, easing her onto the seat. Hell, I wasn’t a gentle man, but she was teetering on the same kind of edge I was.

After she was safely settled inside, I headed to my trunk, popping it open. I always carried an emergency bag of supplies and ammunition, including several dry towels, although their anticipated use was for cleaning up crime scenes, not drying off a damsel in distress.

I knew I could be making a very bad decision, but at this point I didn’t give a shit.

As soon as I jumped onto the driver’s seat, I tossed the towel into her lap, shutting the door then taking a deep breath. There were no headlights from oncoming vehicles, but it was a matter of time before someone came looking for her. “I want answers. Who are you running from?”

“I…” She nuzzled her face into the towel, and I rapped my fingers on the leather console under the driver’s window.

The girl remained quiet, which was as unnerving as the situation. I leaned back against the seat, wiping water from my face with the other towel. “Spill it, princess. What the hell is going on?” When she continued to remain silent, I turned my head, the overhead streetlight providing a more than decent look at her face. A bruise was starting to form under her eye where she’d been hit. Rage tore through me.

She was shivering and I watched as she dragged her tongue across her lower lip, digging the tip into the area where it had been split.

Sighing, I turned up the heat, trying to keep my patience with her. A full two minutes passed.

“Talk, princess. I’m not a patient man. By all rights I should punish you right here and right now.”

“Punish me? Are you out of your mind? And I’m not a princess. Don’t call me that. Ever.” Even though she whispered the few words, her tone was defiant. “My guess is you’re just like him, bastard.”

Him. The single word had left a nasty taste in her mouth.

“Hmmm... The little fawn has claws. Then what are you? Did you escape from a mental institution?”

She snorted and I laughed softly. A single moan slipped past her lips and I wanted to crush the person who’d hurt her.

“O-kay. Did your boyfriend do that to you?”

When she tensed, I could tell I was on the right track.

“No,” she said softly, glancing at her lap as if embarrassed.

I shifted in my seat, gently sliding my hand under her chin and turning her head. Her eyes opened wide, so doe-like that my cock twitched. She was insanely beautiful, my balls tightening. “Your father?”

Her eyes opened even wider than before, fear tearing through them. Motherfucker. What kind of father hit his own daughter?

“Where is he? I’ll take care of him for you,” I told her, meaning every word.

“No!” She clawed at me as she’d done before, leaning in as her eyes searched mine. The scent of her was intoxicating, floral yet mixed with a vibrant hint of vanilla and other spices. “You can’t do that. He’s dangerous. He’ll hurt you.” Her voice was imploring but not nearly as much as her sultry voice. She was shaking her head slightly, as if a heavy burden would be placed on her shoulders if I dared consider helping her.

I allowed my gaze to fall down the length of her face, concentrating on her plump lips, a mouth I wanted to kiss.

It was obvious she had no clue who or what I was. That made the electric connection that much sweeter.

“I assure you, princess, that I would come out victorious.”

“You don’t know who he is. He’ll kill you.”

Chuckling, I folded my fingers, rubbing my knuckles across her cheek as gently as possible. I wasn’t known for my tender touches, my needs crossing into the realm of true sadist years before. But with her, I wanted to be gentle, careful so I didn’t terrify her even more, or cause a single bruise to her lovely skin.

She glared at me through thick eyelashes and for a few seconds I felt powerless, drawn into her beauty like a moth to a flame. That wasn’t a good idea, my enemies always searching for a single weakness, but here I was unable to take my eyes off her.

As if she’d already become my possession.

“And you don’t know who I am,” I told her.

“Who are you?”

“A dangerous man.”

“Then why do I feel so protected?”

I wanted to tell her that it was because she was a fool, blinded by the fact someone had offered a helping hand. But I didn’t. What point would that make? “What do you want me to do?”

“I... don’t know.” She lowered her gaze, darting another roll of her tongue across her lower lip.

“I think you do, princess.” I wasn’t a man who held back under any circumstances. If I wanted something, I took it. I’d enjoyed my share of beautiful women, but so many of them were plastic versions of their former selves, hiding the ugliness of their flaws behind plastic surgery and thousands spent on what my sister liked to call paint and body work. This girl was entirely different, classy and innocent, the combination irresistible.

Either she hadn't accepted or didn't care I was likely more dangerous than the cretin who'd smacked her, born of the same tainted blood.

"Chrissy. My name is Chrissy."

"Then, I think you do, Chrissy. Tell me what you want." I lifted her chin, the ache between my legs increasing as my balls tightened.

"You're very handsome."

"You think I'm handsome?" In a world where appearing scary was considered a positive attribute, hearing her praise was strangely appealing.

"Very much but you already knew that. What's your name?"

"It's best you don't know."

She opened then closed her fingers around my shirt, using the leverage to pull herself closer. "I want to know. Please tell me."

At that moment I felt like some psychopath, staring into the eyes of raw innocence. I was almost certain that just my presence would taint her purity. The thought was ridiculous but almost overwhelming. And still, the draw to her was so powerful that pulling away would cause unwanted pain. How fucked up was that?

She had no idea what her breathless voice did to me. "Francesco. Now, tell me what you desire, little princess."

"A new life."

"I'm not certain I can give you that. What can I offer you at this moment?" I lowered my head, the draw to her becoming irresistible. As the rain continued to fall, the wind strong enough to rock the car back and forth, her breathing became increasingly ragged.

"To allow me to feel something. Anything."

"How can I help you do that?"

She tilted her head until our lips were only centimeters away. "Fuck me. Please, make love to me tonight. Just one night."

Jesus Christ. Was I truly considering it? When she crowded closer, her gaze more imploring, I made a selfish decision. The girl was far too trusting. “Do you understand what that means?”

“Tell me. I want to hear it.”

Goddamn, the girl’s voice was seductive. “First, I’ll bury my face into your tight little pussy until you come on my tongue while screaming out my name. After that, I’ll fuck you like an animal, as if I hate you. It won’t be sex or making love. Not this go-around. It’s going to be hard, brutal fucking. The kind that leaves every inch of your body aching, breathless but satiated. If I fuck you, it’s something you’ll cherish for a long time, wishing we could do it all over again. Fucking you will leave you with unbridled lust, an all-consuming need that will make you want to do crazy things to have it once again. And you will try.” Fuck. My cock was throbbing because that’s exactly what I wanted to do. “Now, tell me if that’s what you really want.”

Her chest rose and fell, the shadowed light unable to hide her glassy eyes or the way her lower lip trembled. I wanted nothing more than to ravage her sweet mouth.

“Yes. That’s exactly what I want,” she whimpered.

I cupped the side of her face, digging the rough pads of my fingers into her skin. The last thing I needed to do was to seduce her, but God help me, I wasn’t going to be able to resist.

As I captured her mouth, I was well aware I’d likely go to hell for this if for nothing else.

And I was fine with my fate.

As long as I was allowed a single taste of an angel.

CHAPTER 5



*C*hristiana

Francesco.

I whispered his name, the sound tickling my lips.

My God. The words he'd used left me breathless, my heart thudding against my chest. I was lightheaded, yet so excited there wasn't an inch of me not tingling, the anticipation more than I'd imagined.

To feel again.

That's exactly what I wanted, so much so I couldn't care less that I'd placed my life into the hands of a handsome stranger. Francesco could be a monster but no more so than the bastard who'd raised me then sold me off like livestock to a man who was more than twice my age.

His crude words about what he would do to me were exactly what I'd wanted to hear. As he placed his hand on my thigh, his fingers digging into my skin, the feeling of being his possession was entirely different than the events that now seemed a lifetime ago. Francesco only wanted one thing.

Raw pleasure.

Not tearing me apart or selling me off, just a level of intimacy we'd both remember fondly.

He was such a beautiful creature than I was almost mesmerized, which was something that had never happened

before. The fact he made me tongue tied was a clear indication of my blinding attraction. I was here in a car with a mysterious stranger, someone who could be a serial killer for all I knew, yet I was perfectly happy, even relaxed. The terrible experience from before had almost faded away, leaving only a bad taste in my mouth.

“Be careful what you ask for, little bird,” Francesco growled. “I play for keeps.”

“That’s the thing with birds. They tend to fly away, but you can try. Besides, maybe I’m not asking. Maybe I’m telling.” Who was this girl doing the talking? Certainly not the one who’d arrived in New York. Maybe I’d grown up in the space of a few hours out of necessity.

Perhaps the mystery man with the dazzling eyes could replace that taste with something sinful and creamy. He was insanely hot, so much so my pulse was skipping.

He seemed amused and even more aroused, his nostrils flaring. His laugh tickled the darkest part of me, the sizzling sensations creating vivid images of the filthy things I wanted him to do to me.

“One thing, princess. You’re not in charge. I am. I’ll make certain you’re very clear of that.”

“Meaning what?”

“Giving you exactly what you need.”

When he shoved his seat back, yanking me over his lap, I was in a crazy moment of shock. “What are you doing?”

I was shocked and mortified when he yanked up my wet dress, exposing my naked backside, the thin material of the G-string doing nothing to shield me. A roar of embarrassment shot through me as he brought his hand down multiple times, not hesitating one tiny bit. The shock quickly wore off as pain swept through me, the kind that left specks of light floating in my periphery of vision.

“Ouch. Oh, my God.”

“That should help keep you from running into the arms of dangerous men.” He smacked his palm on one side then the other, my bottom already aching as the heat started to build.

The insanity of what was happening, including the man sitting in the middle of the road with his headlights on stuck in my throat. I kicked out, the fight or flight moment real. He pressed his hand down against my back, holding me in place.

“You’re not going anywhere, little dove, not until I’m finished teaching you a lesson you won’t soon forget.”

I continued to fight, wiggling as he cracked his hand against both sides of my buttocks. That only made my mouth water alongside the feel of his cock throbbing beneath me. This was turning him on! I wanted to be angry, telling him to take me back to the horror I’d come from but I had to admit, I was just as aroused, my libido skyrocketing.

Even the sound as he peppered my bottom with brutal smacks had become a powerful aphrodisiac, almost as much as the scent of his aftershave. So rich in timber. So delicious with hints of citrus I was dragging my tongue across my lips. Nothing like this had ever happened to me.

When he caressed my skin, brushing his fingers from one side to the other, I allowed myself to become lost in the moment, floating away into a beautiful moment of bliss.

“My guess is you can be tamed.” His words were dark and full of filthy promise, which was exactly what I wanted.

Was he kidding me? Tamed? I wiggled and gyrated, which only made the desire boost to an entirely different level. I was breathless, horrified that the pain he was inflicting was driving me to some crazy point of madness.

He issued six more in rapid succession, each one harder than the one before. Then he stopped, his breathing as labored as mine.

“Are you wet for me, little dove?”

“Never.”

“Hmmm... Something else you need to learn, another rule to follow. You will never lie to me. You’re terrible at it.”

I bit back a smile as he rolled his fingers down the crack of my ass, pushing one leg aside. When he eased his hand between my thighs, I couldn’t stop a jagged moan from escaping.

He chuckled, the dark sound added to the dreamlike state as he took a deep breath, holding it as he dared to tease my clit.

Another whimper rushed past my lips and I felt my body bucking against him, humping his leg. My God. What kind of a woman had I turned into? I was so wet I knew my juice had to be staining his trousers.

But I doubted either one of us cared.

He fingered me for a few additional seconds until suddenly a flash of light forced him to tense. The single blast of a horn made him burst into laughter. “Maybe we should continue this elsewhere, little dove.”

The car jerked around, another blast of the person’s horn jarring.

As soon as he eased me off his lap onto my knees, he cupped the side of my face. Then he brought his head down until our lips were almost touching.

“You have no idea what you’ve done, sweet girl. None.”

“Maybe I do.”

He brushed his lips across mine, allowing a single growl to float between us. “I’ll keep that in mind. Buckle up, princess. And get ready for a ride.”

Shuddering, I moved into my seat, still tingling all over as I fastened the seatbelt. This was the craziest thing I’d ever done in my life.

After revving the engine, he sped away, taking me up on my offer. That allowed me to take a deep breath, and to think about the consequences of what I’d just done.

I had no idea how I’d managed to get away from the house but I had practice slipping away from the watchful eyes of men

with guns. Plus, there'd been almost two dozen guests milling about the house. When the opportunity had presented itself, I'd taken it without hesitation.

As soon as I'd been outside, I'd run as fast as my feet would allow, ignoring the pain as I stumbled from one street to another in the dark.

And in the raging storm.

Terror had kept me going, the certainty of what I could expect from my fiancé weighing heavily in the back of my mind. Now I felt safer than I had in a long time as Francesco sped away from the neighborhood, the lights from the luxury homes finally fading into the distance.

I leaned my head against the supple leather seat of his expensive sports car, concentrating on the lull of the engine as my hopeful savior drove. What little I knew about him was from observation. He was a man of wealth, in his mid-twenties. He had gorgeous shaggy dark hair, tousled curls rising against the collar of his expertly tailored suit jacket. The luminescent glow of his DE Bethune watch, one valued at well over eighty grand, had initially kept my attention. He was insanely gorgeous and rugged, but his eyes were cold and calculating.

At this moment, I didn't care.

I wanted to be swept away in an entirely different level of danger, one that I chose to be involved in. I wanted to feel alive if for only a short period of time before I was sent to hell. Which is exactly what would happen to me. But any beating I received would be well worth a night of utter bliss.

There was no need to say anything else, our bodies speaking for us. The moment I'd rushed into his arms I'd felt an instant connection, the powerful draw to him from continuing jolts of electricity keeping my heart racing. I remained still, keeping my eyes on the road even though I wasn't seeing anything. There was too much excitement soaring through me.

Yet as the few miles turned into a dozen, I found myself relaxing beside his massive frame. I turned my head, studying

his profile as the storm began to subside, additional streetlights allowing me to catch a better glimpse of the man I'd allow myself to enjoy.

His jaw was strong, chiseled to utter perfection, his suit unable to hide his carved physique. I took a deep breath, holding his exotic scent in my system. The fragrance was exquisitely manly, hints of timber mixed with citrus and balsam invigorating my senses, igniting a fire deep within my core.

“Who are you, Francesco?”

He laughed and threw me a look. “A very bad man, the kind who will devour such delicate innocence.” As if to prove his point, he pressed his hand against my knee and I shuddered audibly. There was an undeniable connection between us, something I'd never experienced.

Every word out of his mouth made me shiver. Desire electrified every muscle, my heart thudding to the point the sound echoed in my ears. I'd never felt so wild and free in my life.

I forced my attention away, staring out the rain-streaked window at the darkness enshrouding the surrounding area. The pelting sound of raindrops matched the erratic beating of my heart. Where the shadows had once been ominous, as malevolent as the storm, now they provided the comfort of secrecy, allowing me to vanish for a little while. Only the blips of exterior lights strategically positioned on stone pillars and ornate iron gates marred the obsidian bleakness.

My mind remained tangled in an ugly web of deceit and fear, the uncertainty of what I'd face remaining crouched in the foggy corners of my mind. There was no doubt my vulnerability could be taken advantage of, but given the circumstances, I wasn't entirely certain I minded. However, even if I did, I doubted I could turn back the clock. It was as if this moment in time was a blip of destiny that would remain with me for all eternity.

Maybe the romantic girl inside of me still believed and hoped for the possibility of true love.

Or perhaps I was finally accepting the reality of my life, and this was the only moment of control I'd manage to carve out for myself. It was time to grasp onto it, refusing to let go of the incredible feeling.

One thing I was certain about was that the carnal sin that occurred between us would leave an indelible mark on my heart. Could the mysterious stranger possibly know how important our accidental meeting had become? A smile crossed my face and I pressed my fingers to my lips, eager to taste all of him.

When he rolled into another neighborhood that seemed similar to where we'd just been, I tensed, another wave of fear rushing into my system.

"Relax, Chrissy. Where we're going, no one will hurt you."

"You don't know what they're capable of."

There was something chilling yet comforting about his dark and sensual laugh. "Apparently, you don't have an understanding of what I'm capable of. I didn't lie to you when I said I wasn't a good man."

For some crazy reason, I believed him. There was no doubt he was a vicious person capable of violence, but I also sensed that I was completely safe with him.

He pulled down a long driveway and into an oversized garage, the bright lights inside the interior highlighting several expensive vehicles. A Range Rover. A Mercedes convertible. A Jeep Wrangler. And a Dodge Ram. The powerful man had eclectic tastes.

As soon as he pulled to a stop, he was out of the car, taking long strides around the back of the vehicle, then opening the passenger door. I could tell by the heated look in his eyes alone how enticed he was. Yet the thick bulge between his legs made my mouth water, a need furrowing into my system that I'd never known existed before now.

The moment he wrapped his fingers around my hand, a single strangled moan slipped past my lips. I took a good look at him as he tugged me across the cement floor toward the door. He

was even more gorgeous than the shadowed light had allowed me to see.

Tall.

Broad.

Muscular.

Deadly.

Of that there was no doubt. I'd seen the outline of the weapon in his tightly fitted jacket, the holster easy to identify. Only when I was inside his house did my pulse began to skip, another ragged whimper pushing up from my throat.

He'd pulled me into a kitchen, the neon blue glow on the display of two wall ovens drawing my attention. There was no other lighting, the darkness almost suffocating.

Francesco backed me against one of the counters, planting his hands on either side of me. He stood almost a foot taller than my five-foot six-inch frame, his wet hair shimmering in the eerie light. My breathing was ragged from the crazy rush of adrenaline and raw excitement. I'd never done anything this impetuous in my life.

"Are you afraid of me, Chrissy?" he asked in a deep, throaty voice.

I didn't answer right away, still shocked at my rash behavior, tingling all the way to my icy toes.

"I asked you a question."

My lips formed the words, but my mind was strangely blank other than the single thought that had been in the back of my head since I'd rushed into his arms.

Kissing his soft lips, biting down until I tasted blood.

Touching him in the most inappropriate places.

"Answer me, princess. I need to know what you're thinking." His voice was commanding but not harsh.

"Yes, very much so. Is that what you want?"

“The truth is that you should be, but it’s apparent I’m not the one you should fear at this point in your life. If you tell me who hurt you, they will suffer.”

As he cupped both sides of my face, I pressed my palms against his chest, kneading his muscles through his shirt. He took several deep breaths and I sensed he was debating whether or not what he was about to do was a good idea. Maybe it wasn’t but a dose of filth and sin was exactly what I needed.

“I won’t do that. And the truth is I want to be afraid of you, if only for a little while. I want the fear and anger to fuel me, to help me let go. I need this, Francesco.” My whispered words seemed to intrigue him, his upper lip curling. “I need you.”

“Be careful what you ask for, princess. Once we begin, there’s no going back.”

I sensed he was a man who took what he wanted instead of asking. When I rose onto my tiptoes, he knew it was my final answer.

“Then so be it.”

“What are you going to do?” I asked him breathlessly, pressing my hand against his chest.

“Whatever the hell I want to. Kiss you. Taste you. Fuck you. Get used to it, little dove. You’re mine for the taking.”

CHAPTER 6



*C*hristiana

His for the taking.

The words were sweet sin and I couldn't wait to be a sinner.

After issuing a dark growl that sent a series of vibrations through me, Francesco captured my mouth, holding my lips in position as he slipped one hand around the back of my neck. The moment he wrapped his fingers around my neck, I knew without a shadow of a doubt that he'd just laid claim if only for a single night.

I'd assumed that he would know how to kiss, a far cry from the two boys I'd allowed to do so before. I'd been right, his passionate hold and the way he masterfully controlled our lips a dream come true, but I hadn't anticipated the hard thrum of vibrations shooting into every vein or the fact my entire world ceased to exist. For a few beautiful seconds, it felt like I belonged to him.

Forever.

There was nothing sweeter in the entire world, even if it was false reality.

I rolled my hands up his chest, fingering his jacket before slowly easing it over his massive shoulders. He allowed me to take some control, dropping both arms so the material could easily fall to the floor. Then he fisted my hair with one hand as

he curled his fingers around the hem of my dress, crawling it up my thighs.

A wave of heat jettisoned through me, my heart racing as the brush of his fingers created a white-hot series of tingling sensations. He tasted incredible, as if combining spicy bourbon with something terribly sweet. Cake. I could taste cake and frosting. The combination was irresistible.

As a dark growl bubbled past our connected lips, I realized I was swooning in his hold, which had never happened to me before. I'd kissed a few boys in my time, but never a man.

And certainly not like this.

When he slipped his hand between my legs, sliding a fingertip back and forth across the thin lace of my newly purchased panties, I pushed my hips against him. Another tingling wave of fear settled in. I was trembling all over, uncertain of how I was supposed to act. He broke the kiss briefly, taking scattered breaths. "Relax, little dove. This is what you wanted."

His statement was accurate, but I was so clueless how to react that I remained stiff.

Until he swept his tongue inside, dominating mine as the kiss flew into a passionate roar of nearly desperate need. Then my body responded for me. I clung to him as if letting go would cause me to tumble into a dark abyss. He was rock hard, the feel of his thrumming cock pressing against my stomach sending a shockwave of electricity through every vein. Wetness dampened my panties, the scent of intense desire wafting between us.

He pulled me away from the edge of the counter, sliding his hand under my buttocks and lifting me off the floor by several inches. I wrapped one leg around his hip and tangled my fingers in his long shaggy hair, the dampness keeping my arm tingling. He spun me around, taking two long strides toward a massive kitchen island, using a single arm to rake across the surface.

As items tumbled to the floor, some clattering, others breaking, I was thrown by how intense the man had become.

There was an urgency about his actions, a need that was easy to see in the burning look in his eyes and his rough touches. Who was I to argue with a man who knew what he wanted and likely had the expertise to provide the moment of joy I was praying to find. I did what I could to relax as his tongue dominated mine, every sound he made adding to jolts of white-hot electricity.

When he broke the kiss this time, he lowered me onto the floor, pushing me against the edge of the island, dipping me at my waist then wrapping his fingers around my throat. He was so strong that he could snap my neck with a single twist of his wrist, but instead he rubbed his thumb back and forth across my jaw.

Then he lowered his head, issuing a series of husky growls, the rough timbre of his voice igniting another fire burning deep within. I kept one hand pushed against his chest as he dragged his tongue from one side of my jaw to the other. He was deliberate about every move he was taking, exploring carefully. Somehow, I knew that wouldn't last.

When he bit down on my lower lip, I shuddered in his hold, fighting to keep my wits about me. The slice of pain was delicious, adding to the level of heightened passion. He continued his sensual exploration, sliding his tongue under my jaw to my neck. When he rolled the tip into the shell of my ear, I couldn't stop a moan from escaping.

“I can't wait to thrust my cock into your sweet pussy.”

Hunger laced every word, his heated breath skipping across my skin keeping quivers dancing throughout my body.

Seconds later, he pulled away completely, brushing the rough pads of his fingertips down my arms. Then without hesitation, he ripped the dress up and over my shoulders, the shock of his actions jarring. I'd seen men in my father's employ peering at women, acting as if at a single crook of their finger the female would drop to her knees, eagerly opening her mouth and accepting a slimy, tiny dick.

The way Francesco was looking at me was entirely different, as if I'd rocked his world, bringing him to his knees. A warm

flush scattered across my cheeks, leaving a stain on my skin. I couldn't breathe or think, the realization of where I was and what I was about to do sizzling every one of my senses.

He took a deep breath, holding it for several seconds. When he blew it across my face and neck, I shuddered audibly. His chest rose and fell as he allowed his gaze to fall once again, whispering hoarse words of lust and need under his breath before allowing his eyes to settle on my naked breasts, nipples that were already rock hard.

I felt his explosive desire, another rapid jolt of electricity shooting through me like fireworks booming on a hot July evening. Another wave of embarrassment thrashed through me and I involuntarily threw my arm across my chest, turning my head.

He gripped my chin first, bringing my face toward him, shaking his head in clear admonishment while dragging his tongue across his luscious lips. "Never cover yourself from me, gorgeous girl. You are perfect in every way." There was no way he could know how his words affected me, the intensity of his tone along with his truthful sentiment a delicious surprise and exactly what I needed.

I dropped my arm and within seconds, he cupped my breasts, gently kneading them as he rubbed his thumbs back and forth across my aching nipples. Within seconds, they were sensitive, my entire body trembling from the first moment of raw intimacy. I remained lightheaded, fighting the good girl inside of me to keep from reacting to his blissful touch. The good girl failed, the wicked woman inside of me longing to touch him.

And so I did.

I slid my hand down the length of his chest, daring myself to brush a single finger down the thick bulge in his trousers. As soon as I found the courage, his throaty growls added to the beautiful moment. I bit my lower lip to keep from giggling out of nervousness, even purring when I freely stroked him.

He chuckled, the dark sound penetrating my eardrums. "Touch and take, my sweet girl."

The gorgeous hunk was giving me permission but somehow, I knew that whatever tiny amount of control he'd just allowed would be short-lived. A man like Francesco never gave up command. Still, I enjoyed the sinful moment while it lasted, rubbing my fingers up and down as I watched his expression shift from hunger to something darker, more primal in nature.

I had no doubt the man was going to devour me whole.

“So beautiful. Every inch of you is utter perfection.”

His words continued to thrill me even though my stomach remained in knots. The fact I'd never done anything like this before while I sensed he was a masterful lover kept my nerves on edge. I wasn't certain if I should tell him I was a virgin, although if I did, it was possible he'd stop and that wasn't what I wanted.

As he lowered his head, he kept his dark eyes locked on mine, the shimmer in both as hypnotizing as the scent of his masculinity was intoxicating.

No longer able to enjoy stroking his thick bulge, I tugged at his shirt instead, fighting with fumbling fingers to unfasten at least a few buttons. He wore no tie, whatever event he'd been attending more casual in nature, but I knew men's attire very well, having selected several of my father's expensive Italian suits. What Francesco was wearing cost more than most people made in a month, obviously tailored for him specifically, the deep charcoal linen unable to hide his insanely chiseled physique.

Yet I wanted nothing more than to rip off every inch of his clothing, exposing more of the tattoo I'd noticed on one side of his neck. I could only imagine the colorful ink and how the masterful art would add to his dangerous persona. I heard a slight purr coming from my throat and laughed nervously. He was every girl's fantasy, a perfect alpha hero from my favorite romance novel. If I had a best friend, I'd be on the phone detailing every single second. It was too bad I'd yet to make a decent friend, my father's reputation terrifying anyone who'd ever dare to get close.

“Are you hungry, little girl?”

I nodded instead of attempting to speak, fearful I'd sound as inexperienced as I was. To make a point, I yanked at the two sides of his shirt, shocked at my level of force as three buttons went flying. "Yes."

"Mmm... Then allow me to help in your... endeavor." His growl sent another series of vibrations all the way to my crimson painted toes. With a slight shift in his stance, he ripped off the crisp cotton by the back of the neck, yanking it over his broad shoulders with ease. When his perfect carved abs were exposed in the limited lighting positioned over the Viking stove, I couldn't stop the appreciative moans from giving more of my desire away.

The tattoos were more than I'd imagined, the varying shades evident, several designs intricate. I couldn't help myself, reaching out and running the tip of a single finger down the vine on his neck, swirling it around the strange-looking creature covering a portion of his chest. "Gorgeous."

He grinned like a kid, as if no other woman had ever complimented him in such a way. Then he cupped and squeezed my breasts again, this time pinching my nipples between his thumbs and forefingers until the pain forced a cry from my throat. "Yes, you are."

I was shocked that almost instantly, the wave of anguish brought another throb of need between my legs, my panties soaked. Whimpering, I threw my head back as he soothed the ache with his hot, wet mouth, pulling one hardened bud between his teeth.

"Oh, my." Stars floated all around me, marring my vision, every vibrant color catching my attention. The intimacy was entirely different than I'd imagined.

He sucked, allowing the exaggerated sounds to float between us, which made me tremble and giggle out of nervousness. When he rolled his lips to my other breast, I threw one arm around his head, tangling my fingers in his hair. God, it was thick and silky, the dark curls so soft. I closed my eyes briefly, enjoying the freeing moment, but seconds later I sensed his

needs were pushing to the surface, every sound he made dark and animalistic.

There was no doubt he was a predator and I was his prey.

He pulled away as he'd done before, only without a second of hesitation, he lifted me off the floor, pushing me down onto the island.

"Oh." I tried to bite back a cry but failed, my arms flailing as I tried to find something to hold onto. My heels thumped against the cabinet as they dangled off the edge, a slight reminder I was at his utter mercy.

Just where I wanted to be.

His laugh was the most romantic yet darkly famished sound I'd ever heard. He placed his fingers against my chest, opening them wide then rolling them down my stomach, swirling the tip of his index finger around my bellybutton. When he finally slipped several under the thin elastic of my thong, I cinched my eyes shut.

"Look at me, princess. Don't take your eyes off me."

It was impossible to ignore his commanding tone. I opened my eyes cautiously, studying his strong jaw, adoring the way his two-day stubble created a stunning shadow on his carved features. He took his time rolling the lace over my hips, his smile widening as soon as he exposed my bare pussy. I was thankful I'd worn my favorite pair of panties, although I'd never considered giving myself this kind of delicious, filthy birthday gift.

I could imagine what I might have worn if I had.

After tossing the unwanted material aside, he shook his head ever so slowly and rolled his fingers along the insides of my legs, easing them apart. Then he bent them at the knee and I almost lost it, shaking like a leaf. I could swear my teeth were even chattering.

"Relax, baby girl. I'm going to enjoy every second of providing you with nothing but pleasure."

“Meaning... what?” Oh, God. I sounded like some stupid kid. I was certain of it.

He slipped a single finger between my legs, rolling the tip around my clit. “That means I’m going to enjoy feasting on your pretty pink pussy.”

CHAPTER 7



*F*rancesco

There was something about her utter vulnerability that pulled me in like a moth to a flame. Unfortunately, the blossoming insect usually didn't survive. I chuckled inwardly as images of smoke and flames erupted in the forefront of my mind. Why was I worrying about whether fucking an innocent girl would drive me into the fires of hell?

That wasn't like me. It was rare for me to think about consequences in my life, much to the chagrin of my sister and discord with my brother-in-law. But I made no excuses for who and what I was.

A monster.

A killer.

A bloodthirsty man.

I had a job to do, one I took seriously, never allowing my weakness for a member of the opposite sex to interfere.

Usually.

This beautiful flower was something special, a rare creature that normally didn't come around for a man like me unless it was forced. The fact she'd offered herself freely like a lamb to the slaughter was another indication she had no clue about my real identity. Maybe that made the taste of her lips, her luscious skin that much sweeter. Whatever the reason, I had

plans on indulging in finding satisfaction for the remainder of the night.

Spanking her was just the filthy beginning.

Tasting her was all I'd been able to think about.

My world was jaded, full of those pretending to be something they weren't. It was often necessary in my profession. If you showed fear or even trepidation, the weakness would be used against you. While some women were still used as bargaining chips, an offer made to satisfy a debt owed or perhaps to strengthen an alliance, there were hundreds of women who had no issue flaunting themselves in front of dangerous men, addicted to the strange kink of bedding a monster.

Many of them ended up dead, unable to handle the sadistic needs. I'd certainly been privy to repulsive stories of other syndicate leaders, their soldiers required to find creative dumping grounds for leftover sex partners. I'd wanted to hunt down every single bastard, shoving their dicks into their mouths as a gag before honing my knife skills.

Maybe that's why I still wanted to hunt down her bastard father, providing a lesson in how to treat women. Perhaps I still would. I'd need to take her somewhere after we were finished. As much as I'd like to keep her, that wasn't possible.

There was more than a sense of need sweltering between us, but I refused to hurry, allowing the desire to explore every inch of her to take over my usual brutal actions. When had I given a shit about satisfying a woman? If it happened, which it usually did, then that was a plus for the girl and nothing more. That's why I'd been called a selfish prick several times, another title I'd accepted with pride.

Everything about being with this girl was different, as if the entire world was twisted on its axis. It had to be the mystery involved. I peered into her eyes, realizing hers were already dilated, her shallow breathing indicating additional nerves. She was a bundle of them, goosebumps floating across her porcelain skin. That usually indicated lack of self-confidence or fear. Maybe she had a little of both.

I wondered whether she liked it soft or rough, although I was guessing by her seductive nature she preferred a dominating man. Plus, she'd been completely aroused by the spanking. Perhaps she enjoyed being tied up. Even if she didn't, I would do what I wanted. That was the kind of man I was. Her soft sighs drew my attention and a series of prickling sensations coursed through me.

Or maybe she was more innocent than I'd originally realized. As I lowered my head, she sucked in her breath, her doe eyes opening even wider. I kept my gaze locked on her as I rolled my tongue around her clit. The subtle gesture as she pressed one hand over her mouth forced my balls to swell.

While the urge to have her come in my mouth was strong, I knew I wouldn't be able to hold back from my selfish needs but for so long. I rolled the tip of my tongue around her already swelling bud several more times until she moaned.

The second I sucked on her tender bud, Chrissy jerked up from the island, her loud moan such sweet music. I pressed my palm against her stomach, providing an indication that she wasn't going anywhere. Then I dragged my tongue all the way down her sweet pussy.

“Oh, my...”

I didn't need any additional light to know she was turning red from embarrassment. I could feel steam rising from her skin, the air as dense as it was thick from need. There was something entirely different about taking my time for exploration, learning every nuance of her body. I adored the way she responded, every sound spinning inside my eardrums.

When I started licking her in earnest, she bucked hard, her legs flailing. I became a beast, savoring the sweet flavor of peaches and cream. After a few seconds, I realized I couldn't get enough of this woman, my hunger growing out of control.

As I buried my face into her wetness, I wrapped my arms around her thighs, lifting her off the surface. When she pressed one hand against my head, fisting my hair then tugging every time I thrust my tongue inside, I was forced to try to tamp back the lurking creature.

She continued shifting her hips, acting as if she was desperate to get out of my hold. Then I realized she was fighting succumbing to the pleasure, allowing herself to let go. I slipped a single finger into her very tight channel, my cock at the point that I was in severe pain.

Her reaction was instant, her entire body tensing, and she did what she could to shove me away. This time, her whimper was full of dreaded anticipation.

“Breathe, baby girl,” I commanded. “I’m gonna make you feel so good.” I continued lapping her cream, taking my time as I pumped into her with gentle, even strokes.

Only when her breathing became easier did I allow myself to pick up the pace, adding a second and third finger, curling the tips as I thrust inside. As soon as I pulled her clit into my mouth, she let out another shriek. I knew she’d shifted into a place of rapture, allowing her body to enjoy the sensations.

“That’s it. Come on my tongue, baby.”

“Oh. Oh. Oh...” Even though she pressed her hand across her face, I was still able to capture her beautiful smile. Certainly, no woman had allowed me to see this kind of reaction before. I continued licking her furiously, realizing her entire body was still shaking. As a single orgasm swept into much more, I held her wide open, drinking my fill, trickles of her sweet nectar sliding down the back of my throat.

There was nothing like watching the intensity of her expression as it changed or the continued shame she was experiencing from enjoying herself. Only after her body stopped shaking did I rub my wet lips against one inner thigh then the other, ending by rubbing my fingers down the length of one leg.

Moaning, she rolled onto her side, trying to catch her breath, curling into a ball as if that would keep her protected from me.

“Are you ready for me, baby?” I asked, although the question was more rhetorical than anything. I was too far gone to hold back my desires. The beast had to be fed or he’d go mad and that wasn’t something anyone wanted to face.

Chrissy shifted, taking gulping breaths. When I pulled her off the island, easing her bare feet to the floor, she gasped. Every action became kitten-like as she pressed her palms against my chest, her long fingers kneading while she dug her nails into my skin.

I was jazzed up, so much so I could easily drive my cock into her tight little pussy right here in the middle of my stark kitchen. That would be typical of me, my lack of interest in romance or true intimacy what I was known for. However, as with everything else, I wanted this to be different, maybe a cleansing moment for my soul.

If I fucking had one.

Chuckling, I slipped my hand around the back of her neck, pulling her onto her toes. Then I slid my slickened fingers around her lips, finally pushing them into her heated mouth.

Her eyes opened wide as they'd done before, and she immediately snapped her long fingers around my wrist. I expected her to try to pull them free, but she did just the opposite, holding my arm in place as she took her time sucking on my thick digits.

Everything about her actions was sexy as hell, the little seductress not realizing how intense the fire was burning deep within. I took scattered breaths, unable to take my eyes off her as she took her time licking every drop of her cream from my fingers, acting as if she was savoring her favorite flavor of ice cream. She was more than just a temptress; she was a woman who could grab a handful of my essence, taking it with her.

When they were sufficiently slickened, she gave me an apprehensive look, searching for either praise or perhaps expecting admonishment.

“You have one hot mouth, little vixen.”

“Mmm...” she murmured over the thick invasion. I couldn't help myself, flexing my fingers open and driving them into the back of her throat. A part of me wanted to force her down to her knees, taking my cock instead, but that would come later after I'd finished fucking her to exhaustion.

I wasn't expecting her to shove her hands against me, completely breaking the connection. Her lilting laughter filtered into the air as she backed away, moving around the edge of the island and out of my reach.

"What do you think you're doing, vixen child?"

"I'm no child. What I'm doing is teasing you."

"Be careful. I do bite."

"You'll need to catch me first." Her laughter continued as she backed away. Then she jerked to the right, flitting out of the room.

I couldn't help but laugh, not remembering the last time I'd felt so at ease. With her, I could be anybody I wanted to be. This wasn't about money or power, my family's influence versus hers. This was a night of passion for two strangers. What the hell could be better than that?

Ah, yes. The answer was easy. Her writhing underneath me.

I took two long strides, remaining in the doorway as I listened, tamping back my heavy breathing. Her laughter had ceased, but I sensed she remained close.

As I moved into the darkened hallway, I twisted my head from one side to the other. There was no noise but the slight ticking of the ornamental grandfather clock, one of the few pieces I'd requested from my dead father's estate. While I usually managed to ignore the sound, tonight it added to the eerie effect as the rain continued to pelt against the roof.

I took silent steps, hissing when my foot hit the single floorboard that I knew creaked. I could swear the tinkling sound of muffled laughter was a sweet reward for giving away my location.

It was impossible not to smile as I headed toward the sound, lewd and filthy thoughts of what I wanted to do to her streaming into the back of my mind. I stopped short just before entering the living room. "Come out, come out, wherever you are. Or there will be a second punishment to face."

The silence was surprising. Then I could swear I heard another muffled sound, as if she was doing her best to stifle another laugh.

“I think you’ve already learned what happens to bad girls when they don’t obey. It’s time to finish what I started. Teasing me isn’t a good idea.” I moved further into the room, scanning the perimeter. There were several places for her to hide. Another surprise was how much I adored the way she was toying with me. It made the anticipation that much greater.

When she said nothing, I moved quickly behind the overstuffed chair, certain I’d find her. Then I heard another noise and turned just in time to see a pillow flopping from the couch in front of the fireplace. Smirking, I moved toward it silently, issuing a throaty growl as I jumped from around the side.

The silence was almost irritating. She really believed she could win this game. I turned in a full circle, amused as hell at the way my mind worked. I was annoyed and aroused. The combination was uncomfortable and sexy at the same time. “You have one chance to give up like a good little girl. If you don’t, then I’m going to spank you for a second time. And I promise I won’t be nearly as gentle.”

I glanced from one shadowed corner to another, finally noticing the drapes in front of the oversized window had fluttered. I wasted no time, heading in that direction, yanking it back by several feet. That’s when I heard sparkling laughter clearly as well as the sound of Chrissy racing toward the door of the living room.

She managed to make it out before I had a chance to react, but I wasn’t the kind of man to give up easily.

I issued another series of predatory growls and ran toward the hallway, noticing her immediately as she lunged toward the stairs. Throwing a single look over her shoulder was her only mistake. Within seconds, I had my arm wrapped around her waist, spinning her around and tossing her over my shoulder.

“No. No. No!” she yelled, immediately pummeling my back with her fists.

“Uh-huh. Did you really think you could get away from me that easily?” The second I cracked my hand against her bottom she squealed, kicking her legs up and down.

“Ouch!”

I smacked her again, taking my time heading to the stairs. “I warned you.” I cracked my hand across her bottom four times in rapid succession, taking the stairs slowly and one at a time. “Let me see how many cracks of my palm I can get in prior to reaching the second floor. Then I’ll pull off my belt.”

“You’re horrible.”

“Yes, I am.” I couldn’t keep a grin off my face as I continued the spanking, even whistling as I headed toward my bedroom. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d whistled for any reason. That wasn’t my kind of life.

“Ouch. Ouch. I’ll be good. I promise!” She continued pummeling her fists against me. If she really thought that was going to work, she had another think coming. I was enjoying the hell out of myself, which allowed her to keep pretending she was trying to get me to stop. I knew better. I’d sensed from the beginning that she enjoyed being dominated, although skittish after the abuse she’d been through.

Another blast of rage rushed through me. I wanted to smash her father’s face in, giving him a taste of his own medicine. I smacked her long and hard. She finally stopped fighting me as I neared the top, the scent of her desire wafting straight to my nostrils. I was more than just enthralled with this woman.

I was starting to feel the need to possess her for all eternity.

Fuck me. I’d need to let her go as soon as possible or I’d become obsessive. With two more brutal smacks of my hand, I reached the floor, taking long strides toward my partially closed bedroom door. I kicked it in, moving inside and taking the time to turn on a single lamp on the dresser.

Then I tossed her into the center of the bed, pointing down at her, keeping a commanding look on my face. “Stay right there,

little vixen. If you don't, your next punishment will be that much worse."

When I backed away, she took gulping breaths, crawling into her knees. Fuck me. Just the sight of her that way created another wave of thoughts that could likely be considered vile and heartless. I could tie her to my bed, keeping her for an undisclosed period of time. No one would know where she'd been taken, which would make her incarceration that much sweeter.

Was I that kind of bad man?

Hell, yes, I was. Grinning, I unfastened my belt, watching as she licked her lips in continued appreciation. Her admiring expression from before had been a delicious treat, but the way she was looking at me now was a mixture of love and hate. Or perhaps hate, need, and spitefulness. I sensed she was trying to figure out what to do to get me back for spanking her.

I kicked off my shoes, unfastening my trousers as the same time. While her gaze became more heated, her chest rising and falling with anticipation, I noticed she darted her eyes across the room. She waited until the most inopportune time for me, when I literally had my pants down before jumping off the bed, racing toward the door.

Her squeal of shock made me grin all over again, but the force I used in wrapping my hand around her wrist, tugging her backward, pitched us both to the floor. Now I was finished with being a patient man, my needs far too intense.

I rolled her over onto her back, thrusting my hand under her chin, issuing a tsking sound. "Such a bad girl." I struggled until I was able to kick off my pants, lifting a single eyebrow as I peered down at her.

"Yes, I am." She writhed underneath me, gasping for air, her small fists trying to make an indentation against my chest.

"Hmmm... I'll keep that in mind when I use my belt the next time."

"You wouldn't dare."

“Baby girl, you obviously don’t know me that well. I can and I will. Because that’s the kind of man I am.” I reared back, dragging her with me, pulling us both from the floor.

“Now what?” She clawed my chest, her eyes full of fire.

“First, you’re going to receive several strikes of my belt for your insolence and disobedience.”

“And then?”

“Then, little dove, I’m going to fuck you long and hard.”

“I’ll scream,” she said playfully.

“Good. Because I’d feel slighted if you didn’t scream out my name.”

CHAPTER 8



*C*hristiana

The moment was sheer madness.

I'd come to realize that when I was in the middle of playing hide and seek. The man had a weapon and was obviously dangerous. He was a stranger and could easily keep me here for as long as he wanted, discarding my lifeless body at a moment's notice.

No, he wasn't going to do that. My instinct had never failed me. The single reason I was suddenly frozen was that I had no idea how he'd react when he realized I was a virgin. Or perhaps I was terrified I wouldn't be good enough.

How ridiculous of me.

Or was it?

Francesco wasted no time, tossing me into the center of the bed once again, raking his long fingers through his tousled hair. Then he grabbed his trousers from the floor, jerking off the belt, the expression he wore raw and carnal. I glanced at his actions, shocked all over again that I was tingling with excitement. When the belt was free, he wound the buckled end around his hand, taking his sweet time doing so.

That allowed me to truly bask in his incredible beauty, every muscle chiseled to the kind of perfection only seen in high-priced movies and glossy magazines. He was buff, beautiful,

and a badass. The man's prowess had become like catnip to me, keeping me on a delirious edge that I didn't want off of.

He had a true Italian heritage, and I couldn't take my eyes off him after catching sight of his long, thick, and gloriously huge cock. Now my mouth wasn't just watering, I was practically drooling at the sight of him. The glorious ink on his body continued down both massive thighs and across his entire chest. The art wasn't gawdy or crude but refined in a masterful way.

As if he'd planned out the use of his body as a canvas, only introducing pieces that continued telling a story. They captured my mind while he advanced like a predator, placing one knee on the bed before leaning over and planting his hands on the comforter.

"Be a good girl," he said. "Get on all fours."

His command was just as thrilling as everything else about him. I found myself obeying, as if he already had a hold over me.

"Mmm... Such a good girl."

Every time he opened his mouth, I shuddered. This was no exception. He rolled his fingers down my spine then eased my legs apart. I gathered an immediate whiff of my desire, which was crazy but wondrous, my mind spinning with all the possibilities of what would happen.

I wasn't certain what to expect but with the first crack of the thick leather strap, I fell forward onto my face. The shock of pain was as blinding as it was electrifying, my mind pushed into a frenzy of salacious thoughts. He fisted my hair, yanking me back into position.

"Relax and breathe, little dove. And be a good girl and don't move."

Was he nuts? I clawed the bedding, holding my breath instead of doing what he asked. When the second and third strikes rained down on my bottom, I was certain I'd lose my mind. I issued a stark scream, the sound echoing in the room.

He didn't hold back, delivering four more in rapid succession. That's when I gasped, dropping my head. Tears immediately formed in my eyes, a single bead slipping past my lashes. As I panted he caressed my bottom, allowing me to get used to the anguish.

Everything was a strange blur, my mind fuzzy as my nerves processed the pain. But I was wet, juice trickling down both inner thighs. It was insane, something I would never admit to anyone.

"You're doing very well."

I almost laughed but bit my lower lip instead, unprepared for the next four, two hitting my upper thighs. My single moan was almost as electrifying as the sound of the strap striking my bottom.

"Four more. Then I can't wait any longer."

He caressed my bruised skin then trailed his fingers between my slickened folds. Then without any additional warning, he finished the wretched round of discipline, tossing the belt halfway across the room as soon as he did.

Collapsing on the bed, I took several deep breaths, still amazed at my body's reactions to him and his roughness. I liked it. The thought brought a wicked girl grin to my face.

"Turn over, sweet thing. I need to see all of you."

Every word out of his soft lips made me swoon. I did as he commanded, wincing when my bottom rubbed against the comforter. I couldn't help myself, opening my legs and exposing my slickened pussy.

"Mmm... You are..." He laughed and ran the rough pads of his fingers down his chest, stroking his cock a couple of times. Seeing the light glisten across his sensitive slit made my mouth water all over again.

I backed away, only to have his dark gaze alter into one of slight chastisement. He crawled over me, his massive arms straddling my body as he leaned over, forcing me onto my back. Now was the time to tell him if I wanted to say anything at all. My tongue suddenly seemed twisted, tied to the point I

couldn't make a single sound. I felt even more ridiculous, especially since I'd pushed for the brooding stranger to sweep me off my feet. He'd done exactly that, giving me the kind of orgasm that most women could only dream of.

My entire body was still tingling from the way he'd thrust his tongue past my swollen folds. Even the harsh spanking kept me electrified, the red-hot heat coursing through me searing every nerve ending.

There was no additional hesitation on his part. He kicked my legs wide open, easing his legs between them. I felt my mouth opening involuntarily, but there were only ragged breaths instead of coherent sentences. When had I ever been unable to issue a tart retort to anyone?

Holy hell. This was actually going to happen.

I tried to allow the haze of passion to override my insane fears, rubbing my fingers up and down his chest aimlessly. Every touch of his overheated skin sent trickles of delight into the back of my mind. Yet when he lifted and bent one leg, cradling it as he lowered his head, pressing kisses against my skin, I froze.

"Relax, baby. I'm not going to hurt you. At least not in the way you might think." His grin was positively evil, but the twinkle in his dark eyes kept me entranced.

The kisses were as hot as Hades like the man himself, the sensations catching my breath. Only when he lowered his body, pressing his throbbing cock against my wetness did I make a strangled sound. He took that to mean I was excited, shifting my leg over his shoulder so he could wrap his hand around the base of his shaft.

He pushed an inch inside, holding his stance as he took a deep breath. "Sweet God, you're tight, baby."

I wanted to scream out the reason why, to say anything at all but there was nothing but air rushing up from my throat. When he pushed another inch inside, I raked my nails down his chest, scarring his skin. Blinking rapidly, I bit my lower lip to keep from crying out as tears threatened to give me away. The

pressure was building, not only from the way my muscles struggled to adapt to his thick girth, but because there was no going back. This would only happen once in my life.

Tonight wasn't just about a sin against God, but one against my family. With one look in his stunning eyes, I allowed myself to be consumed by the drug-infused haze of our passion.

He gripped my hip with his other hand, thrusting the remainder of his thick cock deep, shattering my maidenhood as he buried himself inside. The pain was instant, but the throbbing in my pussy muscles was nothing in comparison to the ache in my heart.

Then his eyes opened wide, his entire body tensing. "What the hell?"

The three little words broke the magical spell and I fought hard to get away from him, horrified that I'd dared do something so stupid. When he pulled out, I almost managed to roll over but he wrapped his hand around my throat, keeping me firmly planted on my back.

"You're not going anywhere, little vixen." He took several deep breaths, his eyes darting back and forth. When I closed mine, doing everything I could to shut out the utter humiliation, he growled in the deepest voice I'd heard, "Look at me, baby. Look. At. Me. Now."

I obeyed him, shaking like a leaf. There was no admonishment or disgust, only shock and awe, his smile so unexpected I wanted to cry.

"Why give me such a gift?" He softened his tone, barely whispering.

"Because I knew you were the one."

"Jesus Christ. No one has ever given me something that important and special. I'm honored, baby girl. Did I hurt you?"

"A little." I hated the rattle in my voice. I was stronger than this. My God. I'd just teased the man relentlessly.

He cursed under his breath and the second I fought to get from underneath him again, he crushed the full weight of his body against me. When I almost managed to slap him playfully, he yanked first one arm over my head then the other, easily wrapping his fingers around both wrists.

“Listen to me. Shush, little vixen. Just listen. I want to make this very special for you. Do you understand?”

I bit my lower lip until discomfort jetted through my jaw but nodded, blinking furiously yet unable to keep tears from slipping past my lashes, rolling down the sides of my face. I hadn’t realized the experience would be so emotional.

“I need you to answer me, little dove.”

Exhaling, he lowered his head, kissing and licking the tears away. I would never have expected him to be so tender, acting as if he was a true gentleman. “Yes.”

“Now, I need to ask you a single question and you will tell me the truth.”

“Okay.”

“Are you of age?”

I laughed nervously. “Today is my birthday. I’m eighteen.”

“Fuck.”

The word caused another innate reaction and I almost managed to pitch him off me. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“You have nothing to be sorry about. You’re a woman, my beautiful creature. You are most definitely a woman. And you are mine.” He positioned himself between my legs again, gently placing the tip inside.

I wasn’t certain whether to believe his words or if they were said in the heat of the moment, but as he breached my tight channel once again, I didn’t fight him. Instead, I did what I could to arch my back, opening my legs even wider.

He exhaled, his eyes rolling in the back of his head as my muscles gripped the thick invasion once again. He kept a tight

grip on my wrists as he leaned down, brushing his lips across mine.

“No man has ever had you. That is the best gift I’ve ever received. Ever.” His husky voice sent a wave of thrills through me, so much so I was pitched into a beautiful and hazy wave of desire much more intense than before.

He pushed deep inside, allowing me to get used to his size. My muscles throbbed but the discomfort was gone, replaced by the most amazing sensations I’d ever felt.

“So vulnerable and innocent, and all mine.”

Why did his stark words thrill me as much as they did? As he drove the last few inches inside, I let out a strangled but happy scream, wrapping one leg around his thigh and keeping him close.

He laughed as he pressed hair from my face, his smile making me feel as if I was the most special girl in the entire world. He continued using significant restraint when I knew he was the kind of man who’d likely never been forced to. As he pulled out until only the tip was inside, I was shocked by how much my pussy pulsed and how empty I felt.

Almost sad, as if we were supposed to be together. When he plunged inside again, he threw his head back with a powerful roar. I loved hearing the rugged sound, the vibrato heating my core to an explosive level. I was breathless, my mind filled with fantasies and thoughts, even though I knew this wasn’t forever. There was no place in my life for him. My father would crush him like a bug, refusing to acknowledge that I cared about him.

I wiggled under him, bringing him back to reality. He peered down at me as if a man possessed, an addict needing a fix and I was the only substance that could do that. As he thrust into me again, he developed a sweet rhythm, pumping in long, even strokes.

There was something special about the way he studied me, watching every nuance of my face, adjusting how he fucked me when I moaned or shifted. The pleasure he was providing

was so unexpected that I couldn't stop the series of moans that ultimately slipped past my lips. I wanted to touch him, the need becoming so desperate that I continued fighting like a lioness, finally managing to free a hand.

He gave me a sly look when I rolled my fingers across his shoulder, marveling in the way his skin tingled the ends of my fingers. When I brushed them along the thick cords of his neck, he took several deep breaths. Then as I tangled them in his thick curls as I'd done before, he stopped holding back.

Now he fucked me in earnest, making good on the sinful statement he'd made before. He plunged hard and deep, awakening the sleeping woman inside, allowing her to experience ecstasy for the first time. I fell into such a sweet moment, a slice of nirvana that I had no idea truly existed.

He was a perfectionist, bringing me close to an orgasm then easing back, keeping me on the very edge to heighten the pleasure. There was an intensity about him that was entirely different than before, as if he was ensuring that I would remember this moment for the rest of my life.

I already knew I would. How could I not? I was with the most gorgeous man on the face of the earth and I wasn't entirely certain I knew his real name.

As he continued fucking me, the tension faded away, leaving me tingling all over. Only then did he allow me to reach another moment of nirvana.

“That’s it, baby. Let go all over again. Let go for me.”

There was no coaxing needed, no forced release of the excitement and pure ecstasy. I was filled with it, barely able to breathe. As the incredible moment rushed into every cell and muscle, I gave him exactly what he'd told me he wanted.

I screamed out his name.

“Francesco!”

CHAPTER 9



*F*rancesco

Possession.

I'd never wanted to possess anyone the way I did with her.

I pulled out, thrilled that Chrissy reached for me, her eyes darting back and forth as she issued several small cries of protest. "Don't worry, baby. I never said I was finished. Did I?" I rolled onto my back, glaring up at the ceiling. "Are you thirsty?"

"Yes."

I rolled onto my side and my elbow, peering down at her. "You are far too beautiful."

"No, I'm not."

"I want you to trust me enough to tell me what's going on." She stiffened just like I thought she would.

"It's not worth getting into, Francesco. I can't change my life any more than you can yours."

After taking a deep breath, I rose from the bed. "You might be surprised what I can do."

She rolled over on her side, bending her knee and easing it forward. As she rolled her hand down the sheets, it was all I could do not to lose myself in her all over again. "No, I have a feeling you're very powerful. I'm curious what you do."

I walked closer, rolling my open fingers down her face. “If you’re a good girl, I might tell you.” Laughing, I backed away, padding out of the room. As I headed down the stairs, I thought about how much the girl’s presence had already affected me. Whatever was going on, it was clear that she was being told to do something she didn’t want to do.

Could I keep her, able to forge a life with her in it?

The question was could I keep her safe. The last thing I needed to do at this moment was provide another clear weakness to be exploited by the Bianchis or worse. Putting her life in harm’s way, no matter how much I wanted to keep her wasn’t a decent thing to do.

Even if I couldn’t consider myself a decent man.

I’d grown up learning from my now dead father. While he’d doted on his daughter, protecting his only son using violence if necessary, everything else he’d taken without reservation. He’d taught me to do the same, which had prevented me from enjoying a true relationship.

However, the tenderness I’d decided to use brought a different series of emotions that I wasn’t used to experiencing. I wanted her happy, to feel as if this was an amazing decision. I wanted her to awaken like a flower, enjoying what we shared without pain or anger. But there was something else furrowing deep inside me.

The need to possess her was now stronger than ever.

It wasn’t a good position to be in, especially since nothing good would come out of this. Now that I’d broken the ice, allowing her to bask in the joy of a man who cared about her happiness, I wanted more. I needed to take all of her. Call me a bastard but my satisfaction depended on claiming her completely and without reservation.

I headed into the kitchen, yanking my jacket from the floor. As soon as I pulled my phone from the inside pocket, I noticed a message from Cayman. When I pressed listen, I took a deep breath.

“I found him, boss. I’ll keep him on ice for you. However, the merchandise is gone. The Bianchis have it. Word on the street is that they take it as another win.”

Another win.

That pissed me off even more. The fuckers would continue attempting to drive a stake right through the middle of our organization. I couldn’t allow that to happen.

Which meant making tough decisions.

After the call ended, I tossed the phone onto the counter, realizing that business was going to get even bloodier. Whatever I chose to do with my lovely dove would need to be calculated carefully. If only she’d tell me the truth.

However, I would need to cut the evening short if for no other reason than I was required to take out the trash. That would involve time. Even if I didn’t want to be away from her, at some point I’d need to get her back to wherever she wanted me to drop her off.

The struggle and need to keep her was real, so much so I pounded my fist on the counter, wanting nothing more than to break whatever was in my closest proximity. The timing was incredibly bad, karma a fucking bitch.

I poured myself a scotch, tossing back the entire contents then pouring a double. For some insane reason, I remained cognizant of her age, grabbing a water bottle. I had no idea why I’d suddenly grown a conscience, other than the last thing I wanted to do was to rip her entire world apart.

You mean stealing her virginity?

That I didn’t mind doing. Smirking, I took the stairs two at time, half expecting her to be hiding behind a piece of furniture. Instead, she’d propped several pillows against the headboard, giving me a saucy look the moment I returned. She’d tucked the sheet under her arms, covering her breasts.

“Bad girl. You won’t cover yourself from me. Ever.” I ripped the sheet down, enjoying the sight of her pebbled nipples.

When I handed her the water, her wicked expression turned into a slight pout. Since she refused to take the bottle from my hand, I rolled the cold plastic across one nipple, issuing a harsh growl from the way she yanked it from my fingers.

I took a gulp of my drink before sitting down. Then I lowered my head, pressing my lips against hers, encouraging them to open. As I drained the gulp into her mouth, she brushed her fingers down my arm. Her touch could set the world on fire.

At least my world.

I rolled her lips open and closed, allowing her to swallow then thrusting my tongue inside. I cupped her breasts, kneading the tender tissue, plucking her nipples as the kiss turned into an explosion of heat between us.

As she moaned into the kiss, I captured the sound, savoring the way her body trembled from my touch. I could do this for hours on end. Unable to help myself, I slipped my hand under the sheets to her thighs, daring to roll the tip of my index finger around her clit. Then I pressed it inside, using the exact same motions stroking her sweet pussy as I did with my tongue teasing her mouth.

She writhed, her moans increasing, now so intoxicating I was in a full state of arousal. My balls ached, my cock throbbing. I would need to fill her again at least once if not more.

After pulling my hand free, I broke the kiss, only long enough to drive my finger into her mouth. "Suck me, baby. I want you to taste the combination of our sweet sin."

Chrissy wrapped her fingers around my wrist, holding my arm in place as she sucked and licked my finger. There was such reverence on her face, as if she'd just dropped into a moment of pure heaven.

Fuck me, I was becoming obsessed with her. I didn't want another man to ever be able to touch her. Hell, I felt like buying a chastity belt, requiring her to wear one when she wasn't with me. The thought was pure evil.

"Mmm..." she moaned, her eyelids now half closed as she pumped my finger in her mouth.

“Jesus,” I muttered, yanking my hand free then crushing my mouth over hers once again. The taste was even sweeter, so much so I was almost blind from the raging desire that continued to build like wildfire.

She pressed her hand against my chest, digging her nails into my bare skin. Then she raked them down by several inches and the burn I felt was delicious. For an innocent little bird, she sensed exactly what I craved.

I eased back by a few inches, nipping her lip then taking a swig of my drink.

“You carry a gun,” she said as she studied me.

After swallowing, I shifted, leaning back against the headboard and crossing my legs. “A requirement.”

“Hmmm... You’re not military.”

“How do you know?”

“Your tattoos. You have too many and they represent something much darker than the team members you’re drilled into protecting.”

“Wow,” I said, allowing a slight chuckle. “Then what am I?”

“Well, it’s obvious you’ve killed people in your line of work.” She’d tipped her head in my direction, a sly grin on her face. “You’re not allowed to lie to me either.”

I took another deep breath, uncertain whether she was testing me. I doubted she’d expect a truthful answer. Why not give her one? “Yes, Chrissy. I’ve killed several men in my life, but I’d consider them the kind of scum of the earth who deserved it.”

“You’re not an assassin.”

“In some worlds, I would be considered that, but I don’t do perform my duties for money.”

“Family honor and protection then.”

Another laugh popped to the surface. “Very true. I would do anything to protect my family and those I care about, including ending someone’s life. There is no question and no guilt. Does that make me a sinner? Of that I have no doubt.”

“Hmmm... That makes you judge and jury.”

Turning my head, I studied her intently. “You don’t seem troubled.”

She shrugged, the action exaggerated. “Not really. I guess I grew up around it, bad men I mean.”

That gave me far too much of an insight into her life. Why did I have a terrible feeling her father was in the mafia? I racked my brain, trying to remember if there was a Bianchi sister. She was Italian, so that could be the case. Jesus. Either I’d stumbled onto that and I needed to buy a series of lottery tickets or I’d just stumbled into a cavern that would lead to hell. “Does the name the Bianchis mean anything to you?”

Her eyes narrowed and I could tell instantly the name wasn’t familiar. “No. Should it?”

“I’m still trying to figure you out, little dove. Nothing more.” I brushed hair from her face.

When she offered another smile, one just as sly as before, my hunger only continued to increase. “Don’t. Perhaps you won’t like what you find.” She took the glass from my hand, pulling it to her lips.

It was impossible to take my eyes off her as she enjoyed several sips, her eyes closing. I shook my head, still trying to put the pieces together. Whoever she was, she was someone’s daughter.

Likely a man of importance.

Mafia? Perhaps.

If so, I’d stepped into more than just quicksand.

I took the glass from her hand, placing it on the nightstand. “No more talking, unless you tell me exactly who you are, princess. And I sense you are a true princess.”

“If so then my crown is made of thorns and blood. I won’t burden you with my life, Francesco. You have yours to worry about.”

I pushed her down, intertwining my fingers in hers. “Then we fuck.”

The way she bit her lower lip reminded me that she was young and vulnerable.

And that she had been entirely too innocent for a beast like me to take, but there was no turning back now. I’d breached her womanhood, which rivaled every other intense moment I’d experienced in my life. A primal surge erupted from deep within, the realization that she’d chosen me for such a tremendous gift not weighing nearly heavily enough on my mind.

My hunger continued to be explosive and I used my knee to press her legs apart, savoring the way she arched her back, her cravings becoming as wound up as mine. As crazy as it sounded, I was glad I’d used the belt so she could feel my control over her for an extended period of time. The thought was far too delicious.

“I can’t wait to be inside of you again.”

“Then don’t wait. I need you. Now.”

As soon as I pressed the tip back to her tight channel, she issued a ragged moan, her fingers clawing at the bedding. Fuck me, I could do this for hours, but I knew her lithe body wouldn’t be able to take it all night long.

I slid my arm around her waist, gripping her tightly as I slowly thrust the entire length of my cock back inside. She was so fucking wet, the sound as I entered her echoed in my ears. She shuddered in my hold, her quivering body so small against mine. As I pulled out, she bucked against me, arched her back.

“My little vixen is very hungry,” I murmured and shifted my hand to her breast, cradling the heaviness of it in my large hand. My mind was blown by how much I craved every part of her, longing to spend days, not just hours, exploring every inch of her body.

Panting, she laughed nervously as she’d done several times, her scattered whisper another round of music for my ears. “Yes, very much so.”

When I pounded into her again, she met every hard thrust, her animalistic needs bridging the surface. I rolled my lips over her shoulder, keeping her in place as I took my time. While her tight pussy fought the intrusion, the hard clenching and releasing was a beautiful indication of how well our bodies molded together.

The moment I developed an intense rhythm, I couldn't stop myself from using more force, fucking her like the crazed man I'd become. All because of her.

"You're so..." She laughed, still shaking in my hold but no longer fighting me.

"Are you still glad you ran into the path of a very bad man?" When I nipped her shoulder, she let out a rapturous yelp.

"Yes. God. Yes. You're everything I've ever wanted. This is the best fucking night of my life."

I believed her, and if I had to admit it, I'd say the same. I pinched her nipple, enjoying her ragged mewls as I increased the level of pain. If it bothered her, there was no way of telling, her reactions exactly as I'd hoped they'd be.

Within minutes, I knew I was about to lose control, which was far too early. I couldn't help myself, pounding into her relentlessly, rearing back so I could grip both her hips, hips that were meant for only my hands. I never wanted another man to touch her. I craved to brand her with my initials and lock her away.

There was no desire to allow my bird to fly free, even if that's exactly what would need to happen. I pumped long and hard, holding back until the very last moment.

As the rush of adrenaline turned into another wave of utter pleasure, I could tell she was ready to climax once again. There could be nothing sweeter than to have her releasing on my cock as I erupted deep inside of her.

"That's it, baby. Take it all. Every single inch."

"Don't stop. Please don't stop."

My balls aching, my cock painful, I thrust for as long and brutally as I could.

Until there was no holding back and I filled her with my seed.

My beautiful prize, a gift from heaven above belonged to me if only for this precious moment.

One I would remember fondly.

As much as I wanted to come into her tight pussy for the third time, I sensed she was sore. Besides, I wanted to claim every hole before I was forced to let her go.

When I pulled out, she cried out.

“I’m not finished with you yet.” I rolled onto my knees, easing her onto hers. When I flipped her around, dropping her onto all fours, she threw her head over her shoulder.

I drove the entire length of my cock inside, throwing my head back with a stark roar. She stiffened when I rolled my fingers down the crack of her ass, sucking in her breath when I slipped several in beside my cock. I thrust in several times before pulling them out and pressing them against her dark hole.

“What are you doing?” She tried to jerk up, clawing the bedding.

“Taking your tight little asshole as well.”

My special little dove didn’t try to stop me, only pushing up from the bedding. When I eased my fingers inside, she sucked in her breath all over again, her body shaking. I continued pressing my long digits into her tight hole, taking my time as I hit the tight ring of muscle. Then I flexed them open, driving them in and out in a slow, even motion.

Her whimpers turned into soft purrs, the sound such sweet music. I couldn’t care less about anything else but being with her.

Taking her.

Fucking her.

Goddamn, that made me a beast of a man.

I fisted her hair, wrapping her long curls around my fingers, tugging until she issued another whimper. She was so tight, but I felt her muscles relaxing. I removed my fingers, pressing the tip of my cockhead against her dark hole. Her slight whimper was ragged, driving me into another moment of increasing hunger. I pushed an inch inside, allowing her to get used to the invasion. When she arched her back, I knew she wanted more.

“I adore fucking your tight asshole,” I muttered then slowly drove the remainder inside, smiling when she gasped for air, her body quivering.

I loved being in control of her, claiming what already belonged to me. Nothing else mattered but her sweetest deflowering, the desire that continued to explode. I threw my head back, digging my fingers into her hips. Every sound we made was animalistic, our breathing ragged. Being lost in her was the best thing I’d ever experienced.

But I couldn’t hold back any longer, the need to fill her with my seed too great.

With four additional brutal plunges, I erupted deep inside, issuing a savage roar.

If only the entire world could hear that I’d found the one woman who I knew could soothe the beast, the single one who’d grabbed my heart.

But I had to let her go, to free the beautiful bird.

For now...

CHAPTER 10



“In a world full of monsters, only the strongest survive. You’ll be chained by your greed and temptations, your enemies ready to suck the life out of you. Only those fearless enough to free themselves of their hindrances without hesitation will become powerful.”

—Tony Arturo

Three years later...

Francesco

Monsters.

My father’s sentiment had been completely accurate. There was an art to becoming a beast of the night, a creature with no conscience. I’d perfected being callous, cruel, and heartless with only a single exception.

My niece and nephew.

Other than that I was completely devoid of humanity or guilt. That’s why I was damn good at what I did, refusing to accept a single weakness. Booze. Gambling. Women. Cigars. Expensive possessions. I had whatever desired proclivity at my fingertips and enjoyed my share of all of them but never to excess. That’s how the weak were singled out, crushed like worthless rodents.

Business.

Over the last few years, the holdings of the Arturo–Powers enterprise had increased by three hundred percent. We were a formidable force by anyone’s standards, including those considered on the right side of the law. One of the reasons for our success, although there were a dozen others, was that Maxwell Powers’ innate knowledge of the military, corporate mergers and acquisitions, coupled with my father’s more brutal legacy of handling our more unscrupulous clients, meant our powerful billion-dollar operation was well versed in both legal and illegal activities. I’d fought shifting more toward our businesses that were completely on the up and up but could no longer deny their profitability.

That had also reduced our need for violence. It had been thirty months since we’d crushed our former enemy, the Bianchis, sending them back to New Jersey.

However, if I’d learned anything through my years of working within the organization, there wasn’t a single person alive who didn’t crowd the moral line at least once in their careers. Sadly, those who seemed to do so without conscience performed better, their greed and hunger for power driving them to the top of their game. I’d also learned that patience was often the key to success, something that had taken me a long and very painful time to understand, let alone embrace.

I was within months of taking over as Don, Maxwell eager to retire. Perhaps the truth was that he’d pushed himself to the top of the leaderboard in the various industries, fighting against and for criminal activities in his quest to act on revenge for my father’s murder. The fact they’d been best friends during my father’s stranger than life stint in the Marines was something my sister never allowed me to forget.

Max was far too young to retire, but he would never leave the corporation or the security firm he still owned with our Consigliere, Viper Briggs. Keeping both had broadened our reach from New York to California, proving helpful more than once.

We’d eliminated several enemies along the way, but I’d learned that when you removed one, another would be waiting

in the shadows. At least our world had been peaceful, allowing for more of a normal life.

It was Raleigh's love for the man that had kept me from killing him when I was eighteen, the anger I had inside of me caustic and uncontrollable. While Max and I would never consider ourselves close friends, as my brother-in-law and as the most powerful Don in the entire United States, I respected him more than I ever did my father.

That was saying something.

Maybe his conscientious handling of my brutal methods of acting on business was the reason, or that through his love of my sister, two of the most adorable children in the entire world had been produced. I often laughed at the fact the two kids had me wrapped around their little fingers.

Meghan and Brock had come to mind simply because I needed to pick up a birthday present for my niece, the party scheduled for the next night. While my assistant normally handled obtaining what few gifts I purchased for clients, or an occasional woman scorned, I insisted on purchasing the ones for my family.

If only my Capos knew at the ripe old age of thirty, I'd turned into a total softie. Well, only when kids were involved. Anything else was fair game.

Including what I was doing at the meeting that I hadn't scheduled. The fucker had wanted to meet in a public setting, likely because Carmine Capello had gotten wind of the fact I'd considered placing a hit on him. It wasn't something our regime did on a regular basis as it was considered the old method of doing business and risky in the modern environment. However, in this case, it had brought the weasel out in the open, likely prepared to beg for his life. Or for forgiveness.

Either way, I wasn't interested in his atrocious lies, only that he hand over the portion of the business that had been contractually obligated to our corporation. If he signed on the dotted line as promised to Maxwell, then I'd allow him to live.

For now.

I'd already talked it over with Max. He agreed the man would need to be made an example of, the rumblings of a weakness already tarnishing our reputation. However, it wouldn't be tonight, not in a family-style Italian restaurant in the heart of Little Italy. I was a savage man, something no one would argue against, but I did what I could not to place the lives of women and children in harm's way. That had become a part of my character the day my best friend had been murdered three years before. I was still taking care of his widowed fiancée and the little boy he'd never met. They were considered family as much as my sister and her kids.

Unfortunately, Carmine knew that as well, which was the reason he selected this particular location.

I eased out of the SUV, studying the front of the restaurant. It had been years since I'd visited, once a location my father had adored bringing us as kids after I'd grown out of my highchair. Maybe because it had been our mother's favorite. It left me with a bad taste in my mouth. I buttoned my jacket as Cayman rounded the back of the vehicle.

We stood quietly together, studying the facility as if there would be some additional answers provided. I'd taken the meeting for Max, allowing him time to prepare for the party.

"Did you get Meghan's present yet?" he asked, which forced me to laugh.

He knew me better than most, our friendship odd yet something I could count on like the trust I'd placed in the man. I'd visited his parents on two occasions, both treating me like a long-lost son.

He'd taken four bullets for me and I'd taken one for him. We would no doubt do so again.

"Not yet. After you drop me off later, I'll pick it up."

"You did get the right thing, the little riding outfit I suggested?"

I yanked off my sunglasses, shoving them into my pocket, trying not to laugh from the concern in his voice. "I know

what I'm doing, bro. Trust me.”

“Right. Trust. You have no real clue about little girls.”

“And you do because you have a passel of nieces?”

He gave me a toothy grin, his smile the kind that could light up the darkest bar. When he laughed, everyone laughed with him. On one hand, he was just as savage as I was, perhaps appreciating the thrill of the hunt and removal of limbs even more than I did, but inside was more of a softie with regard to his family. Hell, maybe that's why we got along so well. He had several sisters, at least eight nieces and nephews, although I'd lost count.

“I make certain I know what my girls like. They would run me over if I didn't.”

I shook my head. His accent was always heavier when he talked about his family. As three of my other soldiers moved onto the sidewalk, I took a deep breath, nodding toward Ralph. I considered the older gentleman my point man, someone I could always count on to provide decent advice. He'd worked for Maxwell, serving alongside him during his days in the military. He was an expert in weaponry and explosives, both coming in handy over the years.

“Let me do a sweep,” Ralph stated, directing the two men who technically worked under him. I nodded in agreement, although my soldier had a mind of his own when it came to the lengths he'd go to in order to ensure the safety of me, my men, or any family member.

“Just don't be late,” I told Cay. “You know how my sister gets if everything isn't perfect.”

“Whew. Raleigh is one tough broad. I mean amazing woman.”

“You're certainly not insulting either my beloved sister or me. She knows she's a tough broad but that's how she can keep Max on his toes.”

“One day you need to find that.”

I slowly turned my head, giving him a hard look. Chrissy's name had been forbidden to be mentioned. He knew better

than most how I felt, the decision I made haunting me to this day. I'd let my little bird fly, determined to protect her. Then she'd vanished as if she'd never existed. No one could ever compare. "No."

"No? You know I'm not wrong. Ask your buddy Dominick. He'll tell you."

"My buddy Dominick is a priest. What does he know about relationships?" Dominick had counseled me on several occasions, his tough love often driving me nuts.

Cay looked at me in fake horror. "Are you kidding me? Never say that around my mother. She'd wash your mouth out with soap. Priests know about all aspects of love and family, relationships of every kind. That's what makes their advice so important."

They were words I knew had come directly from his mother's mouth. She was one of the most religious people I'd ever met, but she was also one of the kindest and most intelligent women on the face of the earth. "What makes you think I need a wife?"

He peered over his sunglasses, smirking the entire time. "Because you can get out of hand, your anger getting the best of you. And don't tell me that you're still saving yourself for that little hottie from a few years ago. If she was meant to be in your life, she would have miraculously appeared like she did before."

"Yeah, well, I doubt good karma will strike again."

"Why, because you don't believe you deserve it?"

"Are we seriously going to talk about this?"

Cayman shook his head, muttering something under his breath. I did hear the term 'hardheaded,' which I accepted like another badge of honor.

That little hottie was a girl I'd yet to be able to drive out of my mind. Chrissy with no last name. After our night of blissful passion, both of us wanting more, I'd dropped her off on the side of the road as she'd requested, not far from where she'd almost gotten herself run over. My intention had been to keep

track of her, not only ensuring her safety but claiming her as I'd promised. Then she'd disappeared so I couldn't track where she was going.

I'd searched every family who lived in close proximity to the drop-off spot for any scrap of information, but there was no smoking gun. Hell, I'd talked to informants in the streets, but it was as if she'd never existed. I'd been forced to accept that fact I'd never see her again and didn't need to tell Cayman that I'd tried to find her more than once. He knew. "I don't know who you're talking about."

"Bullshit," he said, coughing into his closed hand. "You need to let her go, man. You're driving yourself crazy. Chrissy obviously moved on."

"It doesn't matter any longer. I've moved on."

"Then go out on a date occasionally. Maybe you'll find true love. Again."

"Not going to happen. Business. That's what matters. Money. Power."

"Ri-ight."

Now it was time for me to be repulsed. Raleigh and Max had it, Viper and Madisen, but I wasn't the kind of man where luck struck twice or fate for that matter. I'd fucked up my single chance.

"All clear," Ralph said just before the stench got too overpowering.

I headed for the open door, Cayman following me. As usual, only Cay would sit by my side, the others keeping an eye on front and rear exits, Ralph staying inside to scan the customers. Sadly, he wasn't the kind of man who could blend in, but in this neighborhood, people were used to members of various mafia organizations enjoying dinner with their families and business associates.

We were a motley group in New York, the various territories divided between the Irish, the Bratva, the Greeks, and our blended, Americanized Cosa Nostra. I noticed Carmine immediately, thankful he hadn't been stupid enough to insist

on sitting front and center in the restaurant, otherwise known as a sitting duck.

I moved to the man's table, waiting as he and his associate stood, Carmine holding out his hand first. While he was twenty years my senior, respect was earned and, in my book, he had very little given his fluctuation with who he considered his friends. I could tell by his look of surprise that he'd been fully anticipating Max's presence.

Evidently, he'd forgotten our family was on the list. I accepted his gesture, giving his Capo a onceover. The kid was young and green, likely a family member. Hell, I'd been there once, nagging Max at eighteen to be given a place of authority. True to Max's word, he'd given me the rope to almost hang myself three times before sitting me down and having a discussion.

It was funny how the words he'd said hurt more than if he'd beaten me like my father used to do. His methods had ultimately won me over. I'd give this kid a pass, hopeful he'd learn what not to do when moving up the ladder in our business.

"Francesco. I wasn't expecting to meet with you. I mean no disrespect of course. I hope all is well with Max."

While we were barely little more than acquaintances, I didn't consider his less than formal address disrespect. I'd known him and his wife for far too long.

"No offense taken, Carmine. He was merely detained with important business. I offered to come in his stead. I'm certain that won't be a problem?" I didn't like the expression on his face or the fact he seemed fidgety. Something was off.

"Of course not. It's always good to see you." He wasn't good at lying, but at least my presence put him more on edge. I noticed he glanced toward the front of the restaurant. There wasn't a single syndicate in New York who would dare attempt to take out the Don or the Underboss of a powerful family.

"As you might imagine, I'm a busy man, Carmine. Let's get this meeting underway." I drummed my fingers on the table,

still enjoying the few minutes of seeing him squirm.

“Absolutely. I’ve taken the liberty of ordering a drink for both of us. Perhaps you’d enjoy a bite to eat?”

I gave him a look and we both sat down. It was customary to offer, although he knew the answer. Also, a drink wouldn’t arrive for Cay as Carmine preferred the old methods of doing business. In his mind, my Capo was nothing but an unintelligent hired gun.

Once I was seated, I glanced around the restaurant, noticing our table had already received more than the usual share of glances. People should know better than to pay any attention to meetings of this nature. That didn’t set well with me, but no one was stupid enough to order a hit in the daylight. Cayman seemed on edge as well, already shooting me a cautionary look.

The waiter brought the drink seconds later, backing away so quickly I almost didn’t catch the look of horror on his face.

My instinct was in overdrive. I gazed at the amber liquid, pushing the glass away then leaning over. “If you’re here to provide the signed contract for our business agreement then we’ll toast to our future business endeavors. If not, then we have nothing to talk about and I’ll move on to annihilating your entire corporation. The decision is entirely yours, although I suggest you make it wisely.”

After issuing the mandate, I smiled, noticing his hand was shaking as he brought the glass to his lips. He knew how savage I could be, yet I’d never seen him this full of angst. No. Something was definitely off, the man under obvious duress. I glanced at Cay who was immediately on notice.

“I’m happy to sign the contract, Francesco, but there have been some complications.” Carmine lowered his head and that’s the moment I reached for my weapon.

If my gut was correct, he’d sold his soul to someone else.

Within seconds, I knew I was right, the slow motion of the imploding situation something I’d remember for months to come.

Pop! Pop! Pop!

There was no time for hesitation. Both Cayman and I shoved our seats back, dropping to the floor as we tossed the table over onto its side.

“What the fuck?” Cayman yelled seconds before firing off several calculated shots.

I turned in the opposite direction, scanning the crowd as screams erupted, customers jumping over chairs and each other to try to get away from the impending carnage. I noticed an assassin at four o'clock, carefully able to drive a bullet between his eyes. With both hands on the weapon, I threw my arms over the edge of the table, snarling as I witnessed Carmine and his protégé being escorted toward the back. They were nothing more than the decoys, luring us to the destination.

“Come on. Let's get you out of here.” Cayman jerked my arm, yanking me toward the front but almost immediately another round of shots was fired, innocent people hit in the process.

I dropped and rolled, firing another round of my own. There were at least four of them if not more, men in suits who'd blended in with the customers, waiting for our arrival. We'd been the sitting ducks, pulled into a ruse.

Goddamn, I was pissed. There was only one family stupid enough to do something like this.

The Bianchis.

I would bet what was left of my soul I was right. I'd never believed they'd been chased away. Roberto Bianchi continued to harbor rage at the loss of his son as well as the demise of what little business they'd garnered in New York. They were American born and raised Italians with no couth and zero respect for the old ways. There was also no loyalty between them, their methods little more than those of brutal animals.

I'd paid attention to their every move for almost two years. Then I'd grown soft, ignoring my usual regimen. How many times would I allow the fuckers to play me for a fool?

While Maxwell had managed to stop a bloody war three years before, my gut had told me one day they would seek additional revenge. If my instinct proved to be true, this time I wouldn't keep any level of patience. The fuckers didn't deserve to live.

"Goddamn it," Cayman hissed as another round of bullets whizzed by, far too close. "Where the hell is Ralph?"

I scanned the restaurant, snarling when I found him. "He's been hit. We do not leave without him." There was no time to waste. I calculated the next moves of the two assassins who'd taken hiding positions. Then I stood, firing off a full eight shots into the hostess stand, immediately grabbing a second ammunition magazine and slapping it in.

"Look out!" Cayman knocked me to the floor again, popping off three rounds in rapid succession, hitting the second bastard in the chest. Then we both scrambled toward Ralph. "I got him!"

I helped pull the injured man to his feet, Cayman wrapping Ralph's arm around his neck. He'd been hit in the chest as well, blood already soaking his shirt. This time, I covered Cay as we struggled to reach the front door.

My soldier was down, his vacant eyes staring up at the waning light in the sky. "Fuck." Sadly, there was no time to gather his body. I could only assume my other man had been killed as well. I raced toward the SUV, throwing open the back door then turning and crouching, popping off one more round as another assassin rushed out from the shadows. "Get him inside!"

"Come on, boss. We don't know how many more of them there are." Cayman yanked me away from the sidewalk, pushing me in through the open door, jumping in the driver's seat and starting the engine.

As he roared off, the tires screeching, I made a promise to track down the bastard who'd hoped to exterminate the Don of New York.

The fuckers would die.

CHAPTER 11



*F*rancesco

Normal.

The day was perfect, hardly a cloud in the sky. The weather was warm but not oppressive as it usually was in the middle of July. And the light breeze provided not only a series of tickling sensations but wafting scents of hamburgers and steaks on the grill. There were at least three dozen adults, only a few soldiers watching out for any additional attacks, and a solid two dozen children having the time of their lives.

Max and Raleigh had pulled out the stops for my niece's birthday party, the entire backyard decorated in shades of pink and purple, the little girl's favorite colors. There were tables everywhere, the festive coverings depicting the Little Mermaid and Pocahontas. I studied the four ponies that had been brought in, more appreciative of the often strange duties the loyal landscaper had to deal with on occasion.

By all accounts, the event was nothing more than a happy event where the greatest anxiety was if the birthday girl would enjoy her cake and party.

However, those of us in the family knew that at any time, an attempt at ending the beautiful scene could occur. Our enemy had gotten bolder, so much so that I'd spent almost all night combing the darkened streets in search of information. What I'd heard confirmed my suspicions. The Bianchi regime had their sights set on New York once again.

That didn't make me feel any better. While some might consider what happened nothing more than a warning shot, the fact two good men had lost their lives in the process kept my rage just below the surface.

Yet here I stood with a drink in my hand, staring out at the beautiful lake and the dock and cabana Maxwell had built himself in his spare time. He'd had help of course, including Ralph and Viper, even another member of the original Powers Security team making the trip. I'd never swung a hammer in my life up to that point but had gotten a crash course in becoming a handyman if only for a couple of days.

The weather had been perfect, the beer flowing, and we'd gotten way too much sun. But we'd finished the project in five days, likely given the fact Raleigh had kept us on task. We'd laughed more than normal, hadn't worried about business and had eaten like kings every night. The memories were some of my favorites.

I took a deep breath, my stomach growling as I watched Maxwell load up a plate for one of the guests before handing off the duties to a member of the catering company. He wiped his hands on his apron before ripping it off, looking very much the proud papa as he peered over the heads of guests toward the bounce house he'd had brought in. The setting was serene, a complete takeoff from the life I'd grown up in and Max had taken to after only a few months.

Fuck. Not that I'd admit it to anyone, but this was exactly what I wanted. A home. A family. A gorgeous wife. Cayman's words had struck home more than I cared to admit.

Maybe I was thinking about what Joey had told me all those years ago, the happiness he'd conveyed in finding Julie.

I studied her from where I stood, the man she'd brought with her to the party someone who'd been there for her. I'd sensed her hesitation in bringing him with her, but the woman deserved to find happiness. And I could tell that little Joey adored the man.

"Fuck." I swirled my drink and purposely looked away. Everyone had moved on but me. Great. Now I was feeling

sorry for myself. What the fuck was wrong with me?

I had the house, a sinfully posh estate in another high dollar neighborhood. I had the kind of wealth people would kill for. I also had all the toys money could buy, including a small yacht, several expensive sports cars, and a lagoon-style saltwater pool that hadn't been used by anyone but Max's kids and Joey. What I also had was quiet every night I went home. I rarely watched television, hadn't read a book in six months, and music did little to soothe the savage beast.

Yeah, I had it all.

Except someone to share it with.

Max laughed as he moved through the guests, forever watching where my sister was and what she was doing. It wasn't just because he was obsessively protective of her. His adoration was clear in everything he did, every action he took, and every decision made.

When he'd received the call about the shooting, I'd heard the glitch in his voice. Even if he'd hate admitting it, he was furious that he'd used politics instead of brawn three years before.

One of the many things I'd learned to respect about the decorated soldier was his ability to separate business and family life. Somehow, even after several attacks and continued danger, he could shut it all down when he returned to his gorgeous estate. Yes, it was gated, protected by several of his men, security cameras placed in dozens of locations, but once you moved from the house to the backyard, you'd never know the destination was as highly protected as fucking Fort Knox.

"Picture perfect," Viper said as he joined me on the deck, a drink in his hand.

"Too much so. I've been envisioning a bloody massacre."

"Jesus, dude. We're surrounded by firepower. No one would be that stupid."

"Tell the men who just died that story, Viper."

"Fuck. I know. What cowards."

I glanced at him, nodding as I continued to seethe. “This wouldn’t have happened had we eradicated the entire Bianchi family.”

“And what good would that have done? I understand your anger. I feel your frustration.”

“Do you?”

His eyes opened wide and I sighed, rubbing my jaw. “You seem to forget Max is my friend and has been for a long time. I’m one of the godfathers of his children, for fuck’s sake. I also consider you a brother, whether your sorry ass likes it or not. Max is taking this harder than you think. He worries every day about his family, including you. While you’re acting cavalier about what happened, violence isn’t always the answer.”

“It’s not about violence, Viper. It’s about setting a tone, making certain shit like this doesn’t happen. Some men don’t do that with threats or conversations. If my father hadn’t ignored the signs that he was being targeted all those years ago...” I stopped short, immediately turning away. “Stupid fool.”

“I didn’t have the pleasure of meeting your father, Francesco, but I’ve seen him through the eyes of his two children who by all accounts loved him very much and through the stories Maxwell has told me. In my eyes, your father was a brilliant, caring leader who would be very happy with the man you’ve become.”

Viper had never said anything like this to me in the years I’d known him. I gave him a nod of respect because he deserved it. “I appreciate that but right now, I feel like a failure.”

“Why? Because of the loss of two of your soldiers? They knew the score when you hired them. You didn’t lie. They did their jobs.”

“Yeah, well.”

“Why do I think what’s really going on here is that you can’t forgive yourself for letting that girl go?”

Bristling, my grip on the glass became tight enough I was certain it would break. “She doesn’t matter right now.”

“Uh-huh. Keep telling yourself that and maybe one day you’ll believe it.”

Fuck. Why was everyone determined to provide unwanted advice?

We stood quietly for a few minutes.

“Have you heard anything about Ralph’s condition?” he asked. Music blared from several speakers, children laughing as they played in the bounce house. I found it fascinating that neighbors had allowed their kids to accept an invitation to the birthday party. Maybe it had been out of fear, but I wasn’t so certain.

Everyone was having a good time, even if Max’s expression remained pensive. He understood what the personal attack meant, the requirement to go on the offensive. “He’s stable, likely to make a full recovery. I can’t say the same thing about James and Marco.”

“They were good men,” he said quietly. “Did you make arrangements for their families?”

I threw him a look and laughed. “Of course. Their kids will be well taken care of including college funds established. Just like little Joey.”

“You’re a good man as well.”

“You obviously don’t know me very well.” I grinned but that was the truth. I would take everything that was important to Roberto Bianchi, including his second-born son if necessary. This time, nothing would be held back.

“Uncle Francesco!” Meghan came running and a smile crossed my face immediately as I placed my drink on the railing, crouching down so she could throw her arms around me. Maybe I really was an old softie.

“Oh, baby girl. Happy birthday. How old are you now? Four?”

She pulled away and gave me an evil eye. I could tell she was going to be a handful just like her mother. “You know I’m

seven.”

“Eight going on fifteen,” Viper said in a hushed voice.

“Very funny, Unkie Viper,” Meghan said, giving him attitude as usual. The men who were closest were all considered relatives, ready to die in order to protect the two children.

Myself included.

They were the light of all our lives, Max and Raleigh allowing us to share in the special moments such as this one.

“Did you get what you wanted for your birthday?” I asked, noticing the huge table that was full of colorful presents. I’d been forced to use the help of my assistant after all, the girl a godsend. The riding outfit was complete with frilly cowboy boots and a stunning little Stetson.

“Not yet. I want a puppy. I don’t see a puppy.” My niece had the best pout in the business. “Mama said I could have anything I wanted.”

I noticed both Raleigh and Max heading in our direction hand in hand, Cayman following closely behind as well as Gio, Maxwell’s Capo. He was a man who’d risen through the ranks under my father’s regime, seeing the family through births, deaths, and far too many battles. While Viper had his men with him as well, they were busy helping keep the perimeter protected.

I had to laugh given it had probably been Raleigh who’d insisted every soldier wear more casual attire, including tropical shirts. She did everything in her power to keep the kids from discovering who their father was. And what he did for a living. I was impressed the soldiers had all been fairly creative in hiding their weapons when working family events, something they’d gotten used to over the years.

“A puppy, huh? I thought you wanted a horse,” I mentioned, grinning when I noticed my sister rolling her eyes.

“Both. Thank you very much,” Meghan said politely. “I think I can get Daddy to agree.”

“Sweetie, it’s time to rally up for the pony rides. Are you ready?” Raleigh gripped her shoulders, giving me the sisterly look to shut up.

“I’m sure you can. Your daddy loves you.” Grinning, I knew Raleigh would smack me later for egging her on.

“Then can I open presents, Mommy? You asked me to wait until everyone arrived and I think you invited the entire neighborhood.”

Maxwell chuckled. “My daughter, the politician. Yes, my beautiful daughter. We’ll have birthday cake and open presents afterwards.”

“I’ll take her down,” Cayman said, giving me a knowing look. The man had been close to Marco, considered his closest friend. I could tell he’d taken the man’s death hard.

“No. I know you gentlemen have some things to talk about, but after this, no more business until after the celebration,” Raleigh ordered.

I noticed my nephew out of the corner of my eye and shook my head. The little boy was growing far too fast. I couldn’t imagine what their futures would bring. Being a child in this world had its share of difficulties.

“Yes, Mother,” Maxwell said as he yanked her against his chest, fisting her hair and bending her head so he could capture her mouth.

“Yuck-y!” Meghan said in her sassy little way.

We all laughed, but a slight ache coursed through me, memories of feeling the kind of joy and passion they had resurfacing. It was ridiculous as usual, but it happened almost every time the two were remotely intimate.

Raleigh finally pulled away, winking before grabbing Meghan’s hand. “Come on, princess.”

“I’m not a princess.”

“Oh, yes, you are,” all of us said at the same time.

In true form, Meghan stamped her foot and gave us all a very haughty look.

Max exhaled and watched his two girls walking away. “That child is going to age me.”

“She already has, boss,” Gio said. Then his eyes opened wide, grinning as much as the rest of us. “I don’t mean any disrespect. Of course.”

My brother-in-law smiled and patted the man on his back. “None taken. Look. This is a party, and you know how I feel about handling business during one. However, we need to come to terms with what happened. What is the word on the street?”

“Definitely the Bianchis,” I told him. “They wanted to make a statement. They wanted to retaliate for years ago. It would seem they refused to give up on coming into New York.”

“Fuck,” Cayman hissed. “They deserve to die for what they did.”

“They wanted to kill our Don,” Gio added.

Max took a deep breath. “We’re all angry about this, but we need to handle the situation with the Bianchis carefully. While I understand that you believe this has to deal with Stefano’s death years ago, from what I just heard, I think it’s more about a power play. Roberto is likely boosting his son’s prestige prior to taking over the helm of the family empire. You need to remember that the family isn’t respected amongst any of his peers after the way things were handled three years ago. If they want any hope of capturing even a small portion of the New York market, they’ll need a few allies and to prove they plan on handling business professionally.”

“Agreed,” Viper said. “And from what I’ve learned, Dante Bianchi is a real piece of work. You know better than we do, Francesco.”

“He’s made some bad decisions over the years, falling into bad habits. Gambling. Underage women. Sadism. Methods of torture that would make a hardened Bratva assassin blush.”

Which translated to the second-born son being a brutal son of a bitch who would sell his mother for power and wealth. I tried to think about the best retort. Max wasn't a man who liked to dwell on retaliatory needs, something I'd learned from day one.

"Don't forget that Roberto made a direct threat to all of us after we showed up to Stefano's funeral," Cayman added.

"We did so out of respect," Viper answered. "Which was bold but not untypical."

"Maybe, but Roberto saw it as a slap in his face. Even though he and his organization were criticized by other syndicates, losing business because of the attack at Gone Wild, that didn't change that he'd lost his son. Blood is blood. Revenge has no time limit," I added, glancing into the eyes of every man in the circle.

"He's right, boss," Gio added.

Max took a deep breath. "Understood and agreed. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't be careful. The Bianchis are more powerful than they were three years ago. I did a little fact-finding mission of my own. It would seem they also have support from the Greeks, who as you know are also considered outsiders."

That was something I didn't know. "Fuck the Greeks."

"Not so fast," Max chided. "We have business with them as well. That's why this needs to be handled with kid gloves."

"Carmine was nervous. I think the man was under duress," Cayman said.

"Fuck Carmine," I added, trying to lighten up the conversation even as I continued to seethe inside.

"At minimum Carmine needs to be handled immediately as a deterrent if nothing else," Viper interjected.

"I agree. He must be punished." The last thing we needed was to appear weak right now

Max glanced from one to the other of us, nodding. "Yes, unfortunately, there is no other choice. Francesco, take care of

the situation as soon as possible. Use it as a teaching tool.”

He didn't need to ask me twice. “That's exactly what I had in mind.”

“Then what do we do with the Bianchis at this point?” Gio asked.

“Suggestions?” Max glanced from Viper toward me, a curious look on his face. He continued testing me, ensuring that I had what he liked to call the brains and the brawns for accepting the position of Don when he formally retired.

“We find Dante's weakness and exploit it. That shouldn't be difficult. From what I've heard, he's a man of excess in all aspects of his life.” I took a sip of my drink, hating the fact I'd worn a shoulder holster, even ignoring the rules of attire. I'd come straight from the streets, rousing a few informants.

“Good idea,” Viper said. “He's an arrogant asshole with a penchant for women and fast cars. But like Francesco, I've also heard he enjoys some pretty sick proclivities.”

“Meaning what?” Gio asked, more than curious.

Viper gave him a hard look. “Let's just say he enjoys beating women and I'm not talking about kink play.”

“Fuck. Bastard,” I snarled. I hadn't realized how bad his behavior had gotten.

“Yeah. He's been banned from several area clubs because he almost killed a woman.”

“That's right,” Cayman said as he glanced at me. “I heard about that. The submissive had several broken bones, her jaw cracked, and had her mouth wired for two months. That was a single session of his brand of kink.”

I bristled. My hand was now fisted around the glass with enough force I was certain I would break it. I thought about what I'd heard over the last few weeks. “There's something else going on within the family. I'm not certain what it is, but there's a rumor that another syndicate is involved. I didn't have the time to delve into it but now I will.”

Maxwell rubbed his jaw. “Are you thinking arranged marriage?”

“I don’t know. Possibly. I will find out,” I told him and polished off my drink. As badly as I’d craved relaxing, I had a feeling that wasn’t going to happen. If he did marry, the poor woman selected would be in for a terrible life of abuse. However, depending on who she was, the Bianchis would obtain an instant boost in respect as well as heightened loyalty among their men. Sometimes the ancient methods of doing business still worked. No matter how barbaric they seemed.

“I’ll have a few conversations with our informants,” Gio offered. “A couple have gotten pretty close to the youngest Bianchi, Luca. Maybe they can shed some light on what’s happening.”

While I wasn’t happy about what we were doing at this point, Maxwell was right in that we needed to determine the Bianchis’ course of action prior to acting.

“We have a plan in motion,” Maxwell said. “Now, it’s time to enjoy the party. Or Raleigh will kill me. Go. Eat. Drink. Ride a pony.”

“Yeah, right. I doubt my fat ass could fit on one of those poor creatures,” Gio said, half laughing.

“You have put on a little weight, buddy,” I teased. Hell, the man was two hundred seventy-five pounds of mostly muscles, although I could see the effects of his recent marriage like everyone else could.

He patted his stomach and grinned. “That’s what a good woman will do for ya. You should try it some time.”

“Yah, man,” Cayman agreed, laying on the thick accent but backing away so I wouldn’t punch him.

“Get the fuck out of here. Why is everyone trying to fix me up?” I glowered, able to grin as they walked away, even though the two deaths continue to weigh on my mind.

“Because they’re right,” Maxwell agreed, chuckling under his breath. Then his expression became darker, something he

usually allowed only when behind the closed doors of his office.

“What’s wrong?” I asked a few seconds later.

He shook his head several times before answering. “You’re right to be concerned. I don’t like this, Francesco. The timing is horrific and if the Greeks are backing them, helping in any way, it will scare some of our customers off, including those on our legitimate side.”

“You’re forgetting you were supposed to be dead.”

There’d been at least four assassination attempts on his life over the last eleven plus years. While none of them had seemed to bother him, I had to admit that the only assassination attempt that had almost been successful was the one the day before. I could only wonder what would have happened had he taken the meeting.

“Yeah, I don’t take it lightly. Raleigh isn’t either. In fact, I’m surprised she’s handling the situation as well as she is.” He took a sip of his drink, continuously scanning the lake as if worried enemy soldiers would appear by boat.

“When the time is right, I’ll eliminate Dante and his father myself. I started this crap. I’ll end it.”

“You didn’t start anything. The Bianchis are greedy. And attempting to handle me, are you? I have enough of that with my beautiful wife.” He smirked as he turned his head in my direction. “You know that’s ill advised.”

“My sister shouldn’t learn what it’s like to be a widow at such an early age.”

“She won’t. I’ll make certain of it.”

“Look, I had a thought. Maybe you should take the family to a safehouse for an undisclosed period of time.”

He moved in front of me. “While I appreciate your candor and your concern, don’t put me out to pasture just yet, my dear boy. I have moves that you’ve never seen before.”

“My concern isn’t about your qualifications, Max. It’s about the fact the Bianchis appear to have no respect for the system.

That makes them dangerous. The other families are anxious as well, which won't bode well for business or peace for that matter. Whatever undermining the Bianchis are doing started long before the assassination attempt. We were just too certain of our power to notice."

"Hhmmm... Interesting you think so."

There was a faraway look in his eyes as he scanned the crowd, waving to whoever had grabbed his attention. I could tell his smile was fake, another anomaly. He was extremely concerned. If that's what a family did, I was right in keeping anyone out of my life.

"I'll check with my buddy at the CIA to see if he's heard anything about the Bianchis' push to gain additional territory," he added.

"Not a bad idea," I told him. Max's contacts inside various law enforcement agencies had proven helpful over the years. It was amazing how much chatter was learned through agencies like the DEA and the FBI. The important thing was that the discovery was always vetted so we could believe in its authenticity.

"Don't do anything rash at this point. I want Bianchi and his son nervous, worried about what might happen. However, Carmine? That's an entirely different story. Make it painful." He patted me on the shoulder before walking away.

I would enjoy doing that and more.

CHAPTER 12



*F*rancesco

Carmine had three homes, two in the state of New York. I'd learned from Viper the best method of tracking every purchase made by our enemies and those we considered risks to our corporation. The list I'd proctored over the years didn't merely consist of criminals and their illegal activities. Politicians, lawmakers, members of the FBI, the CIA, and corporate moguls also had a prominent place. The wealth of information had proven vital over the years in our efforts to blackmail and extort when necessary.

Granted, we were careful in pushing too hard on some of our more illustrious guests on the list, but often a mere mention of a repulsive proclivity was all that was necessary. For Mr. Capello, his adoration for young girls had gotten him in hot water more than once, this time to the tune of being forced to pay child support.

While I'd never consider him a doting father, at least he enjoyed spending some time with the brat he'd spawned. That's where Cay and I found him, smoking a cigar on the deck of the small house where the mother of his baby still lived in a quaint yet rundown section of Jersey. What he hadn't thought to do was to provide both her and the baby with a better set of accommodations. Maybe because his gambling debts had become so significant.

Which was the reason I believed he'd sold his soul, paying off a portion of the debt to the Bianchi family. While their criminal record precluded them from owning a casino, that hadn't stopped them from earning millions from backroom gambling establishments located in the least likely locations. Over a laundry mat in Teaneck, New Jersey. In the basement of a liquor store in Secaucus. Everything was a stone's throw away from New York City. If the cops knew of the existence of the facilities, they'd been paid off to look the other way.

It wasn't usually our concern given the legitimacy of most of our businesses, but everything had changed. The driver remained by the SUV, ensuring some stupid kid didn't try to steal it while Cayman and I handled the business at hand.

Cay remained quiet as we moved down the dark alley, careful to avoid stepping on broken glass or other trash tossed into the disgusting hellhole. The stench was reprehensible, but perfect for what I had in mind as punishment for the treacherous son of a bitch.

What few streetlights there were had been encapsulated by dull bulbs, the fixtures likely never cleaned. That added an ominous feel to the setting. Between the honking noises and dogs barking in the distance, bottles being dropped and the occasional loud voice from an ongoing argument, the street was a typical one in the heart of Shitsville. When I was only a few yards away, I pulled out my weapon, holding it low and keeping it both hands.

I knew the lay of the land to within a few inches. Once Cay opened the back gate and I walked inside, his hand was around the man's mouth within seconds.

While he screamed and tried to fight his way out of my Capo's hold, it was next to impossible to break free. The man was a fucking powerhouse, able to snap a man's neck with a twist of his wrist.

Hell, I'd learned the technique from him, something he said he'd been taught to use on live chickens in his homeland.

I moved in front of the man, crouching down then glancing at the upstairs windows. The woman and her child were already

asleep, none the wiser. They might miss the asshole for a few days but would quickly learn their lives were much better off without him. Then the money from his account I'd wired into the girl's would be discovered and she would learn to breathe easier. It was incentive cash he'd earned from the Bianchis, who were more generous than I'd believed. At least she'd have fifty-K she could use.

As I crouched down, I certainly didn't need much lighting to know he was shocked and petrified. "Well, hello, Carmine. I'm certain you believed you'd never see me again. Or maybe you were hoping Maxwell would arrive just prior to the attempted massacre."

He muttered, fighting until Cay placed the barrel of his weapon against the man's head.

"Now, I'm going to allow you to speak but if you attempt to scream, I'll shoot you in the kneecap. Do we have an understanding?" It took him a few seconds, but he finally nodded profusely. I grabbed his cigar, shaking my head before stubbing it out on the chair a mere inch from his leg. "Nasty habit. It'll be the death of you."

I took out my silencer, taking a few seconds to screw it onto my Glock. I'd yet to decide where the man would ultimately face his demise, but he didn't need to know that. I nodded to Cay who removed his hand but not the position of his weapon.

"Now, I don't need to know who was responsible for tempting you into doing something stupid, Carmine. I already know. What I want is the answer to a simple question. What other syndicate has ties to the Bianchis? The Greeks are one. But I've heard talk someone is in from out of town."

He was obviously mortified that I knew details he'd tried and failed miserably to hide. The man who had once almost been a powerhouse was now nothing more than a shell just like his company, but it still had value and before he kicked the bucket, I was getting his signature on the contract.

"I don't know what you're fucking talking about."

“Uh-huh. You’ve been up Roberto Bianchi’s butt for months. You’re an idiot, Carmine, but not a dumb man. Spill it or I won’t be able to allow you to live.”

“I’m no fool, Franny,” he said, trying to piss me off. I’d given the man credit. He still had spunk. What a shame he hadn’t put that to good use in breaking his gambling addiction. “You’re going to kill me whether I talk or not.”

“Not true. I’m a man of my word. But you’ll never know if you don’t open your fat mouth.” I barely glanced at Cay and I could tell he was having difficulty keeping a straight face. I’d gone from being a sullen SOB to a comical one, at least according to my Capo. Well, we all had to be known for something.

Cay pressed the barrel with more force, enough the man winced. “Some shithead from Chicago. That’s all I know.”

There was no doubt Carmine was telling me the truth. While inviting members of a rival mob into a city owned by several syndicates wasn’t unheard of, there was usually a purpose in mind not a death wish. If an alliance was being made, then the pathway between the two powerful cities could potentially become difficult to navigate.

Especially given we had shipments of our own coming and going from Canada through the Windy City and vice versa. The news wasn’t what I’d wanted to hear. “Any idea why?”

“I’m not on the bastard’s Christmas card list, Arturo.” Reminding me of my heritage also wasn’t in his best interest, but it would seem the man had a death wish. I’d oblige him. What the hell.

“At this rate, you won’t be on mine either.” I pulled out the contract and a favorite pen of mine. “The other reason I’m here is to finish the ongoing business between our two companies. Sadly, with your decision to betray the Arturo–Powers empire, that forfeited the original deal. Now, you’re going to sign away your entire company to our corporation.” I turned to the appropriate page, placing it on his knee.

“That’s blackmail.”

“On the contrary. The first contract you signed had a codicil about changes or assassination attempts. It was in the fine print. I’d sorry if you didn’t read it. This is entirely legal.” I offered the pen and he did nothing but stare at it, fisting his right hand, the one he needed to use to sign the damn piece of paper. I’d done everything in my power to make this easy for him.

Sighing, I yanked his arm, snapping his finger. When I heard a crack, I knew I’d broken it. What a shame.

Carmine gritted his teeth, tears running from one eye. When I forcefully wrapped his hand around the pen, he started to shake.

“Now, sign it, Carmine. I’m not a patient man. If I need to ask you again, I assure you that it won’t be done so nicely.”

The man hissed and it was obvious he had not so choice words ready to spout off to me. Good for him for keeping his trap shut. I lifted my eyebrows when he hesitated again. Then he finally scribbled his name.

“Good boy,” I said as I grabbed the pen and contract, folding the pieces of paper and shoving both into my suit jacket. “Now, I have one last question for you, my friend. Was the intention to kill Maxwell?”

He grinned and I knew the answer. The Bianchis believed that with my brother-in-law gone, they could move into our territory much easier. Perhaps that was a bargaining chip they’d use with the Chicago organization. I patted him on the leg and stood, glancing at the house once again. There was no sign we were being watched by the girl or any of his neighbors. Not that it would matter. No one would call the cops. While people were more in tune than most gave them credit for, most also had a desire to live.

Simply showing their face in a window was often a death sentence. Things had gotten out of hand in the business of crime, which was why the legitimate businesses had so much appeal. But often, dirty laundry needed to be handled.

“This is how we’re going to play it, Carmine. Your girlfriend and son will be well taken care of. I am an honorable man after all.”

He breathed a sigh of relief although it would be short lived. Even if I didn’t follow through with Max’s request, the man would be dead within twenty-four hours, killed by one of Bianchi’s men. I preferred using his death as a teaching tool.

“I’m afraid you were right after all. I had no intentions of allowing you to live, but I’ll ensure your death is as painless as possible. Sound like a good plan?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t have a choice. They didn’t give me a choice.”

“Not true, Carmine. You know that you always had a choice.”

Carmine wasn’t certain whether to be appreciative or horrified. When he started blubbing, I shook my head and patted him on the shoulder. I started to walk away, stopping short by Cay’s shoulder. I lowered my voice. There was no need in terrifying the blubbing man more than necessary.

“Take your time with him. Enjoy honing your skills.”

“Why, thank you, boss. Maybe you need to get some sleep.”

“Yeah, I’m beginning to think you’re right. I’ll see you bright and early tomorrow. We have a new business operation to go over with a fine-tooth comb.”

“I look forward do it, boss man.”

With that, I walked away, satisfied that by morning, the Bianchis would learn we weren’t taking this sitting down.

Then all hell could break loose.

CHAPTER 13



*C*hristiana

I'd always known that one day the life I'd built painstakingly slowly, especially over the last three years, would come to a crashing end. I'd even planned for it, taking precautions to prevent being moved away from the sanctity of my small apartment located in Chicago. While my father and I no longer had a close relationship after the stunt he'd pulled in New York years before, I was still under his protection and his control to a point.

After all, he'd paid for my education, including going to law school. I was in my third year, something that I coveted more than almost anything. I'd worked hard, not bothering to be worried about making him proud. I simply wanted to make a name for myself after graduating.

Little did he know I had plans on bringing down men like him, those who skirted the law with every aspect of their lives.

With my excellent grades and the fact this was the third summer I'd interned for a prominent law firm in the heart of the city, my future looked bright. Because of that and the contacts I'd made, I was almost guaranteed a decent position after I passed the bar exam.

Which I had full intentions of doing. I had one more semester to go, graduating in December. Then I was set to take the exam in January but not in the state I'd grown up in. I had no desire to remain in the city where my father ruled like a savage

on a throne. New York held the rest of my dreams, including of finding the one person who'd managed to make me happy.

Someone I had no clue how to find.

I'd rebelled against my former life, even changing my dark hair to bright red, just something else that had gotten under my father's skin. I'd grown another two inches, which had surprised me, my figure fully rounding out. I was nothing but a shadow of the girl who'd lost more than just her virginity on a stormy night years before, the decision altering everything in my world.

And I'd thought for the better.

There's been no indication things had changed, my father no surlier than normal. He'd visited my apartment only twice, once to hand me a check for tuition, the other to drop off a birthday present. The recent gesture had shocked me. He'd even had kind words, offering a small olive branch. Considering he was the only family I had, I'd welcomed it.

I should have known my father was nothing but a hunter who'd stalked his own daughter, waiting for the perfect predator to offer the highest bid for his flesh and blood. I'd thought I was tainted enough no one in the world of the mafia would want me. Maybe that's why my guard had fallen and two of my father's men had managed to kidnap me in broad daylight.

Not a single person had come to my defense or aid, probably because the two goons were all muscle, both standing at least six foot five inches tall. They'd dumped me in the trunk of the car, worried that I would manage to get away from them.

And I would have. I had skills that my father used to call ridiculous and close to treachery. I knew how to protect myself, could use almost any tool handed to me and had made certain I could fire a weapon. I even carried a Swiss army knife with me, which would have ordinarily allowed me to unlock the trunk from inside the cramped space, but they'd yanked my purse and backpack from me, tossing them inside the main portion of the car.

Now I sat in an upscale rented house in some posh neighborhood of New York, locked inside a beautiful room that was still a prison and nothing else. It was all far too déjà vu.

Since being trapped inside, I'd talked with my father once for five minutes, the man telling me only two things.

One—that I'd been pulled out of law school because I'd no longer need the education.

And two—that I'd follow his rules, or my penance would be severe. I believed him. There was a strange look in my father's eyes, one of desperation as well as determination. I was sick to my stomach, trying to figure out what he had in mind, although my instinct told me another marriage.

I paced the room, going to the window every few minutes. When I noticed an SUV pulling against the curb in front of the building, a tremor skated down my spine. We were on a lovely, well-lit, and gloriously maintained street in the heart of New York. There were cafés on the two corners, a gorgeous Catholic church almost directly across the street, and the cars lining the wide roadway were all expensive.

Even the windows in the brownstones were adorned with flowerboxes, flags on poles besides every front door. The area was beautiful, but I couldn't stop quivering.

A huge man stepped out of the passenger seat, immediately opening the rear door. I watched with sickening curiosity as another man exited the vehicle, immediately buttoning his jacket. He didn't bother looking up at the building, merely taking a deep breath before heading toward the front door. I'd been introduced to a small staff, two men and two women who would take care of me in my father's absence.

They'd likely been instructed to keep me locked away.

I shrank back from the window, another instinct telling me that the visitor had everything to do with me. I glanced down at the jeans I'd chosen to wear, ignoring my father's request to put on one of the recently purchased couture dresses. The closet was full of them, some slinky and others far too inappropriate

for anything but a night in the bedroom. Then there was lingerie that made even me blush.

Jeans, a red sweater, and boots suited me just dandy. I paced the floor once again, wishing I had a cellphone, but that had been destroyed as well. Given I didn't know anyone here, except for my mystery man, even if I could escape, where could I go for help? The police? I had a feeling that would possibly land me a night in jail until my real prison keeper came to pick me up.

How had I allowed myself to get into this horrible position?

Seconds later, I heard footsteps then the lock positioned on the outside of the door was disengaged, the door opening.

One of my father's men walked in, my father second. He glared at me as I knew he'd do, cursing in Italian under his breath. Then he nodded to Brute Man who headed in my direction. I noticed the soldier had something in his hand, a blocky contraption of some kind. What it was I couldn't tell.

"You continue to want to defy me, Christiana. I thought I made myself very clear that you were to follow the rules that I set forth."

"Since you didn't take the time to explain them after having your goons shove me in the trunk of their vehicle, I don't think I'm doing too badly."

He smirked as if knowing a secret that would soon come to haunt me. "Well, there is no time to change as the man you're going to marry is waiting for you, eager to meet you for the first time. He is well aware you are soiled goods, but at least I've gotten a decent price for your hand in marriage."

There it was. Confirmation. He'd found the highest bidder. Or maybe the only one.

The way he issued the words was disgusting, so much so I fought with the angry girl inside to keep from taking long strides toward him and slapping him across the face. I knew that would only lead to another black eye. "Who is the bastard?"

The anger in his eyes flared, my father seething, but he kept his temper. “His name is Dante Bianchi. He is the son of a very important man who’s about to retire, leaving a powerful regime in Dante’s hands.”

Bianchi.

The name immediately struck a chord but from where? I couldn’t quite remember but I was certain my memory was important.

“Ahh. You mean you were paid an exorbitant amount of money to bridge an alliance between the two organizations,” I chided in response.

The goon seemed surprised I had an inkling what was going on, the surprise in his eyes amusing.

My father appeared tired, more so than I was used to seeing, the lines on his face deeper. Time hadn’t been kind to him, his unhappiness turning into greed and an entirely different longing for power.

“I’m not going to argue, Christiana. It’s not worth it any longer. The deal is done. All I need is your signature on the contract. Dante is waiting. There will be a short engagement followed by what I’m assured will be a beautiful wedding and reception. You won’t fight me on this. Do you understand?”

“I’m not marrying a pig. There’s nothing you can do to force me into it.”

“Are you so certain about that?”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

The smug look on his face disgusted me. “You have nothing. I burned everything you own. You are no longer enrolled at the university, and you don’t have a single cent to your name. I will disown you if necessary.”

“I couldn’t care less.” I backed away, folding my arms. “I’m leaving.”

My father’s goon stepped in front of the door, giving me a hard look.

“I’ve tried to be patient with you, Christiana. I’d done everything in my power to allow you to live a life after you nearly destroyed mine. I even forgave you for sinning against God.”

Huffing, I burst into laughter. “You’re trying to make me feel bad after what you’ve done in your life? You’re a sick man.”

“Maybe so, but like father, like daughter.”

“Oh, my God. I’m nothing like you. You disgust me. I will not marry this person. As I said, you can do nothing to me that matters. I’ll be poor. I’ll live on the street, but eventually I’ll find a way to make my own life and it will be happy.”

I tried to walk away from him, but he snapped his hand around my arm, jerking me to a dead stop. Then he took a deep breath. “You leave me no other choice.”

“Meaning what?” I struggled to get out of his hold, but it was no use.

He yanked something from his pocket, handing an envelope to me. Then he let me go, walking toward the window. I sensed he was waiting for me to discover what was inside.

Exhaling, I threw him a look before unfolding the flap, pulling the single photograph from the interior. It took several seconds for reality and understanding to sink in, yet there was no mistaking what I was looking at. Oh, God. I pulled the picture against me, unable to stop shaking. Then I crumbled against the wall, taking gasping breaths. “What have you done?”

No. No. No.

Every horror I’d ever lived, the screams that I’d shouted out with no one to care about me, burst through the surface. Stars floated in front of my eyes, the horror of learning the truth something that would never leave me.

“Nothing else as of yet, but if you don’t agree to marry Dante, then I will finish what I should have done years ago. And I do mean permanently. Do you want that on your conscience? Do you want to make that final decision?”

I gasped for air, fighting to understand what was happening and what I could believe as the truth. Nothing made any sense. Years of lies. Years! Why did my father hate me so much? Why?

“How could you do this?”

He took his time before answering. “Because you’re a bad seed just like your mother was. I tried to overlook who you are, but you’ve proven time and time again that you were just like her. What a shame her life had to end. I’d hoped for better luck with you. I can tell I was a fool.”

Oh. My. God. The man was a monster, a murderer.

“You killed her. You killed my mother.”

He turned slightly, enough for me to see the smirk on his face. I flew toward him, pummeling my fists against his back, able to knock him hard in the jaw twice before his goon grabbed my arms, yanking me away.

My father turned around, rubbing his jaw. Then he ripped the item from my hand, laughing as he studied my face. The man was pure evil.

I was sick inside, no longer able to process what was happening, shaking so badly that all I could think about was dying. “You killed her.”

“She left me no other choice, Christiana. I discovered she’d been working with the Feds. Can you believe that?”

Every word he said was insane, but I knew what he could do if I didn’t sign the contract and marry a man I didn’t know and one I had no doubt I would hate. A single tear fell but I knew that’s what he wanted. He needed me weak, so much so that I wouldn’t dare try to defy him.

“So. Now that we understand each other, I hope that you will no longer remain difficult. Can I count on your to act like a lady so we can move forward with the business at hand?”

I had no idea what to say to him. “Whatever you say, Daddy dearest.”

He gritted his teeth, obviously tamping back his anger. Then he nodded toward his soldier, who walked closer. “Given I know how you are and that I won’t be able to keep an eye on you twenty-four hours a day, I’ve come up with an alternative. To that end, it will also allow you some sense of freedom, which is a privilege and one you don’t deserve but one I want to provide.”

“What does that mean?” I glanced at Goon Boy, trying to decipher when he had in his hand. My ears were ringing, the nausea in my stomach increasing. None of this was real. It couldn’t be. It just... couldn’t be.

“Sit down on the bed, Christiana. Now.” My father’s insistent voice sent another wave of terror through me.

I didn’t fight him, easing onto the edge of the bed, my heart racing to the point my chest was aching. Oh. God. How had I been so stupid. My father had had my mother killed. Why? Why? When Goon Boy crouched down, I realized what he had in his hands.

An ankle monitoring system. Was he kidding me? I was sick inside, so much so I almost threw up and likely would have if I’d had anything to eat in the last twenty-four hours. “You can’t be serious.”

“Take off your boot or shoes will be a privilege you’ll need to earn.”

Oh, my God. I hated myself that I was shaking like a leaf, trying to blink away sudden tears. I’d been fooled once again, stupid enough to believe I had a life and would be able to make choices. Had it taken him this long to find someone who’d agree to marry me? Disgust tore through me but at least if I could leave the house, maybe I could figure out how to get some help.

Feeling empty, I bent down, removing my boot, tugging up the leg of my jeans. I couldn’t watch as the contraption was put into position, the bastard enjoying his duty a little too much. I resisted kicking him in the face, which was difficult.

“Is that too tight?” the goon asked.

“No. It’s fine.” I had to shut down everything. My emotions. My thoughts. My hatred. I needed time to figure out what I could do. If anything. I also needed to find out if what he’d told me was the truth. I couldn’t just believe him. The man was a consummate liar.

The soldier nodded then stood, immediately backing away.

I took another deep breath, still struggling to breathe normally as I repositioned my jeans and yanked on my boot. It barely fit with the thick thing shoved around my ankle. I’d need to rethink the clothing I wore over the next few days.

God. Was I buying into this? I refused to marry someone I didn’t know. It was barbaric at best. But I had to. I couldn’t keep from it. If I did... No. No. No! Was the wretched story even possible? I tried to remember every detail of that horrific day, but there was no way to think clearly. None.

“Excellent. Maybe this won’t be as difficult as either one of us anticipated. Come. It’s time to meet your fiancé.”

I glared at my father yet made a promise to myself that I’d take control of the situation, acting compliant so I’d keep the small set of privileges. Then I folded my arms and trailed behind him, doing everything I could to calm my breathing.

When I was on the first floor, my father stepped aside, pointing toward the hallway leading to the living room. The meeting would be a civilized affair. How perfect. I held my head high as I headed into the space, stopping once I was inside. I refused to show any emotions, but I did wonder how much my intended fiancé knew about my past.

Dante Bianchi was tall with dark hair. He was standing staring out the picture window with his back to me and for a few seconds, I was hopeful that karma had been kind to me. Bianchi. Where had I heard the name? Wait. Francesco. Wasn’t that the name he’d asked me about?

Thoughts of the best night of my life rushed into my mind, something I’d tried very hard not to allow. It was crazy to think that after spending only hours embroiled in passion that I could miss someone I didn’t really know.

But it was the truth.

I'd tried to forget about Francesco, especially since the end of our beautiful night had reminded me I lived an alternative life than one built on fairytales. Now I could never forget. Never. I still couldn't think straight. It was entirely possible my father was lying. He did that so well, but I had to find out. How? There had to be a way.

If only I could track down Francesco. This was all so crazy. The man wouldn't want to see me again and he certainly wouldn't accept being saddled with the bullshit of my life. I had to do this alone.

However, to me the fantasy had been real, everything we'd shared incredible. But I'd suffered more than I'd originally thought, something that would haunt me for the rest of my life. Still, I refused to regret the decision I'd made. Even now.

What annoyed me was that I'd managed to fool myself into thinking my father wouldn't attempt to find another purchaser. I'd never believed myself that naïve, but I certainly had placed blinders on.

As soon as my mystery fiancé turned around, I realized I wasn't destined to find the man of my dreams again. While Dante wasn't bad looking in comparison to the joker my father had wanted me to marry years before, I had a sense of just how brutal he was given his misshapen nose.

He gave me a hard onceover, obviously amused at what I was wearing. Then he looked away in disgust.

"I've heard a lot about you, Christiana. I can tell you live up to the expectation of being... difficult."

The man's accent was heavily Italian, which matched his olive skin and dark eyes as they penetrated mine. My father pushed me forward, immediately heading to the desk on the other side of the room.

"Since you don't know a thing about me, I suggest you keep your opinions to yourself." As soon as I issued the statement, my father jerked me closer to Dante, hissing in my ear.

"Don't make a fool out of me."

There were so many nasty things I wanted to say to my father, but I knew I'd only regret them one way or another.

“Come, Christiana. Dante. We'll finish signing the contract then have a toast to the upcoming nuptials.”

The glee in my father's voice was far too repulsive, but I was almost eager to glance at the contract so I knew how much I was worth. I took long strides toward my father, snatching the document from his hand.

I read very quickly, turning the pages until I found what I was looking for. Five million. That certainly wasn't a small sum of money. The disgust only grew. I lifted my head, gazing from my father to the man I was supposed to marry.

Dante walked closer, pulling a pen from his pocket. “I assure you, princess, that there isn't a hidden agenda. You will become my wife and bear my children. I will do everything in my power to make your life tolerable, even pleasant. I have a wonderful home with many niceties and they'll all be yours. We'll be partners in every aspect.”

Did the bastard really think I was that stupid? Sighing, I snatched the pen from his hand. “You both do realize that this won't stand up in court. Don't you?”

My father's reaction was swift, similar to something I'd experienced three years before almost to the date. Only this time, he smashed his fist against my jaw instead of his open hand. The pain was blinding, knocking me to the floor. I was stunned, the taste of blood swimming in my mouth. Shock tore through me more than anything else.

The man was desperate.

“I am sorry for her bad behavior. She is normally more obedient than this.”

Dante laughed. “I assure you, Don Lorenzo, that she'll be broken within days. I don't allow such atrocious behavior inside my home. Get up, Christiana.”

He didn't offer his hand or act as if he was bothered that my father had slugged me. My legs were shaking as I tried to stand, fighting another round of tears. Then I was thankful

anger had taken over. When he offered the pen again, I snatched it with force, offering a sweet smile while I planned his death.

It would happen one day and I'd enjoy it.

"Allow us to have a few moments, Don Lorenzo," Dante said, the expression on his face one I couldn't read.

"Of course. I'll be outside." My father left without so much as glancing in my direction, the hard slam of the office door making me cringe.

Dante studied me for a few seconds before glancing around the room. Then he took purposeful steps toward me, stopping only a few inches away. I refused to back down. "What do you think is going to happen here?"

"What do I think or what do I know?"

His smirk was one of knowing. I held my breath. When he gripped my jaw with force, I gasped as pain rushed through my face and down my neck. "You will obey me, you little bitch. I don't care that you're Daddy's precious princess. You're nothing but a whore in my eyes. You're lucky that I'm willing to marry you. I assure you that if you refuse to obey, I'll make certain you're kept in line. You'll feel the bruises even if I'm very careful they don't show. Do you understand?"

Tears tried to form but I refused to allow them, hating the man more than anything. "I can't wait," I managed.

He squeezed, laughing as he shoved his thumb inside my mouth. I kept a glare in my eyes as I bit down on his fat digit.

Hissing, he yanked his hand away, immediately backhanding me.

I was tossed halfway across the room, tumbling over the couch, barely avoiding hitting my head on the coffee table. Stars floated in front of my eyes, the entire moment catching me off guard, so much so I almost burst into laughter because of my high level of anxiety. I had to get away. I just had to find some way of escaping.

“Fucking bitch!” Dante bellowed. “You will learn one way or another. And once you have my child, my heir, I will toss you aside as the used garbage you are.” He took long strides toward the desk. “Get up.”

When I didn’t move fast enough, he shook his fist at me.

“Get the fuck up and sign this contract, or so help me God I’ll bruise every inch of your body, only leaving your face visible for the fucking wedding. Do you hear me?”

A cold shiver trickled down my spine, but I managed to get to my feet, trying everything in my power to keep from shaking. As I walked toward the desk, I continued to glare at him. Dante was pure evil. There was no doubt about that.

The door opened and my father returned, shaking his head in the same method of disgust as he’d done before.

I scratched my name, tossing the pen on the desk then backing away. “My. My. I can’t wait to meet my new family.”

The two men looked at each other and I watched as Dante added his signature. After returning his pen to his jacket, he pulled out an envelope, handing it to my father. “As negotiated. I hope she’s worth every penny because she’s already a problem.”

“I assure you she is, but I’ll have a talk with her. She won’t give you any more trouble, Dante. That I promise you.”

The reality of what I was facing hit me hard, but I refused to succumb to the sadness and terror.

I would exact revenge one day on both men.

Somehow. Some way.

CHAPTER 14



*C*hristiana

Memories.

Fantasies.

Desires.

They were all mixed together in a raging swirl of need, allowing me to shift away from the anger and brutality of what I was facing if only for a few minutes. I sat in my room, staring out the window on a gorgeous late afternoon, uncertain about what my future held.

Other than knowing if I didn't find a way to break free of the chains, I would die. It might not be now, but eventually that would happen.

As I pulled my feet under me, I eased my hand to my ankle, hissing as my fingertips tapped the hard piece of steel and plastic surrounding my leg. How could any father do this to their daughter?

Then again, I'd learned what my father was made of years before, now uncertain why it had seemed my mother loved him in the first place. There had to be some good inside the man that I wasn't aware of.

My thoughts drifted to what my father had shown me, the picture something that could easily be doctored. But my gut told me it was real. What happened? Why hadn't I been told?

And why did my mother not share with me that she was talking with the Feds? Was that nothing but a lie as well?

My heart ached, more so than it had in a long time. Thank God my father hadn't been able to find Francesco, and he had tried. I'd overheard phone calls, his goons looking for him. I'd lied well enough to keep him from figuring a damn thing about him. My lover.

The man of my dreams.

Oh, God. What was I going to do?

I leaned back against the comfortable chair, allowing my thoughts to drift to the only real pleasurable moment I'd experienced. Suddenly, the images were extremely vivid, more so than they'd been in a long time. I could almost feel his presence. Maybe Francesco was somewhere in the city. Maybe one day I'd see him again.

Right. As if you're going to run into him on the street.

I bit back a laugh. What would happen if I did? I'd honestly look him in the eye, acting as if I didn't know who he was. Or maybe I'd slap him for letting me go.

Yeah, you'll do that. Ha ha.

My inner voice always trapped me in my lies.

The memory continued to form and shift in my mind, and I allowed myself to go there, to a place of peace and happiness. Why not? What could it hurt? As his naked body materialized in my mind, I bit back a salacious moan.

"Come here, baby. Suck my cock," Francesco growled as he beckoned me with a single finger. He remained on a leather chair, completely naked with a drink in one hand, his right leg stretched out as he lounged in the chair. There was no mistaking the look on his face or the raging desire flashing through his eyes.

I gave him a coy look, toying with my hair as I twisted back and forth, remaining several feet away. When I licked my lips

in an exaggerated manner, the heavy breath he issued sent goosebumps up and down every inch of my body.

“If you don’t come here right now, I will spank that sweet ass of yours once again, this time using my belt.”

Laughing, I dropped to my knees, but I had no intentions of obeying him immediately. Teasing him was far too much fun. I gave him a seductive look then rolled onto my hands and knees, stretching my back like a kitty cat would do, even purring to give him an idea of how hungry I was.

He chuckled in a dark and dangerous way, before taking a swig of his drink. His eyes never left me, never blinked as I tossed my head, teasing him relentlessly. “Goddamn it, woman. What you do to me.”

I continued swinging my hair as I crawled closer, clawing the floor on purpose. He rolled his palm down his chest to his cock, wrapping his hand around the base. With a heated look continuing to build on his face, he stroked up and down, twisting his hand to create friction. My mouth watered from the need to slide my tongue around his cockhead before taking every inch.

His subtle yet powerful laugh continued, his eyes now hooded as he continued staring at me. “You are one bad girl, my little dove. Aren’t you?”

“Yes, sir,” I cooed and crawled closer, still keeping my distance in my desire to torment him. I knew I’d pay the price of having my bottom blistered all over again, but it was worth taking control if only for a few minutes. His actions became rougher every few seconds, the way he was pumping his cock enticing me to the point my pussy was throbbing.

When I was only a couple of feet away, I rose up onto my knees only, brushing my fingertips down both sides of my neck to my breasts, gently cupping them as I rolled the tip of my tongue around my lips.

He sat up, his chest rising and falling as his expression turned carnal. I wanted this moment to last, to bask in the sweetness of just being together. When he finally beckoned me with his

index finger for a second time, I knew disobeying him wouldn't be in my best interest.

Still, I took a few seconds to slide my hand between my legs, flicking my finger back and forth across my already sensitive clit.

There was something so enticing about his labored breathing, as if it was a telling statement of how rough he was going to be. The man was obsessed, his needs darker than I'd originally imagined and I enjoyed satisfying every single desire over and over again.

"Come to me or there will be hell to pay."

God, the rumble of his deep baritone set off a series of dancing vibrations, my heart racing from the mere thought of the powerful man driving his cock deep inside. I wanted to feel alive, electrified as only he could do. I needed to feel the weight of his body, the heat of the connection, and the longing that erupted from every muscle and cell in his body.

And I needed my skin seared from his touch.

I threw my head back and moaned the second I drove three fingers past my swollen folds into my aching pussy. He'd already fucked me twice, the ache in my muscles like a glorious badge of honor.

"You're driving me insane, little bird. Come now. Now!" His words were little more than an intense growl, his entire body shaking from an obvious rush of adrenaline.

The moment I crawled between his legs, he fisted my hair, laughing softly, maniacally as if he was nothing but pure evil.

Then he stroked my hair, running his large hand under my chin, lifting my head with a single finger. "You are the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. Suck my cock, baby. Suck my big, fat cock."

He didn't need to ask me twice, my desire as ever present as his. I opened my mouth, forming a perfect O with my lips, lightly brushing my hands up the inside of his calves to his thighs. He was so muscular, every inch of him perfectly chiseled. And his scent was of burning timber and

sandalwood, a dash of spices and citrus keeping his fragrance fresh. Inhaling, I held my breath for a few seconds before blowing across his cockhead. I was almost instantly rewarded with drops of pre-cum, which I hungrily dragged my tongue through, every sound I made that of a famished animal.

Francesco thumped back in the chair, raking one hand through his hair as he fisted mine with the other. Just the expression on his face was enough to keep me fully aroused, my mind spinning with all the filthy things he'd done and would do to me. When I engulfed the tip, he issued a series of strangled moans, his tense muscles starting to shake.

I sucked on his cockhead, dragging my tongue around in lazy circles, keeping my eyes on his face. It seemed strange for a girl with zero experience that I knew exactly what to do. Well, that was only partially true. This was the second time I'd sucked his cock; for the first I'd needed his advice. Not any longer.

"You have one hot mouth, baby girl. It would seem I taught you well. You can be my good little girl." His praise was something I hadn't known I needed until he'd complimented me the first time. Tears had formed in my eyes, which was ridiculous, but his words were powerful.

Now I wanted nothing more than to please him, to drive him to the brink of madness.

I rolled the tip of a single finger down the underside of his cock, swirling it around one testicle then the other before wrapping my hand around the base as he'd done before. The way his shaft throbbed in my hand was just as enticing as everything else about the man. The feeling of being lost in a beautiful haze kept my pulse ticking high.

"That's it. Take every inch. Slowly, baby girl. But I plan on gagging that hot mouth of yours. You belong to me. Now. Forever. Fuck. Yes, forever."

While lust was doing the talking, the powerful aphrodisiac was real. The guttural sound I made just before engulfing the tip, lowering my head by several inches almost made me laugh.

Who was this girl who enjoyed sucking a man's cock this much?

Someone I didn't know but already liked.

As I pumped the base, I slathered his cock with my tongue, trying to relax my throat as I filled my mouth with his huge girth. He was so large, more so than any fantasy I'd created in my mind, the taste of him sweet yet tangy. Utter perfection like everything else.

He pressed his hand on my head, taking deep yet scattered breaths. "I'm going to impale your mouth, sweet girl. Get ready." He didn't give me much time, driving his cock inside until the tip hit the back of my throat. "Fuck. Goddamn, so hot."

I adored his exclamations, the way he roared his pleasure when he released. He slowly lowered his head, a sly grin crossing his face. Then he thrust long and hard several times, backing off only when he heard my gagging.

"Breathe through your nose, baby dove. Relax."

I followed his instructions, still swirling my tongue. Still hungering for more. I rose onto my knees again, rubbing the fingers of one hand across his chest, marveling in the way the touch sent white-hot flashes down the length of them.

He kept control, pumping my head several times, his dark mutters adding fuel to the continuous flames.

My mouth and throat ached but he gave me no relief, plunging with crazed abandon. Then he pulled out completely and I whimpered from shock as well as need.

"As much as I want to spew my cum down your throat, to cover your body with long strings, I need to come inside of you." There was no doubt he was in full control of me, slipping his arms under mine, yanking me up until I was forced to straddle his legs.

Laughing, I planted my hands on his shoulders, barely able to concentrate, breathe, or even focus from the way he was tempting me. I raked my nails down his chest, biting my lower lip to keep from crying as I positioned the tip of his cock into

my slickened folds. The scent of our desire floated between us like a beacon of sin. We were crazed animals in heat, mating over and over again.

The thought was deliciously filthy, adding to the fact I was embroiled in a carnal sin. What did I care? The girl I'd once been was long gone, tossed aside. I preferred the new, much wilder woman.

I hovered above him for a few seconds, studying the delicious curve of his jaw, his high cheekbones and the aristocratic wide forehead. Then I rolled my finger from one side of his chin to the other, marveling in the way the two-day stubble added to his sensuality.

"You're very sexy," I purred.

"You think so? Never been called that." His grin was followed by a twinkle of his eyes.

"You're not a good liar. You're a marvelous catch. I'm certain you have women falling all over you."

He burst into laughter. "Honestly, I wouldn't care if they did. I'm all about business. I don't have time to play."

"Hmmm... What is so important to keep you from enjoying your life?"

The way he thought about my question was interesting. I wanted to learn everything there was to discover about the man. "Building what my father started before his... death."

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "The loss of a beloved parent at an early age shapes you."

"Yes, my little dove, which is why capitalizing on his regime is so important for me to do."

Why did I have the feeling there was a tragedy around the event? And why did I know for certain that his work would always take precedence over anyone he dared to care about? "And I'm certain you will."

He lifted his head, narrowing his eyes as he brushed the backs of his fingers down the length of my arm, digging his nails into my hip. "No more talking. It's time I fuck you all over again."

As he pulled me down savagely, my muscles expanding, I threw my head back and screamed.

God. The memory was so sweet. I kept my eyes closed, every breath shallow. Then I said a silent prayer that maybe, just maybe I'd see him again.

But karma wasn't a good mistress, at least not for a sinful girl like me.

* * *

A good Catholic girl.

That's what I'd been brought up to be, first by my mother then my father taking over after her death. I'd often wondered as a child why he hadn't burst into flames when he entered the church where I'd been baptized. The blasphemy of his appearance was something that remained in the back of my mind. After I'd become a teenager, he'd stopped going, leaving me to decide whether I wanted to or not.

I'd done so alone until I was eighteen. After the events on that birthday, I hadn't returned, certain my God had forsaken me for the horrible sin I'd committed. Now I was certain of it. As another thought about the photograph slithered into my mind, I hated myself for my past decisions. And as I stood in front of the double doors of the beautiful, ornate church, a lump formed in my throat.

Maybe my silly prayer had allowed me to realize I needed something bigger than me. Maybe God could answer my prayers.

I wasn't certain I'd come to this destination once Dante had left and I'd been allowed to roam the streets: the Catholic church. Maybe because I had no money, no credits cards or phone. That left me with few options. At least I could try to absolve my sins, professing to all the horrible things I'd done over the last few years.

Confession.

The priest wouldn't have any idea what to expect. He also wouldn't know anything about me or feel obligated to help a lost soul given I had none. As soon as I walked inside, I felt a sense of comfort, which was something I desperately needed. The church was about the same size as the one I used to attend, but the interior was much more elaborate, including red carpeting between the pews. I stood in the back for a few seconds, gazing at the various stained glass works of art, trying to calm my nerves.

For the first time in as long as I could remember, I felt small and unwanted, nothing more than a possession. As my thoughts drifted to the man named Francesco, I knew a portion of my confession would be about him. Maybe that would ease my conscience to some degree.

As I headed to the confessional, I wasn't certain I could speak coherently, the tears suddenly rushing to the forefront. I was so sick inside, trying desperately to hold them back but by the time I opened the small door, they were readily rolling down both cheeks.

I lowered my head, wringing my hands as I waited. When I finally heard footsteps, I gasped for air, terrified that I wouldn't be able to speak at all. The creaking sound as the priest eased onto his seat brought a gasp from my chest.

"Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. It's been three years since my last confession." I blurted out the words before they escaped me. "These are my sins."

I hesitated and the fact the priest remained quiet was almost as terrible as what I was about to say. The agony of what was lingering in my mind remained so I littered the first few minutes with benign atrocities.

Lying.

Indulging in alcohol.

Partying too late.

Then the first hateful words slipped from my mouth easily.

“I hate my father. He is a monster, a bloodsucking monster who sold my soul. He killed my mother. No, he was too chicken to do it himself. He had one of his men do it at my birthday party when I was only fifteen. Just like he insisted I was going to marry a man for my eighteenth birthday, but I fooled him. I did something so horrible that I know I’ll end up in purgatory. But you know what? That’s okay.” I took a deep breath, holding it as the priest shifted in his seat, the sound of wood creaking penetrating the small space.

“I’m sorry, child. What did you say?” the priest asked, the glitch in his voice creating another wave of anxiety thick enough it altered my voice when I spoke.

“I’m sorry, Father. I know I’m not making any sense.”

“Is what you said true?”

“Yes. All of it. I know it sounds crazy, but I wouldn’t lie about something like that,” I said in quiet reverence.

“Have you gone to the authorities?” he asked.

“About my mother? They couldn’t help me even if I had. My father has them under his thumb in the Windy City. And it’s been several years. At least she’s no longer suffering.”

His voice was even more terse when he spoke again. “What about now?”

“Now, I’m being forced to marry a man I don’t know when I’m in love with another. It’s complicated, my father entering into a contract for money. Quite a bit of money. Five million dollars. I was just told about this. No, not told but commanded to enter into this unholy union, forced to sign my name on the contract. While I know it won’t hold up in court, I fear I’ll be dead before I can seek help.” I’d already said too much but I knew the priest was bound by his vows, not allowed to break the sacred oath. I wouldn’t dare mention the rest. I was terrified somehow my father would find out.

“And the man you’re in love with?”

“Someone I didn’t really know, but he was so incredible, someone I felt comfortable and happy around. He was special, even though I sensed he was dangerous. Forgive me, Father,

but he was the one I gave my virginity to. He was my hero and I wanted to spend the rest of my life with him. But he had a life and I didn't fit in. We both knew it. I understand his decision, but that didn't mean it didn't hurt. I know. I'm rambling. I do that when I'm nervous." Why did it seem so easy to confess all the emotions I'd tried so hard to bottle up?

Because this man was a stranger behind a dark screened panel, someone who wasn't allowed by his faith to chastise me or run to my father. This was the first time I'd felt comfortable being around anyone since...

Since the night with Francesco.

"Go on, child."

"The bastard I'll be forced to marry will keep me locked away. I'm certain of it. He'll beat me just like my father." I might as well jump into the quicksand with two feet.

There was another slight glitch in his voice or maybe a cough. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-one."

"Who is requiring you to marry this man? Your father?"

"Yes, the horrible son of a bitch. I'm sorry, Father. I'm just angry. I used to think my papa loved me. He protected me after my mother's murder, but he needs me to pay off his debt. Or infuse capital into his business. It doesn't matter, does it? Should I be required to marry something I don't love who will do nothing but hurt me?"

His exhale almost made me smile. That had to be a sin in itself. I leaned my head against the thin wood of the vestibule, fighting to keep from laughing hysterically.

"Child. I am very sorry that you have this kind of relationship with your flesh and blood. Is there anyone else in your family who can help you?"

"No, sir. I have no one. I also don't know anyone in town so there is no one to turn to." A sob rose from my throat, the horrible realization that I had no one to turn to finally settling in. There was nothing I could do. Nothing. "I'm sorry, Father.

I know it's a sin to love another man, but he was my first and my only. I love him but I'll never find him. It was so long ago. We did things, passionate things. He made me feel alive after the first time my father tried to marry me off the day I turned eighteen. My birthday. Can you believe that?"

I was openly crying now, getting close to becoming hysterical. I had to find a way to control myself.

He sighed and I sensed he'd leaned forward. "I can offer you sanctuary for the night until we can get you a suitable shelter. I work with one that I believe can help you. Unfortunately, that is all I am allowed to do."

"Thank you, Father," I said, still choking on the depth of my sadness. "But even you can't help me. I'm wearing an ankle bracelet like I'm a criminal while my father and the horrible mafia man I'm supposed to marry go free. I don't know why I'm here. I just don't know. But know I am not repenting my mortal sin of engaging in sexual activities with a man I wasn't married to. He was my everything. He's here somewhere in this city. I will find him. I think he's the only one who can help."

The priest's sigh was as comforting as his voice was deep and there was no sound of chastisement, only concern.

"I will not ask you for atonement, child. You're going through enough. I will suggest that you seek help from the local authorities."

"I'm sorry, Father. Apparently, you don't understand that the police and every other form of law enforcement are owned by the syndicate in New York, Chicago, and every major city. That's the way it works. I know it well. Sadly, better than most." I allowed the tears to fall for a few additional minutes before sucking in my breath, refusing to allow my father to get away with breaking me down. That was the least I could do for myself.

"May God, who has enlightened every heart, help you to know your sins and trust in his mercy."

“Amen. Thank you for listening. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry I’m not a good Catholic girl.” Before I had a chance to say anything else that could possibly get him into trouble or worse, I fled the box, rushing toward the doors.

“Wait. Please allow me to help you. I will find a way.” The priest was close behind, tugging on my arm.

I turned sharply and the look of horror on his handsome face was as terrifying as the experience. My lip was swollen, the taste of blood remaining. I backed away, offering a smile before fleeing.

As I told the kind man, there was no one who could help me.

No one.

CHAPTER 15



*F*rancesco

“What’s your poison tonight, Father?” I asked, grinning at my best friend as soon as he entered my basement. I’d renovated the entire five thousand square foot basement of my estate into what most people would call a man cave. The highly secure location wasn’t readily found unless you knew what you were looking for or had knowledge of the building plans.

Almost four thousand square feet had been transformed into an entertainment area complete with a full-size mahogany bar, a regulation size pool table, foosball, three pinball machines, several televisions, a media room, and of course the best music system on the market.

The other one thousand square feet held a weapons room and a vault that also wasn’t on any plans, only I didn’t keep valuables inside. It had been prepped in case the house was compromised, the area able to withstand a raging fire, firearms, and every other disaster.

Our usual two-week gathering was all about decompressing and spending time with my buddy drinking and playing pool. It gave me time to shove aside the drudgery of work, the long hours and constantly being on edge taking a toll. We both needed it.

Dominick Saltori was without a doubt the coolest priest in all of New York. If it hadn’t been for his friendship and his determination to keep me from flying off the rails after Joey’s

death, I would have taken out half of New York City. I was certain of it. He'd also helped me embrace Max's arrival long before he ever considered becoming a man of God.

Some might think our friendship was odd, but we'd grown up together, including attending boarding school. We'd been bad-asses then, getting into trouble often while ruling every school with the same kind of brutal tactics I did with my soldiers today.

While he'd found God sometime after turning eighteen, I'd shifted toward my obvious vocation of criminal activities with my father's encouragement. However, Dominick didn't judge my behavior and I didn't try to sway him back into my life. That made us extremely compatible.

"Scotch. Neat." His growl was entirely different than I typically heard. "Long damn day."

"Wow. A curse word."

"Don't taunt me. I've fully admitted I'm still a sinner." He half laughed but his scowl remained.

I tipped my head toward him, watching as he ripped off his jacket, tossing it aside. I was easily able to tell by the haunted expression he wore that he was troubled deeply about something. That was rare for him or at least had been given the last few years. However, while his current parish was in a decent part of town, that didn't mean he'd started out there. He'd serviced some of the worst humanity had to offer, trying to provide guidance while hoping they atoned for their sins.

He took his oath seriously, so I'd never learned names and had stopped asking. Still, for him to have an outlet the way he provided me one made our relationship stronger. After a few years, nothing seemed to bother him any longer.

Until now.

"That bad, huh? I thought priests always found joy in their work." I knew better of course. He'd given last rites to men who were going to both heaven and hell, comforting wives and children of loved ones dying of illness and disease as well as mortal sin. I'd seen his heart get broken more than once,

requiring my comfort and words of wisdom, even though they were usually accompanied with bottles of liquor.

Somehow, I had a feeling tonight would be no different. I moved behind the bar, grabbing another glass. After refilling mine, and making his, I slid the dense tumbler across the bar.

He took a full two minutes unbuttoning his long sleeves, rolling them past his elbows. “Yeah, that bad.” When he pounded back the entire drink, I snorted, grabbing the bottle and refilling. “Bad enough I’m questioning my faith. Can you believe it? After all these years and a single confession and I feel clueless. And don’t you dare chastise me, brother.” He pointed his finger, trying to offer amusement in his eyes.

But I knew differently.

“You want to talk about it?” I asked with as much reverence as a man like me could offer. What advice would matter to someone of such virtue?

“You know I can’t.” Dominick grabbed his glass, moving toward the pool table. I hadn’t seen him look so haggard in years. “It’s just... something I need to think through. I prayed last night for guidance too. There was none.”

I moved toward the cue sticks, selecting one for him and tossing it in his direction. He caught it with one hand, eyeing me carefully.

“I know how you are, Dom. You need to get whatever you’re struggling with off your chest. Just tell me the basics, my friend.” When he clenched his jaw, I decided to guess. “Okay. Let me see if I can figure it out, which means you’re not breaking a single oath of yours.”

“Of God. They aren’t my rules.”

“And you know your God won’t want your spirit crushed either. So let me think. Is this about some rich guy’s kid who stole his father’s car then wrecked it? Or maybe a prom queen who gave up her virginity?” I laughed but I sensed he was truly struggling.

“Nothing so easy in this poor girl’s life. There are some truly evil men in this world.”

Snorting, I narrowed my eyes. “Are you forgetting who you’re talking to?” He’d given me absolution more times than I could count, although I rarely mentioned my line of work any more than he did his.

“You’re a dangerous man, Fran, but you’d set the world on fire to protect members of your family.”

I burst into laughter. “Now you’re telling me that’s a positive virtue?”

He laughed and rolled his eyes. “You know what I mean.”

“Maybe my only saving grace.” Perhaps one that would lead to my untimely death as well. By the standards of most men who held similar positions, the increasing love of my family was my greatest weakness. “You have me curious. What could be any worse than my daily activities?” I hadn’t seen him scowl as much as he had tonight.

“Try an adult woman who is being forced into an arranged marriage, someone beating her to ensure she accepts the contract with a person she doesn’t even know. Try knowing that her father killed her mother, something she learned only recently. And I know she’s harboring a terrible secret. I could feel it in my bones. I wanted to console her, contacting the police for her but what good would that have done?”

“Maybe nothing.” The story was horrific.

“I know. This poor girl was so angry but also horrified that her own father would do that to her, especially after her mother had been murdered. I felt her need for retaliation as well as her strong resolve. She needed guidance and I had nothing that would matter in the end.” His words were full of anger, something else that surprised me.

“Ouch. That’s a hell of a lot of baggage.”

“Tell me about it.”

I narrowed my eyes, watching as he continued to fight with his emotions. “Dom. You came from a family where arranged marriages were a generational tradition. You know it continues to exist in my world and others from the old countries. That’s a way of life, alliances strengthening families.” Although

Maxwell had laughed at the thought after one of his men suggested we form an alliance based on my eligibility status, marrying the daughter of the Irish clan.

Dom's mother and father's relationship had been arranged, although from what he'd told me they truly seemed to love each other. It was possible but rare.

"Yeah, I know, but I've never met anyone else outside of my mother who was forced to face it. Besides, to see her gorgeous face swollen and bloody brought out the old Dom in me, the one who wanted to hunt her father and this fiancé down and kill both of them."

I knew the sentiment better than he likely remembered. I took a swig of my drink, curious what I could say to him that would matter. "Did you offer her assistance?" Dominick had also introduced a woman's shelter, church members funding the safe residence, allowing women with children a place to stay until they got on their feet. Hell, I'd donated to the cause more than once.

"Yeah, I did, against my better judgment too. She declined; fearful I would get hurt. Can you believe that? And get this. She told me she was wearing an ankle bracelet."

When I didn't get it right away, he laughed. "Are you talking about a monitoring system worn by convicted criminals under house arrest?"

"That's exactly what I'm talking about. Can you fucking believe it?"

"That will be five Hail Mary's, Father," I teased.

"Very funny. I thought we could be ourselves inside this incredible space." He grinned but it was short lived. "There's a hell of a lot more to the story. I'm certain of it. She seemed resigned and somewhat fragile, but I sensed the girl had a strong backbone. Still, it was as if out of the blue her entire world had been crushed. I think she ran into my church hoping for some kind of salvation that no one can provide."

"So she's a member of your church?"

“No. I’ve never seen her before. From what little else she said, I think she’s from Chicago.” He put his glass on one of the standing tables, racking up the balls slowly. “And don’t you dare think you’re going to profit from this.”

“Profit? Come on, my friend. That’s not me.”

We laughed again but he was right that I considered every misfortune a business opportunity.

Chicago. My hackles were instantly raised given what had recently occurred. “You’re certain of the location?”

“I think that’s what she said. Why?” He lifted a single eyebrow as he glanced in my direction.

“Let’s just say I was saved from needing your prayers a couple days ago, the people responsible supposedly obtaining ties with a syndicate out of Chicago. I don’t know that to be gospel but it’s the word on the street. And this is my confession. I killed four men, Father, and I’d do so again.”

“What?” He quickly realized what I was saying. “Whoa. The shooting at the restaurant. That was you?”

“In the flesh.” I swirled my drink, offering a grin. “A rival syndicate has reared their ugly head. I’m about to cut it off.”

“I’m sorry, buddy. I take it you know who’s responsible.”

“The Bianchis.”

The name caught him off guard and he lifted his eyebrows. “Jesus Christ. Not again. I’m sorry.”

“Not as sorry as I am. Max is nervous as well as furious, but he doesn’t want to start a war.”

“Especially since there is a tremendous push to bring down as many members of organized crime as possible.” He lifted his eyebrows. “It is an election year.”

“Yeah, I know.” Any time the mayor’s position came on the ballot, there was a hard push, the various ‘new’ candidates acting as if they had a snowball’s chance in hell at eradicating or even slowing down the various syndicates in operation. The majority of mafia families were incorporated with legitimate

offices and staff. Whether any of their businesses were legitimate or not, as most of ours were, they'd learned through trial and error how to launder money and always keep their worlds presentable. Still, the possible change in personnel always put the cops on edge.

“Sadly, I’m well aware but it appears the Bianchis are attempting to increase their footprint into fresh territories. And it would seem they don’t mind walking all over us in the process. I can’t allow that to happen.”

“The interstates and ports from New York to Chicago. They’ve certainly cornered some markets in Jersey.”

Dominick had been my sounding board long enough that his knowledge of my family’s business practices as well as that of other syndicates was strong. He could become the single greatest weapon against my family if he wasn’t so entirely virtuous. Arranged marriage. If the girl was from an important Chicago syndicate, that could bode well for the Bianchis’ future. “Exactly. Coincidence? I doubt it. Do you think that girl will make a return?”

He could easily tell I was salivating to talk to her. “Hold on. Forget I fucking said anything. I wouldn’t break my vows and allow you to talk to her even if I knew who she was, which I don’t. And I don’t think she’d want your kind of help either. I’ll guess she has had her fill of dealing with something similar.”

“I’m insulted.” I slapped my chest then laughed.

“Nice try, my friend. And no. You’re not getting anything else from me. The girl was very sad. It was obvious she was in love with someone else, a guy who took her virginity.”

Almost immediately I bristled. “What did you say?”

“I’m just repeating what she told me.”

I glared at him, my hackles raised. “Hold on. When?” When he didn’t answer right away, I took another step closer. “When did this happen, Dom?”

“Three years ago. Yeah, cause she told me she’s twenty-one.” He lifted his head. “Wait a minute. You don’t honestly think

it's Chrissy."

"Did you see her?" My heart was in my throat, my nerves on the very edge. "Did you?"

"Briefly when I tried to stop her. She was beautiful, large eyes and deep burnished red hair."

It felt as if a sledgehammer had been driven into my forehead. "Not my Chrissy."

"There is such a thing as hair color. Why am I telling you that? I'm not trying to get your hopes up."

"As I told you before, I won't get a second chance." I pounded back more of my drink, unable to come down from the precipice. If there was a slight chance the girl was Chrissy, I had to know. But how, given she'd likely never return to his church? Goddamn it.

"Damn, my friend. You are as hardheaded as they come."

"Right. And you're a hopeless romantic, my friend," I told him. "Another reason I was shocked you entered seminary school." Almost immediately his face clouded. "You never really told me the truth as to why."

He took a deep breath, and I could swear he aged right in front of my eyes.

"Do you remember the girl I fell in love with?" he asked seconds later.

"Which one?"

I had a sense he was ready to give me the finger, but his haughty look was the man's only reaction. "Danni."

"Ah, yes. The beautiful blonde. If I remember correctly, her parents refused to allow you see her again."

He nodded. "Yeah, well, they had a good reason."

We hadn't talked about women since he'd made his choice to become a priest right after college. I hadn't realized he'd been thinking about it since we were boys, his faith coming at a time when his father had been pushing him to become his second in command. To this day, not a single member of his

family had spoken to him since he set foot in seminary school. I could tell whatever he was keeping locked away in the dark recesses of his mind was one of the reasons he'd made the difficult decision to enter into a life of celibacy.

"Do you want to tell me about it?"

I'd known Dominick long enough to realize when pushing wasn't in my best interest.

"Was anyone hurt in the attack at the restaurant?" he asked, ignoring the sudden impulse to reminisce over the past.

"Two of my men lost their lives. Ralph was shot but he'll be okay, thank God."

As expected, he immediately made the sign of the cross, lowering his head and saying a silent prayer. He was probably the only person alive that reminded me I was Catholic, although given the nature of my family and my business, I certainly didn't believe in a higher being. Yet I found myself lowering my head, whispering amen when he was finished.

"May God protect their souls," he said quietly. We'd gotten into conversations over the years, debates on how he could still believe that someone like me could go to heaven. He could argue until he was blue in the face, reminding me that I was a good man. Perhaps he ignored what I did for a living.

He took another gulp of his drink then placed the glass on the table next to mine, ready to concentrate on the game. As he placed the cue in his fingers, leaning over, my thoughts drifted to the girl I'd spent an evening with years before. I'd all but managed to shove the passion from my mind until recently. Now I couldn't seem to drive images of her lovely face away.

Tonight, the reason was obvious, the fact she'd been slapped hard still pulling at my rage even today. The sound of his break echoed in my ears and I glanced at the table, studying the way two balls went into the pockets. The man was a shark even if he didn't want to admit it.

"What are we playing for tonight?" he asked as he grabbed the chalk, his grin devious in my mind.

"Dinner at Delmonico's."

“Wow, I can’t remember the last time I had a decent steak.”

“Well, if you got out more, you could fix that,” I told him.

“Four in the corner pocket,” he said, flashing me another grin before taking the shot. As expected, the ball rolled in without hesitation. Why did I have a feeling he’d been practicing, which was something he knew I didn’t have time to do. “You know my work is important to me.”

“Just like mine is to me.” I vaguely paid attention as he called out another move, the reality of what our regime was facing something I couldn’t ignore or push aside but for so long. I’d need to track down Dante’s biggest weakness. Tomorrow night, I would go hunting, scouring the streets, clubs, and even the casinos to try to determine a course of action.

He finally scratched, although I had a feeling he’d done so on purpose so the game wouldn’t be a landslide for him. Which I was used to. “What are you going to do? And please don’t provide any details. I’ll need to spend the rest of the night helping you atone.”

I scowled, shaking my head as he laughed. At least some of his tension was relieved where mine was increasing every minute. I had a very bad feeling the warning shot would soon turn into a bloodbath. I couldn’t allow that to happen. “Cut them off at the knees.”

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning,” I said as I took position behind the table, sizing up the balls. “I’m going to track Dante Bianchi’s whereabouts, finding out what makes him tick. From what I heard at Meghan’s party, Dante is a real piece of work and not in a good way.”

“Ah, stalking.” Dominick laughed.

“Whatever it takes, Dom. Maxwell was supposed to hold that meeting where my men died. They wanted to cut him down, hoping I couldn’t lead. That’s unacceptable in my world. Do you understand?”

“Need I remind you that you’re not God, nor are you allowed to become judge and jury, Francesco.”

They were the exact words Chrissy had accused me with so long ago.

“Says the honorable man of the cloth. Do you want to see my niece and nephew without their father? Do you want my sister to be forced to carry the burden of losing her husband at an early age? Trying to explain to her babies why their daddy isn’t around for birthdays and holidays?”

Dominick studied me intently then dropped his gaze. “There are times that you have me questioning my faith.”

“That’s not what I’m trying to do, Dom. I love my family. That’s not something that came easily or without working through a hell of a lot of rage. You know that better than anyone in my life.”

“I know, buddy. Trust me, I know.” He’d shared more than a bottle of booze while I’d spouted off about all the ways I’d wanted to put a bullet in Maxwell’s brain, Viper a close second. I’d been an angry kid, so much so I was shocked I’d made it to twenty-one alive without landing my ass in prison. Dom had been part of the reason.

“Maxwell rubbing off on you had made a powerful change in your life. Even if I like to think I had a part in that too.”

I chuckled and thought about his advice. “You’re right about Max. One of the lessons he taught me was that every man has a weakness, something that they try to hide in the deepest part of their souls. However, once exposed, it will drag them to their knees. That lessens that need for violence. Usually anyway. Nine in the corner.” With my shot successful, I shifted my heated gaze in his direction.

“And my weakness?” he asked, whistling after the ball twirled, banking off the side then dropping in.

I thought about his question. “Caring too much, Father Saltori.”

“I consider that a benefit to my job,” he said, scrubbing his jaw.

“Even when you can’t help the beautiful waifs who find themselves inside your church?”

“Even then,” he said with significant emotion. “Let me think. Ah, yes. I remember your weakness.”

“And that would be?”

“Chrissy, the only woman you’re determined to allow yourself to love, the one you believe you no longer deserve because you wanted her protected.”

“Wow. You were paying attention.”

“Of course I was. You were hurting. I understand it more than you know. You did the right thing, Fran, whether you want to believe it or not. You had no idea what the Bianchis were capable of. At least now you do.”

While he was right, a cold shiver ran down my spine. I’d told him my secret because I knew he couldn’t allow it to slip to anyone. Not that he would anyway. He’d take my secrets to his grave. I’d done my best to not try to think about her. Although the last few days, thoughts and images of Chrissy had rattled my mind. “Chrissy was something special.”

“I know. I keep thinking about the girl in the rectory. I can’t imagine they were the same girl.”

“Maybe. Maybe not.” I polished off the last of my drink with no intention of stopping now. “Maybe what I’m thinking is next to impossible.”

Dominick headed toward his drink, a smirk on his face.

“What?” I barked.

“I’ve learned that nothing is impossible if you pray about it. Well, almost nothing.”

I studied him for another few seconds, refusing to tell him that I had prayed after Chrissy had disappeared. That was the last time I’d done so. It would never happen again. “Spill it, Dom. I’ll give you the same piece of advice you gave me. Until you let the past go, you’ll never be able to move into the future.”

“The pot calling the kettle black,” he said, half laughing. Then his jaw clenched. “Danni got pregnant.” The statement was so out of the blue and unexpected that I was stunned.

“Geez. I had no idea, Dom.” He’d never mentioned a kid and I would have known. He doted on Meghan and Brock, arriving late to my niece’s birthday party but he’d brought so many presents that Raleigh had almost been annoyed.

“I didn’t tell anyone. I guess I was too... angry with what happened.”

“What did happen?”

This time, he headed around the bar, pouring almost a full glass of his preferred liquor, taking a swallow then wiping his mouth. “Her parents forced her to have an abortion.”

“Jesus.”

“I’d asked her to marry me. She’d said yes. I’d talked to my father and had a position secured. I was still planning on going to college. I even picked out a little house for us, something we could grow into as a family. You know?”

Nodding, I walked closer, still giving him the space I sensed he needed. “How did you find out?”

“She went on vacation with her family. That had already been planned. She was going to tell them we were getting married. Then the week turned into two and I didn’t see her. I was frantic, thinking the worst. One day, I finally saw her walking into her church and I followed her in. That’s when she told me. I almost killed her father that day. The only reason I didn’t was that she begged me not to. Then she told me they were moving out of the city. I let her go. The love of my life and I didn’t fight for her. What kind of man did that make me?” He lifted his head, his eyes questioning mine.

“I’m sorry, Dom.”

He took a deep breath, lifting his glass in a silent toast. I could swear there were tears in my friend’s eyes. A few seconds of tension passed and he finally took a deep breath. “Just remember the power of prayer. That’s what got me through.”

“You know that’s not going to happen in my world. Eleven ball on the side.”

He waited until I missed before swaggering toward the pool table. “Maybe you should try it sometime, my friend. You might be surprised. If you love that girl from the past, do yourself a favor and find her. Whatever it takes, including praying, find her. If you don’t, you’ll never be the same. I can’t go against my oath or my faith, but I will try and provide her with assistance if she returns.”

“That’s all I can ask for.” If Chrissy had returned, I’d handle everything from here. The woman I adored would never leave my side again.

CHAPTER 16



*F*rancesco

In the darkness of the night lies a monster in wait, one so evil that all those around him flee for fear that a single look would draw them into the madness. They live in terror that once seen, they will be targeted, entombed in a steel cage until the filthy creature is ready to feast.

I had no idea why the words had surfaced in the back of my mind. They were from something I'd read years before, a passage in a book considered taboo. For me, it had seemed like a fair representation of my life.

In truth, the words fit even better today. Maybe Dominick's confession had pulled a level of tormented faith to the forefront of my mind. I closed my eyes, trying to block out the darkness creeping into my mind, already threatening to corrode my tenuous hold on reality.

Or maybe I was feeling guilty for every bloody deed from my past. Snorting, I rubbed my jaw, a vehicle horn dragging me into the present.

The power of prayer.

My mother had believed in it. My father had also up until the time when he believed God had taken his beloved wife because of his evil deeds. From what I remembered, he hadn't stepped foot inside a church ever again.

Dominick's words continued to haunt me, more so as the hours had slipped away. He was a private man, keeping his troubles buried as I'd been taught to do. But his torment was entirely different than what I'd experienced.

With the rare exception of missing a girl named Chrissy. Only she hadn't been taken from me in such an egregious method. She'd simply returned to her life, whether for the good or bad. And I'd returned to mine.

The 'what if' continued to rack my system, enough so I considered stalking the church, only my common sense keeping me from doing so. She could have been passing through or already gone from the city.

Then why was there a nagging voice that remained, digging at me as if everything was about to come full circle?

A dull ache returned to my system. The ugly truth was that I'd pushed her aside after reminding myself that I didn't need to be saddled with anyone, especially an instant family. She'd been crushed, which was the reason she'd run from me the second she'd fled my car. Regretting my decision hadn't occurred until several months later.

Too little. Too late.

This was getting ridiculous. Lamenting the past had nothing to do with what I needed to face today.

Or did it?

What it had taught me was that the quickest way to bring down a man was through his most precious possession. In this case, I'd find the single entity or being and exploit it. That was something I was damn good at.

"Remember, we find a weakness. I refuse to allow this to continue for more than a few days."

Two days had passed since the time I'd spent with Dominick. I'd picked up the phone to check on him more than once, realizing finally that he had his God to repent to for what he'd called a mortal sin.

That made what I'd done with Chrissy seem filthy in comparison. Maybe the fact we were lamenting over our respective pasts meant we were getting old. I chuckled under my breath at the thought. Yeah, maybe we were.

The hope that the mystery girl's sudden appearance at the church would lead to something hadn't panned out. The redheaded girl hadn't made a second appearance. Even worse, there'd been little activity and less chatter on the streets about the assassination attempt.

However, I'd sensed fear, as if threats had been made, people told to keep their mouths shut.

Including my trusted informants. Two had disappeared, although that wasn't unusual activity when a turf war was on the horizon. What the temporary silence did do was heighten my level of impatience.

And my continued rage.

In our world, no news wasn't good news. The quiet usually meant evil was festering in the shadows like a venomous snake preparing a deadly strike. Whether or not Maxwell wanted to admit it, he'd placed the entire organization on high alert status, locking his family down.

Viper was prepared to return to California with his wife and child and our businesses had been placed in a cautionary status. For all practical purposes, our empire was on standby, which annoyed the fuck out of me and could establish a dangerous precedent if we weren't careful. The last thing we wanted or needed was to appear as if we were concerned with an inferior syndicate's outward threats.

At least with Carmine's body being hand delivered to both Roberto's and Dante's homes in several different crates, they were aware we weren't taking the situation lying down. What I hadn't believed possible was that Dante could shove aside his darker needs, hunkering down in the short term. He'd kept mostly to himself, seen out only once in the two days since I'd been trailing him. Now he was standing inside a restaurant not unlike the one I'd been in the day of the assassination attempt.

“What are we looking for? Drugs? A woman? Money exchanging hands?” Cayman asked.

“You’ll know it when you see it.” I eased my elbow onto the ledge of the dash.

“I feel like a creeper, my man,” Cayman said from the driver’s seat as he peered at the brownstone across the street, the massive front window allowing a perfect view of the celebrations and dinner engagements inside.

His words brought a smile to my face. “Don’t you think soldiers from the Bianchi family have positioned themselves on the outside of one of our businesses or homes at least once? They’ve been watching us and you know that.”

“Yeah, but they’re soldiers. That’s what they’d supposed to do. We’re different. I’m not equipped to remain pent up in a car watching our enemies enjoying themselves. It’s not a good look on me.”

The smile remained and I drummed my fingers on the dashboard. It took him a few seconds to realize what he’d said, his comparison amusing as hell. Granted, the man had made a fortune given his long-term standing within the organization. He was royalty in comparison.

“I meant no disrespect to your family, boss.”

“None taken, although maybe I’m paying you too much. You have an arrogance that didn’t used to be there.”

He grinned and lifted the binoculars, holding them close to his eyes. “Remember, boss man, I was taught by the best. You’re the most arrogant son of a bitch I know.”

He was right on both counts. The truth was, I certainly wasn’t used to handling surveillance on my own but felt it necessary given the situation.

“I’ll have you know I spend my money wisely,” he added.

While I never interfered or asked but so many questions about what he did with his paycheck, I was privy to the fact he sent a significant portion of his funds to his family in Jamaica. He’d put two sisters and a brother through college already. “I’m sure

you do. That's why you own three luxury vehicles that cost more than mine."

"Investments, my friend. That's the key to long-term wealth. I can hook you up with my financial advisor if you'd like."

"I'll keep that in mind," I told him, still laughing at his usual antics. Nothing dampened his mood for long. I scanned the street, observing the guests continually arriving. "A party. How fascinating."

"If I had to guess, I'd say the restaurant was closed for a very private affair. I do believe the mayor is inside with his lovely wife."

Of course he was. The mayor was a predictable greedy bastard, loathing everything we stood for as a corporation. With it being an election year, I was more concerned that his appearance meant he'd taken sides. He was determined to win reelection, even courting Maxwell's political support. I could imagine what Don Powers would think of Mayor Santiago's appearance. Perhaps my thought of crashing the party was positive on more than one level.

"Definitely a private party," Cay continued. "I can see at least four of Bianchi's men guarding the door."

Given it wasn't the holiday season, the party was more of a curiosity than a typical family gathering. In the last few days, the Bianchis had gone into a self-imposed lockdown, beefing up security around their facilities. I'd taken it upon myself to have their activities watched, which of course they'd known about. Now I was more than just intrigued. "I wonder why the special occasion?"

"Maybe you should look at this." He handed me the binoculars, his expression turning dark.

I didn't need to ask him what he'd seen through the high powered lenses.

There was no reason for my slight hesitation before taking the binoculars from him.

The moment I looked through the lenses, peering inside the restaurant, I tensed. With glasses lifted, it was obvious a toast

was being made. And in my mind, there was no doubt the reason why.

A beautiful redhead stood near Dante Bianchi. Although I wasn't able to see her face, the tingling sensations would have brought me to my knees had I been standing. They were the same. I knew it in my gut.

And this fucking event was an engagement party. I'd bet almost every cent I owned that I was right. The girl who stood next to him was tense, her stance highlighting just how uncomfortable she was. I was an observant man, easily able to sense her discord. Plus, an older man stood behind her, close enough to keep her from skittering away like a little bird.

She had gorgeous long, red hair, the shimmer of the copper appearing like gold in the glimmering lights of the restaurant. Even without seeing what she looked like, my cock twitched, which hadn't occurred in one hell of a long time.

"Is it her?" Cayman asked. I'd told him about the girl from the church, at least what little I knew.

"I can't be certain."

"The coincidence is too brutally weird."

Exhaling, I shot him a look. "There is no such thing as a coincidence in the world of monsters, Cay. You should know that."

"Did I ever tell you what my mother said about karma?"

"Later, my friend. Later."

When she briefly turned, I took a deep breath, allowed to see the curve of her aristocratic jaw and lush lips. I shifted the binoculars down by a few inches, basking in her glorious hourglass figure, the stunning emerald green dress highlighting everything God had given her. Dear God. I still wasn't certain, but my stomach churned at the possibility. I hadn't intended on crashing the party but there was no fucking way I'd let her go this time. None.

Shit. Maybe I'd listened too closely to what Dominick had said. There was a faraway look in her eyes as she continued

smiling and I couldn't help but wonder what she'd been threatened with to keep such a pretense on her face. Still, I had to sort this out with utter precision, or I'd place my entire family into a dangerous position.

"What do you think?" Cayman asked.

"I think we found a partial reason behind why the Bianchis attacked when they did."

"Meaning what?"

I continued to study the couple, noticing just how happy Dante seemed as he shook hands with a judge I knew pretty well. It would seem the syndicate was pulling out all the stops to convince the powers that be that they would soon make their presence known in the Big Apple. I could only imagine how the other mafia families were taking the news.

"Meaning it would seem Dante is about to be married."

Max had been right. The fucker was trying to maneuver his way into being the darling couple of New York. If I had to guess, I'd say he'd shortly, if not tonight, donate a ton of money to the mayor. I had to give the Bianchis credit. They'd watched our techniques over the years, going from being thugs to pretending they had class. I'd also bet the wedding would be the event of the season.

My laughter came easily. Whereas I'd wanted to return to the old methods of doing business as my father had used, they'd learned from Maxwell Powers from a distance. Fuck me. Max would laugh his ass off.

"What if that's the girl?"

I glanced at Cay, taking a deep breath. "Then I assure you they won't be exchanging vows."

"He won't take kindly to your intervention."

"I don't give a shit."

Suddenly, a conversation my father had had with me only two months prior to his murder came to mind. I'd cornered him about wanting the Underboss position in his organization, demanding that he give it to me as it was my birthright. That

had been the single time he'd hit me like a man, something I'd never forgot.

He'd called me the king of the hill in distaste, glowering at me as if I'd broken some code. I'd never seen such disappointment in his eyes, daring me to react after I'd been pitched to the floor. It had been the single time my sister had screamed at a man she adored, worshipping the ground he walked on.

After she'd left the room in tears, he'd told me that he had plans to remarry within a few months, which had nearly torn me apart. I'd believed for a long time afterward that he'd been unfaithful to our mother and she'd died of a broken heart. I'd kept the conversation from Raleigh and would carry it with me to my grave. There was no sense in rocking her world even if I finally understood the reason behind his decision. It hadn't been about love or passion. He'd experienced the greatest joy of his life, suffering more than most men after our mother's death. He'd lived alone for almost eighteen years, grieving while also losing snippets of respect every year that passed. The decision had been based on business alone.

And heightening his waning respect amongst his peers. The old school methods of garnering and keeping honor and respect were still in play, even if Maxwell chose to ignore the unwritten syndicate rules that had begun with the Cosa Nostra in Sicily. My father had refused to live by them as well. That had cost him his life.

On that night, he'd been angrier than I'd ever seen him, shaking to the point I was certain he was having a seizure. I'd learned later that he'd been receiving threats from an unknown source, something Maxwell had discovered after his friend's death. It had taken me until recently to comprehend that he'd made the necessary decisions too little, too late.

The decision he should have made earlier? Remarrying. What he'd said that night after I'd yelled at him for even contemplating betraying my mother's memory remained in the back of my mind. It had also been a vain attempt at burying the guilt that had kept a noose around my neck for years, the

school psychologists I'd been forced to see telling my father that was the single reason I couldn't let go of my anger.

Maybe that's why he'd told me that behind every man running a powerful organization was a woman who pulled the puppet strings. He'd added that if the leader was lucky, he'd enjoy the process of being told what to do. I'd laughed at him, calling him dozens of horrible names, appalled that he'd think our mother was controlling.

And I called him weak.

Fuck.

All I'd wanted was a normal family and he'd done everything in his power to create one and I'd called him weak.

The old traditions still applied. Roberto Bianchi was getting ready to retire. However, given there was little respect for the small, savage syndicate, he'd made the wise decision to require his son to find a wife. In addition to hooking himself up to the decorated politician. If the girl was from another powerful mafia family, that would add instant additional credibility. And if she happened to bring additional territories into the fold, such as crossing the lines from New York to Chicago, then Dante would be allowed a seat at the big boys' table, as my father used to call it.

A brilliant plan, but one the girl had reason to hate as well as fear. Using her was only part of the weakness. Her determination to provide details of the horrors she'd been through was something else and possibly even more powerful. Was it possible the Bianchis had found out about our affair? I couldn't put that past them, although the only way was if she'd figured out who I was.

Playing this carefully would take every ounce of my patience, tearing it apart bit by bit.

I had a lot of thinking and planning to do.

But I would discover her identity.

"If he gets wind of what you're planning, the pig will hurt her," Cayman stated, dragging me back to reality.

“Very true. That pig is set to become an important man. Dante remained in the shadows on purpose, learning far too much about how we operate.”

“Are you thinking he has a friend on the inside of our organization?”

Hmmm... I rubbed my jaw. “Possible, but a smart man would only need to pay attention to our business dealings, our works of philanthropy, and how we engage with members of law enforcement and our local politicians.”

“They’re cloning themselves into remarkable resemblances of Max’s regime.” Cayman whistled.

“Exactly, my friend. On the day Dante gets married, our stock will take a hit.” And I wasn’t just talking about with our legitimate corporations. Fuck. The ball was already rolling, snowballing. This called for different tactics.

“Then what are you going to do?”

That seemed to be the obvious question I continued to get asked. “Remove the temptation and the prize.”

“Can I offer you a suggestion, boss?”

“Why the hell not?”

“Why don’t you find a wife of your own. Better yet. Why not take what Dante Bianchi thinks belongs to him? Whether it’s Chrissy or not.”

His evil grin brought another laugh. “I knew I liked you for a reason, Cayman, my man. You’re as devious as I am. While you’re right, I still have my reservations.” For good reason.

“Understood, boss, but you won’t have much time to decide. And you love me for all the wrong reasons, boss. I keep telling you that. If you figure out the girl already belongs to you, are you taking her tonight?”

God, I wanted to.

I continued to tap my fingers on the dashboard. Then I opened the door. “At this point, tonight is just about getting the facts and to make Dante and his father nervous. They’ll make

mistakes after that, which will be to our benefit. So, for now, it's time to crash a party and have a couple drinks. Nothing more."

"Fuck. I like the way you think."

"Unless Dante fucks with me. Then all bets are off."

CHAPTER 17



*C*hristiana

An engagement party.

Correction, my engagement party. How sad I'd prefer to be strapped to a dentist's chair having all my teeth pulled without Novocain. Then again, maybe I could use the drill to cut tiny pieces out of Dante before shoving the cold steel into his eyeball socket.

At least my violent thoughts helped with the nausea and heartache, now both down to a dull twinge of pain. I'd been able to shut down most of my emotions, although I knew tonight would twist my anger into a frenzy. The cape I'd worn had been removed from my shoulders, a glass of champagne almost immediately shoved into my hand. Then I'd been pushed from the back room into a brightly lit restaurant turned into every girl's engagement party fantasy with only a few words spoken from my father.

"Fuck this up and you'll pay dearly."

Love you too, Daddy dearest.

The thought of wearing a pretty dress, pretending I gave a damn about the man I was standing next to while being forced to interact with dozens or hundreds of people I didn't know not only left a bad taste in my mouth; it kept me on edge, trying to do everything I could not to react at all. If I did, the bastards would win.

Yet here I was, a fake smile on my face, standing in the middle of a crowded restaurant that I'd never been to, trying to find the courage from deep within to be able to plaster a smile on my face. My father and I had arrived only minutes before, whisked into the back like some hired help. I shifted further into the room, glancing around at the entire facility. The Bianchis had pulled out all the stops, likely spending a small fortune. This was all about glow and show. Nothing more.

I hadn't been told where I was going, although I'd suspected, given a dress had been selected for me, placed on the bed by one of the house employees. The only good news about being paraded around like a trained seal was that the ankle bracelet had been removed. It would be blasphemous for a daughter of an important man to be seen treated like an animal.

I'd been appropriately warned, told that if I tried to make a run for it, I'd be severely punished. I had no idea where in God's name I'd run to, since there were guards everywhere, soldiers with huge guns who tried to blend in. That was ridiculous, given I recognized movie stars and musicians, obvious friends or at least acquaintances of the man I was supposed to marry.

At least my father no longer stood behind me like a stalking vulture. He'd gone off to find a proper drink, skipping the expensive bottles of bubbly. Meanwhile, I wanted to drown myself in the liquid libation. Maybe that would take the pain away.

The moment I moved two feet from my intended, Dante grabbed my arm, yanking me against him and lowering his head. "Don't do anything stupid, my lovely bride to be. I don't want a reason to hurt you."

"Which is something I'm certain you'll do after we're married. You do seem to enjoy it so much."

"Only to keep you in line. A good wife is a well-disciplined wife." He turned slightly, rubbing his knuckle across the yellow bruise that I'd tried my best to conceal with makeup. It was still tender, the slight split in my lip accentuated by the flaming red lipstick I'd been forced to wear. I refused to flinch.

“Fuck you, Dante. You might have a contract but be careful of falling asleep at night.” I took a sip of champagne, enjoying the fire in his eyes. While pushing his buttons wasn’t necessarily the best thing to do, I wasn’t going to fall into playing the hapless girl with no spine. Fuck that.

“Thank you for the warning, my beautiful bride to be. I would hate to disfigure such a stunning face. I wouldn’t want our children terrified of their own mother. Now, would I?”

God. The man disgusted me. “You’re a bastard and I’m positive you’ll do everything in your power to alienate our children.” Thank God, I was able to keep the smile on my face. I tossed back the remainder of the bubbly, blinking profusely as I placed the crystal stem on a vacant table. When I tried to turn away, he jerked me by the arm.

“Yes, I am. It’s best if you learn that right away, Christiana. Then your transition into a dutiful wife will be that much easier.”

I wasn’t going to just drive a stake through his heart. If the man had one. I had plans on using a dull steak knife. “My. My. We shall see, *Dante*.”

As a waiter walked by, he grabbed a second glass of champagne, shoving it into my hand. “Don’t get drunk, my sweet fiancée. We have a long night ahead of us.”

“Fuck you, darling.” I offered another sweet smile, enjoying the snarl he issued. Maybe if his devout fans witnessed him beating up his wife to be, I’d get some help.

He pulled me even closer, his hold on my arm painful. Fortunately, he released it as soon as an aging man headed in our direction.

“Mayor Santiago. It’s good to see you,” Dante said as he stuck out his hand, no doubt demanding a handshake.

“Dante Bianchi. I was elated when my assistant received your phone call. This is an event I wouldn’t miss for the world. You must be Dante’s fiancée.”

“Yes, this is Christiana Lorenzo from Chicago. You might know her father, the honorable Michael Lorenzo. He is

considered a consummate businessman in the Windy City much like my father and I are in New York. That will help you get reelected.”

Well. Well. Now I could see where this was headed. I was no fool in the methods of my father’s business. I was a bridge that would soften the various legal and illegal temperaments. I studied the mayor’s face, noticing he continued to glance toward the wall of windows fronting a very busy street. Who was he terrified would see him sucking up to a man like Dante?

He spouted off my father’s name as if the entire world should know who he was. Sadly, by the slight irritation in the mayor’s eyes, I could tell he had heard of him. I was being used as a powerplay.

“Why, of course. You are beautiful and I must say, Dante. You’re one lucky man.” The mayor tried to bring my hand to his lips, but I refused to allow him, offering a firm handshake instead.

“Luck isn’t the word for it, Mayor Santiago,” Dante said, his tone full of amusement. “I am considered quite the eligible bachelor.”

“You’ll have to get in line behind Francesco Arturo, Dante. He’s certainly the talk of the town.”

As soon as the mayor mentioned the rival’s name, my entire system was electrified. While the name Francesco was common in a city full of Italians, what were the odds that the man I’d spent a night with was an obvious Bianchi enemy? I glanced at Dante’s face, noticing the way his nostrils flared. He was pissed the name had been brought up.

I couldn’t breathe as images and thoughts from the past trickled in. For some crazy reason, I glanced toward the massive set of front windows, watching as people came and went on the crowded street.

“Arturo and his godfather can’t get you reelected. Only my family can. I would keep that in mind if I were you.” While

Dante remained furious, I sensed the mayor was playing both sides.

Perhaps he didn't understand it was a very dangerous game.

"Yes, well, I do hope to see an invitation to the wedding. I'm certain it will be the event of the year."

"Of course, Mayor. All my *friends* will be there. You do remember that you're a very close friend of my father's. Yes?"

There was more than just an implied threat in Dante's tone and the man's face showed just how much.

"Of course. I should let your father know I'm here," the mayor said. "Very good to meet you, Ms. Lorenzo."

"You as well." Pretending had taken a lot out of me already and the night was early.

Dante exhaled then moved in front of me. While he kept his voice low, the menacing tone was apparent. "If I need to place you on a leash, I'll do it. However, I have business to attend to and would prefer to allow you to enjoy some time with our friends and family. Do you think it's possible you can behave yourself?"

The man was a condescending, pompous son of a bitch that I couldn't wait to drive a knife into. He was also nervous tonight, which was something I could perhaps use. The smart thing for me to do was to be patient and observe who he had business with. I'd need to be a very good actress to do so, which meant disengaging from antagonizing him. I softened my expression and my tone was casually bland, trying to act as if I was falling into line.

I hated every minute of doing so.

"I would enjoy spending time getting to know your friends, Dante. Besides, I'm already on a short leash."

While a hint of his anger subsided, there was no doubt I'd been right about his anxiety. Everything was riding on the line with this lie for a marriage. That made me wonder what in the hell was really going on. This wasn't just about helping the

mayor to get reelected. There was a major powerplay going on.

Francesco Arturo. Just thinking the name echoed in my ears like the vision of my lover continuously played out in my mind.

“You won’t need to stay here for long. However, do not attempt to leave the premises. Is that understood?”

“Absolutely.” I took a sip of champagne, glancing around the room carefully as I did so. Everyone was watching us, which made me terribly uncomfortable, but there was a story in their actions. This was an event they knew better than to refuse attending.

I had no doubt the five million dollars was chump change in comparison to what my father had been promised.

Dante squeezed my arm with enough force, I had to bite back a cry from the wash of pain. I refused to give him the satisfaction, the anger and hatred keeping me nicely fueled for now. After he walked away, I took a deep breath then glanced over my shoulder, watching him glower in front of another crowd of well-wishers. I wasn’t honestly certain I could tolerate the evening.

I threw back the entire glass of champagne, seeking another waiter and replacing the flute quickly. Then I moved away from the center of the room, hoping to find a little space and air. As soon as I leaned against the wall, I realized I had a bird’s-eye view of the comings and goings in the restaurant. There were still people arriving. What had the man done, put out a bulletin in the *New York Times*?

I couldn’t put anything past him. At least I shouldn’t. There was also a photographer capturing candid pictures. The event would be an internet sensation within an hour. I’d bet on it.

Over the next few minutes, a few people stopped by, introducing themselves. I played the part, shaking hands and smiling like the dutiful wife he’d mentioned, faking my happiness better than I thought I had in me. I noticed either Dante’s or my father’s heated gaze every so often. Then it

seemed as if both men were actively engaged in a lengthy conversation.

As I sipped my bubbly, I shifted closer to the expansive food table, my stomach churning from just seeing the sight of meatballs and shrimp. Turning away, something out of the corner of my eye caught my attention. I lifted my head, noticing two men had walked through the entrance, both scanning the guests.

I moved around the table, inching closer. Both were dressed very well in charcoal suits, yet I sensed the darker skinned man was a bodyguard or soldier walking just a couple of steps in front of the second even more handsome hunk. With midnight curly hair and broad shoulders, a crisp white shirt and bright red tie, he gave off an aura of danger.

The man behind him finally flanked his side, saying something to him that caused the sinfully gorgeous hunk to grin. Then he nodded, immediately grabbing a glass of champagne after a waiter approached.

He was handsome, his chiseled jaw drawing my attention. While I couldn't make out all his features from where I stood, and from people getting in my way, I could instantly tell just how powerful he was by the reactions of those around him. And there was no doubt he was carrying a weapon under his tailored jacket.

Why did I have the distinct impression he wasn't supposed to be here? A party crasher. Why did I also believe there could be a massacre? Maybe because Dante's soldiers were immediately on notice, their actions those of trained seals. Three of them moved closer to the newcomers while another pushed his way through the crowd to find Dante and his father. I was certain of it.

I shifted forward, trying to locate Dante myself. A slight flurry of activity amongst a few of the guests caused amusement. Fear and anxiety were obvious by the fact so many turned their backs or headed toward the food tables. There was no doubt the mystery guest hadn't been well received.

Then within seconds, I noticed that the guests who were closest to the door shifted backwards and away from the late arrivals completely, leaving a wide arc of space. This was getting more and more entertaining. Who was this man who'd caused such a stir in a short period of time?

I moved a few feet closer then froze, tingling sensations already working their way through every muscle. "Oh, my God."

Then the sensations turned to sheer electricity pulsing through every vein, my core immediately on fire. I blinked several times, trying to alleviate the haze that had formed around my eyes. Then I sucked in my breath, unable to stop shaking. Francesco Arturo. The world came to a full stop. No sight. No sound. A void that threatened to suck me in. I'd heard that there was one person that was your true soulmate and that if all the planets aligned, nothing and no one could keep the two souls from connecting.

True or not, the fact the man I'd fallen hard for was standing in the same room was one that both excited and terrified me. The one I'd dreamt of. The one I'd tried to hate. "No. That's not possible. That isn't possible." Fate couldn't be so cruel.

Or was this nothing but a ruse of some kind, a game that had started years before. Another wave of nausea struck and I wasn't certain what if anything I was supposed to do. Run. That was my first instinct.

My second was more powerful.

He'd been my savior before. Now I needed him more than ever.

When I moved closer, a portion of my heart seized, a memory rushing into the forefront of my mind. I sucked in my breath, forced to place my hand over my mouth to keep from making any sounds. Fate was as sadistic as it was clever, reminding me that often what we hoped would come true couldn't while our greatest fears always surfaced through the bed of lies.

“Who are you, my little sunlight, my special little bird?” He’d pulled over where I’d asked him to, the desolate road far enough away from the horrors I’d soon face that I didn’t fear being found.

“Nobody special, just a bird in a gilded cage. Besides, sunlight won’t touch our bed of lies.”

“While perfectly poetic, perhaps I should set you free.”

“You can’t, Francesco. No one can. I’m in a prison where there’s no reform, no chance at salvation, but you gave me a joyous gift.” The single crackle of lightning forced me to wince. We’d spent several hours together yet it seemed like I’d known him my entire life. I hadn’t cared that he was much older or that I was considered forbidden fruit. I hadn’t thought about my obligations or the misery I’d go through after my return. I’d fallen into a peaceful abyss of raw ecstasy.

And I’d do it again.

The hard crack of thunder brought a yelp from my lips. I’d thought the storm was over.

“As I told you before, you have no clue how powerful I am. Just say the word and you will be mine for all eternity.”

I unfastened my seatbelt, turning toward him and pressing my hand against his chest. “You can’t do that. Please just let me go.”

“I’m not certain I can do that.”

“You must. We’re not from the same world. This can’t work. You know it as well as I do. I enjoyed every minute we shared and I won’t forget you. You will hold a special place in my heart. That is the only promise I can make.” When he shook his head, I could tell at least I’d gotten through to him. The last thing I needed was him trying to play my hero.

The moment I leaned over, reaching for the door, he yanked me by the arm, the force dragging me on top of his lap. Then he forced me to straddle his legs before cupping my jaw, squeezing until I whimpered.

“Hear me, my little dove. You are very special and there’s nothing I want more than to keep you with me. I’m the kind of man who would normally just take you without hesitating or second guessing but there are some aspects of my life that you don’t deserve: dangers that I can’t risk inflicting on you or having you as a weakness.”

“Who are you?”

He lowered his gaze, his jaw clenching. “Someone who could hurt you.”

“I don’t believe that for a second, Francesco. I know this is crazy, but I love you,” I blurted out without thinking. “I know it’s crazy. I know we just met each other but that’s the way I feel. I love you. I want to be with you.” When he hesitated, I did what I could to climb off his lap. Of course, a man like him could never love anyone like me.

When he jerked me back a second time, he managed to free his cock, yanking up my dress and ripping off my panties within seconds. Then he impaled me with the entire length of his shaft.

I threw my head back, issuing a ragged moan as even more powerful sensations tore through not only my body but my heart as well. The feel of my pussy muscles wrapping around his cock were incredible, the hard throb deep inside so intense that it took my breath away.

“Oh, yes. God, so good.” Every moan was scattered, the hard rush of adrenaline keeping me on the very edge of excitement. I was sitting in the middle of a stranger’s car on a residential road in the middle of the night, his thick cock pulsing inside. I still ached from the brutal fucking we’d done before, the man taking me several times.

Once he’d stripped away my innocence, there’d been no holding back. He’d fucked me long and hard, taking me in several rooms. But this was by far the most sinful of the delicious experiences.

He captured my mouth as well as my scattered moans, immediately thrusting his tongue inside. There was such an air

of dominance about him that I couldn't help to be in awe, electrified that our connection was so strong. Perfect. As he tasted me for the fiftieth time, sweeping his tongue back and forth, I bucked against him, my muscles still stretching to accommodate his wide girth.

When he was fully seated inside, I closed my eyes, pawing his chest as a kitten would do. I was shocked, gasping down his throat when he pushed the front seat back, providing additional room. As he rubbed his thumb back and forth across my jaw, I squirmed on top of him, adding friction and heat to the already blazing fire.

There was something kinky about the way he sucked on my tongue, growling the entire time he did so. Seconds later, he wrapped his other hand around my hip, his grip firm as he lifted me up by several inches, easing me down then repeating the move. I didn't need instructions to know what he wanted. He was commanding me to ride him.

And so I did. I rocked against him, sliding one arm over his shoulder, running my fingers up and down the length of his neck. He continued the savage kiss, taking every ounce of my breath as his. He had no idea what he was doing to me, pushing me past the point of no return. I'd fallen head over heels in love with him, so much so I was prepared to give up the rest of my life for him.

For us.

For the future.

This was the beginning of our life together. He would sweep me away from the nightmare, fixing all the wrongs.

I was so alive, more excited than I'd been in my life. I wrapped my other arm around his neck, tangling my fingers in his hair and as he took full control, forcing me to ride him long and hard, I remained lightheaded.

Nothing had ever prepared me for something like this. For someone like him. I was thrown into such magic that nothing else mattered.

When he broke the kiss, he nipped my lower lip, his breathing as labored as mine. Heat exploded between us and I laughed nervously, no longer the scared girl who wasn't certain she knew what she was doing. I was a woman. He'd made me that way. All I could think about was being with him.

"That's it, come on my cock, baby. Come for me."

His command was exactly what I needed. In the next few precious seconds, I threw my head back, allowing the vibrations to course through me like a tidal wave of blissful pleasure.

"Oh. Oh... Yes. Yes. Yes!"

His cock continued to throb, his breath skipping and the second a climax rushed into me, I sensed him letting go, filling me once again with seed.

I sucked in my breath as the beautiful, yet damning memory started to fade.

The moment had been just as incredible, just as heartfelt. It had been our last few seconds together before the bubble we'd placed around ourselves had been burst.

Before my tender heart had been ripped apart.

He'd pulled away, his entire demeanor changing, a single phone call creating a distance between us. Then he'd sent me on my way, telling me that it was for the best and that I didn't deserve to be strapped with his world. Now I understood better why. He was exactly like my father and my fiancé, a bastard criminal likely with violent tendencies. On that night so long ago, he'd broken my heart into a million little pieces. I'd hated him at first, telling myself that I would never forgive him. Then it had no longer mattered. In truth, maybe he'd done me a favor.

It was too bad fate was a cruel bitch.

There was no chance that the man standing at the front of the restaurant was my Francesco, the man I'd fallen hopelessly in

love with all those years ago. The chances of me winning a Powerball lottery were much higher.

But when he turned his head, his eyes locking with mine, there was no mistaking the truth of who and what he was.

I tried to turn away, my heart racing, but the draw to the man was too significant.

All the tears I'd shed, the horrors that I'd been forced to go through in the months after our glorious night of passion rushed to the forefront of my mind. I couldn't think straight, couldn't breathe, and there was no doubt that my sins had just come back to haunt me.

Just like my father had told me would happen after calling me a whore.

He was watching me, crowding closer. He pushed his way through the crowd, a knowing settling in. I mouthed his name and he did mine as well. For a few seconds, no one else was in the room. There was no sound, a concentrated light on the two of us. I couldn't move, couldn't breathe.

I'd read about the top syndicates in New York. Hell, one of my classes in college had centered around organized crime. Examples had included some of the most famous crime bosses in the country from history as well as newcomers.

Including Tony Arturo.

My thoughts drifted to when he'd told me his father had been killed. The paths of our lives were too similar. Lights flashed in front of my eyes.

Francesco was everything I'd ever wanted and nothing I could have. When he took another step closer, I knew I had to break my hypnotized state, or the past would collide with the present. Nothing good would come out of this. If he was close to Dante and his family, then my life as I knew it would be over.

When my old lover's attention was pulled away by Mayor Santiago, I fisted my hands. This was possibly the only opportunity I had of getting away. Where? How? *Think. Think.* An idea popped into my head.

Then I did the only thing I could do without having any power whatsoever.

I backed into the shadows, trying to become invisible. I needed air. I needed time to think. Was this all a coincidence? I took several deep breaths, trying to control my nerves then peeked out again.

He was still there. He was trying to find me again. Damn it. I could feel him all around me, capturing me with his essence. I could almost gather his scent, the exotic mix of spices and the darkest part of the forest igniting a fire that I'd purposely kept squelched. He was the only man I'd cared about. The only man I'd ever allowed to touch me.

To kiss me.

To taste me.

To fuck me.

The only man I could ever love.

Yes, as foolish as it had been and as it sounded now, I'd allowed myself to fall hopelessly, foolishly, and irrevocably in love with a man I didn't even know. What he hadn't realized was that he'd already captured the little bird, keeping her in a gilded cage, the creature unable to fly because her wings had been clipped. But I'd grown stronger. I'd learned to fly again, ready to soar.

This was nothing but a tragedy in the making.

As tears rushed to my eyes, images of the beautiful night were clouded by the worst day of my life.

CHAPTER 18



*S*econds before...
Francesco

I'd entered the enemy's current lair and the moment I had, a significant spark of electricity had soared through me, the reason unknown but something I was determined to find out. There was an uncanny moment as I glanced around the venue, trying to find the girl I'd seen through the windows. I also didn't see Dante or Roberto, but that meant nothing.

"Interesting crowd," Cayman said as he flanked my side.

"All curious as well as concerned about what is going to happen with the balance of power." I smirked and grabbed a glass of champagne, continuing to scan the crowd. Only seconds later, I realized I'd caught all four of the soldiers' attention, one of them undoubtedly heading to find Dante or his father. "Time to play." I glanced around the room again, noticing Mayor Santiago was studying me from afar. Was that a smirk on his face as if he was thrilled I'd walked in, or fear?

Perhaps a little of both.

"I have your back." Cayman laughed. "But drinks will be involved."

I moved further inside, amused at how many people scampered away like rats, some hiding in the shadows. I had thoughts of calling them out by name, many having recently

attended an awards dinner where Maxwell had taken home a humanitarian award. What hypocrites.

Where was she?

As soon as I turned my head, I noticed the girl with the red hair standing maybe thirty feet away. While I stood taller than most, her presence was constantly blocked by guests moving from one side of the room to the other. Then a few of them must have realized who I was, fearful a bloody battle would ensue. They moved away by several feet, allowing me to catch a better sight of her.

I took two steps forward, cocking my head. Almost everything about the beautiful woman was enigmatic, drawing my attention like a moth to a flame. Interesting. I'd used those very words only once before, far too many years ago. When she finally glanced in my direction, she opened her eyes wide, studying me without blinking. Her long hair was the color of burnished copper flecked with sunshine. My balls tightened as I allowed my heated gaze to fall.

While she wasn't wearing an electronic monitoring device, I couldn't imagine Dante or the girl's father would allow it to be seen at a party of this nature. Perhaps that would allow me to have a conversation with her.

She was voluptuous in every aspect, her long legs accentuated by the stilettos she was wearing, her rounded hips meant for a man's hands to hold onto for fucking. No, they were meant for my hands only. I realized my palms were sweating, another reaction I hadn't expected. She had a perfect aristocratic nose, her long neck accentuating her stunning face and eyes that tore into me with wildfire and desire.

"Christ," I muttered, enjoying the stolen moment more than I should. At this point, she belonged to another man.

However, that wasn't going to last.

She had no idea how valuable she'd become.

Jesus Christ. The draw to her was extremely powerful, so much so I had difficulty breathing. She seemed frozen in time, her entire body tensing. When I took another few steps toward

her, I sensed she was struggling with my appearance. Anger tore through me when I noticed her split lip. For those few precious seconds as we studied each other, I had another moment where all time ceased to exist, every other noise but the hard pounding of my heart reduced to little more than a muffled series of sounds.

She was shaking her head and I could swear she realized I'd seen her lip. When she pressed her hand across both, I knew instinctively she was shaking. What the hell had the poor girl endured? Snarling, I was ready to get her the hell out of here when I felt a hand on my arm.

“Are you okay, boss?” Cayman asked.

“Yeah. It's her.” The girl wasn't important to Dante, only what she could bring to the table. Her flesh and bones would be used and tossed aside. It was a pity something so precious would be discarded like trash. That shouldn't matter to me but I'd caught a glimpse of her vulnerability.

Or maybe her goodness.

Was there such a thing in our world? She was likely born into a life of servitude, groomed to become the perfect wife. That had stripped away her innocence years before.

When I captured her eyes again, she'd dropped her hand, inching closer as well. That's when it hit me. I was stunned, the entire world around me no longer existing.

I'd heard of fate being a cruel bitch, but in this case it was almost comical as well as heart stopping.

When she mouthed my name, I found myself doing the same. Then I took and held my breath. The shock was almost blinding, but I sensed she was struggling tremendously as some sense of reality settled in. She had no clue who I was but seeing me here I could only imagine what she was thinking. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

I'd need to get her the hell away from here quickly.

Why did her haunting eyes continue to disturb me? Maybe because they were accusatory, her uncertainty about why I'd

sent her away easy to read in her expression, so many emotions rocking her.

Anger.

Lust.

Need.

Shock.

“Shit. What the fuck are the odds? Remind me to purchase a lottery ticket, but only if you pick the numbers.” Cayman whistled.

Maybe I had won the lottery, but only if I played this carefully. “I need her. Goddamn it, I need that woman.” I walked closer, still cognizant we were being watched. I closed my eyes, trying to look elsewhere. The last thing I needed to do was draw attention to our connection until everything was in place.

“Well, we can take her out the back if that’s what you want. It’s risky but you know how I drive.”

“Don’t tempt me. Whatever happens, I want her watched. Get another couple soldiers here. I have a feeling she won’t be allowed to stay but for so long.”

“I’ll take care of it.”

“I want to try and talk to her.” After making the statement, I heard Cayman snorting beside me.

“That will be an automatic red flag.”

“Maybe I don’t care.”

“You’re living dangerously, boss.”

Grinning was easy. “No pain. No gain.”

I walked closer to where she’d been, trying to control my emotions and my libido while he moved away, handling the call to a group of my men.

Marriage.

The tool had been used in every century by every nationality. Perhaps it was worth considering. I laughed to myself as the idea continued to formulate in the back of my mind. When

Cayman finished the call, he returned, nodding in the other direction.

“Don’t look now, boss, but your buddy was told you were here.”

I quickly glanced where she’d been standing, realizing she’d escaped into the shadows. She was an intelligent woman, obviously cognizant of what our past relationship meant even now. And if I had to guess, I’d say she was uncertain whether or not she could trust me.

I could feel Cayman tensing beside me, prepared to pull out his weapon if necessary. I tipped my head, giving him a ‘stand down’ look, hissing until he finally tried to relax. Dante wasn’t a stupid man. He wouldn’t risk his control and his desired hold on those he considered important to his upcoming ascension to the throne.

However, he would tip his hand soon after this eventful meeting. It had been a calculated risk, something I’d need to warn Max and Viper about. He stopped a few yards away, obviously giving orders to two of his men. I couldn’t help but noticed they both glanced toward where Chrissy had been standing. I’d been right. He didn’t want her anywhere near me.

Smart man.

I acted nonchalant, sipping my drink, smirking as he headed in my direction, stopping again only a few feet away. The man was sizing me up, trying to determine what my plans were. At least I could tell I’d irritated the fuck out of him.

As Dante approached, I shifted my attention toward him, swirling what was left of the champagne in my glass.

“What are you hoping to achieve?” Cayman asked quietly.

“Pushing his hand. Work the room. Find out who is most loyal to him. I have a feeling she’s been removed from the building. If the soldiers don’t arrive, do not let her out of your sight.”

“You’re certain?”

I chuckled and gave a single nod. “Don’t worry, Cay. I know how this game is played. I mastered it before I was twenty.”

“Okay. You got it, boss.” Cayman walked away, immediately grabbing a glass of champagne to help him blend in with the crowd.

Before I had a chance to react, Mayor Santiago appeared, shifting in front of me.

“I’m surprised to see you here, Francesco. Was Maxwell invited as well?”

I was forced to return my actions and thoughts to business for the short term. The connection was far too important and something I couldn’t pass up. “As you might imagine, he’s a very busy man, Mayor. As you seem to be as well. Slumming it tonight?”

“Hardly,” he said, laughing as he sipped his drink, barely able to look me in the eyes. He was doing nothing more than making a statement that he refused to take sides, which could ultimately end up signing his death warrant. However, the alternative wasn’t in the best interest for anyone within a typical crime syndicate, the man a former prosecutor with his eyes set on becoming president at some point. Maybe that’s why Mayor Santiago was acting cavalier. “I was thinking about paying Max a visit.”

“Ah, yes. Campaign funds.”

“A necessary evil.”

“Evil. A perfect term. I’ll be certain to let Max know you’ll be calling.”

He nodded, swigging back most of his drink. I moved forward until we were only inches apart. Then I planted a smile on my face.

“Be careful, Mayor Santiago. You’re a very important man, your close alliance with the police commissioner giving you significant power. However, intelligent men know when to stay the course with their friendships. Sadly, there are far too many alligators lurking in the rat-infested waters of New York.”

He finally locked eyes with mine, appropriately terrified. “I hope that’s not a threat, Francesco. That’s very beneath you.”

“You know better than that, Mayor.” I did a quick sweep, noticing Dante was watching us closely. “I’m a legitimate businessman now. So is Maxwell. We are also extremely wealthy. That’s something you can either take comfort in or not. It’s entirely up to you.” I backed away, giving him a nod.

He was notably uncertain what I was trying to tell him. He’d get it soon enough. Then he’d make the meeting with Maxwell where he’d provide statements of gratitude as soon as a check was signed.

Then the man would be crushed like any other bug when the time was right. For now, his usefulness wasn’t yet complete.

“Yes, I understand.” The mayor threw Dante a look before walking away. I was certain the man had plans on leaving the party early.

Dante managed to put a smile on his face as he approached, yet I could tell by his eyes he was furious that I’d interrupted his festive event. I remained where I was, trying to locate the girl I’d seen before. She’d disappeared into the bowels of the restaurant.

“Francesco Arturo in the flesh and blood. I’m so sorry to hear about the attempt made on your life.”

I casually glanced in his direction, noticing the smirk on his face. He was shocked and on edge, which was good for me. “A part of business and nothing more, Dante. I’m certain you’ve been made aware of the dangers without our world.”

“Ah, yes. Have you come to provide your congratulations, Francesco?” Dante asked as two of his soldiers flanked his side. They had enough arrogance to unbutton their jackets, allowing Cay and me to see their weapons.

“I didn’t realize there was anything to congratulate you about, Dante. This is a public restaurant and bar. I simply came in for a drink.” If he had any idea of Chrissy’s level of importance to me, the arrogant man would show it in some manner. If that was the case, I’d be forced to expedite the plans I’d only seconds before completed.

“Well, you’ll hear about this tomorrow as I have an announcement going out in every local newspaper. I’m engaged to be married. The insanely gorgeous, talented woman will become my queen when I take over from my father just weeks from now. She’s intelligent, witty, and beautiful. A perfect combination.”

I did enjoy when a man gloated. Dante’s arrogance would ultimately be the reason for his downfall.

“I hadn’t heard you were engaged. I assume congratulations are in order. You do know what they say about intelligent women, don’t you?”

“No, I’m afraid I don’t.”

“That they will strike like venomous snakes when their husbands aren’t looking.” While we both laughed, it was obvious their relationship was as contentious as Dominick had indicated. “And I hadn’t realized you’d found the right one. The last time I noticed, the tabloids pegged you for a consummate playboy.”

I doubted he had a clue how close we’d been. When I spotted the older man I’d seen before, likely her father, I realized he certainly had no interest in who or what I’d been to her. The element of surprise would be helpful.

“Yes, well, you should know looks can be deceiving.”

“Yes, they can.” I shifted closer, turning to face him.

“It’s a shame I can’t send you an invitation to our upcoming wedding,” Dante mused. “But I understand you have your hands full with attempting to track down the killer.”

I smiled, taking a few seconds to enjoy my drink. The game was interesting, but I grew bored easily.

“I’m going to offer you a single piece of advice, Dante. Do not attempt to destroy my family. If you do so again, you’ll find out my particular brand of wrath is quite painful.”

“I’ll take that as a threat, which surprises me.” He grinned, acting as if my words meant nothing to him.

“I never make threats. I would have thought you’d know that by now. I make promises.” I’d drawn two lines in the sand tonight. I couldn’t wait to see which asshole crossed one of them first.

“Ah, yes, the hired gun of a worthless man from LA. Right? You’ll never be anything other than a hired gun and you certainly don’t live up to your father’s reputation.”

If the man was trying to goad me into reacting, he was failing. Although if anyone else had made such an egregious statement, they’d already have a bullet between their eyes.

Friend or foe.

“Be careful, Dante, your jealousy is showing. That doesn’t bode well for a supposed leader. Remember what’s most important is also what can be used against you. I happen to be the best at evening the score. But on my terms. My time.” I never put my enemies on notice. I was playing an entirely different game. Dante and I were far too much alike, although his heightened level of testosterone was behind the majority of his decisions. That would push him into rattling chains, which would translate into doing something stupid.

“Another threat. I find that most disconcerting.” He threw back the rest of his champagne, his grin returning. Yet I noticed the flash of concern in his eyes.

“As I said before. Not a threat at all.” I noticed Cayman had made his way through the room, the smug look on his face indicating he had information to provide. “I would love meeting your future bride, but maybe I’ll take a taste instead. There’s nothing like the sweet taste of a virgin.”

Making the comment was crass of me, lower than I usually went, but the man had rubbed me the wrong way since we’d met in college. What I also hadn’t anticipated was his response.

“Unfortunately, neither one of us would have that pleasure. She’s soiled goods. I’m doing her family a favor.”

His words irritated me immediately, my rage flaring, I almost lost my cool, starting the battle prematurely. I wanted to smash

his face into the brick exterior, crushing his spine then cutting off his limp dick. He didn't deserve to be in the same room as someone like Chrissy. And he certainly wouldn't have a chance to soil her any further than he believed she'd been.

My original statement to the beautiful dove had returned and would remain.

She. Was. Mine.

Not because this was a game or because of what I would achieve in taking her from the pig standing in front of me but because I adored her. My feelings and desires hadn't ceased. No, they'd grown stronger with time.

"The value of a woman isn't in the flesh of her being but in the brilliance of her mind and the love in her heart. Once you realize that, Dante, maybe you'll be able to handle advancing to the throne. That's the single reason your father never advanced from being a common criminal, a bug to squash under my boot." I turned my head toward him, staring into his eyes. "And I'll enjoy eliminating every cockroach in your organization. Have a wonderful party."

I placed the champagne glass on one of the trays, leaving the restaurant without a second look. Before I headed across the street, Cayman joined me.

"Where is she?" I asked once we'd reached the other side.

"You were right. She was removed from the premises. Don't worry, boss. The car is being followed."

I nodded, draining the rest of my bubbly. "Alright. I want to know where she's taken. Then we wait and watch for the right time for me to risk talking to her. If I can't get that, I'll just take her."

He grinned. "You're getting more formidable in your old age."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"Either that or you're in love."

Laughing, we both headed for the car. Love wasn't something I'd expected, nor did I believe in second chances. Maybe all the fables he'd learned from his mother were true.

Fate had provided me with the only destiny possible.
And God help me if I fucked it up again.

CHAPTER 19



“Then move not, while my prayer’s effect I take. Thus from my lips, by yours, my sin is purged.”

—Romeo

Francesco

My father had told me that fate would be cruel or absent but that it would never be kind. I’d never thought of so many of my father’s statements as I had during the last few days. Now I knew the reason.

I’d felt her presence long before I’d walked into the restaurant.

I’d sensed her being, the woman who’d changed my life even though I hadn’t wanted to admit it.

She was the reason I’d softened or that I could better interact with my family, even showing love.

“You’re sure you don’t want to take her tonight?” Cayman asked as we walked toward Dominick’s church. The moon was bright in the sky, illuminating the golden lights surrounding the courtyard. I stood staring at the front double doors, remembering the last time I’d been here. It hadn’t been by my choice, two of my men lying in blood on the front concrete steps. Dominick had been required to help me clean up the mess.

It was another secret the two of us kept together.

She'd been taken to a brownstone almost directly across the street from Dominick's church, my two soldiers remaining watching both the front and the back of the expensive home until our arrival. By then, she'd already made her way inside, maybe hoping for answers.

"No. My guess is that she doesn't want to see me. She's terrified." I remained conflicted, which surprised me. I wasn't usually hesitant about making a decision of this kind but with so many pieces on the table, Max's advice of finding out how far the Bianchis' reach went was absolutely necessary.

"Of you or what Dante will do?"

I slowly turned my head. "She doesn't know me, Cay. Not really anyway. For all she knew, I was a businessman, even if she guessed my occupation. I think seeing me in the same room as the man she can't stand has her questioning everything, including the time we spent together. And sadly, things didn't end well because I chose not to tell her the truth of why I was concerned."

"Ah."

The single word was defining. I'd been a stupid, arrogant ass.

There'd always been something reverent about standing in front of a Catholic church. I was a sinner. That no one could argue. I remembered my father's attempts at following through with what I'd been told was my mother's strong beliefs, although his lack of faith had prevented her guilt-riddled son from buying good versus evil for a split second.

I'd never forget the single time my father had been arrested. The crime he'd been accused of committing was heinous and brutal, something I knew he'd been guilty of as I'd watched him carry out the savage murder. Of course the charge didn't stick, my father going free within hours. While he'd attempted to block his children from the carnage carnival of the press, I'd snuck out of the house, stealing one of my father's cars and observing in amusement the circus my father had talked about.

There'd been press everywhere, people holding up signs touting that my father was the devil reincarnated.

The family's attorney, the former treacherous Consigliere, a pompous, greedy bastard, had acted as if he was giving an Academy Award-winning speech. He'd encountered boos from every side, tomatoes thrown at both men while being told they'd burn in hell.

The chaotic scene was one I'd never forget. Shortly thereafter, my father had walked into this very church of his own accord, asking for atonement after confessing his sins.

It was interesting that the former priest had been disavowed shortly thereafter, which had eventually led to Dominick obtaining the parish location so quickly.

As soon as Cayman and I walked inside, I took a deep breath, half expecting to burst into flames. The quiet calm of the moment offered sweet peace, which was an unexpected and pleasant surprise.

Almost immediately, Cayman dropped to one knee, giving the sign of the cross.

I thought better of it, doing my best not to push my luck. After he kissed the small gold cross he always wore around his neck, he stood. Then he immediately swept the massive facility with his always observant eye. The moment he unbuttoned his jacket to allow for access to his weapon, I pushed the back of my hand against his stomach, shaking my head.

"Force of habit," he said.

"A good one but not necessary. You're certain Christiana is here?" I'd done a basic google search on the ride over. While quick, it had provided me with the information I needed.

Christiana Lorenzo, daughter of a rather notorious Chicago Don. The only child, her mother murdered years before. No wonder she and I connected so easily. If I had to guess, I'd say on the night we'd met, her father had tried to sell her off to another high bidder.

And I'd interfered.

I'd soiled her.

Should I feel guilty? Maybe. But I didn't. Instead, it was just another tether of ownership.

He scanned the area, nodding after doing so. It was obvious he hadn't noticed her since walking in. "The men watched her walk inside."

"Did anyone follow her?"

"No. But you know it's only a matter of time before she's noted as missing."

"Perhaps not until morning. That will give me time to at least talk with her." If she would talk to me. That remained to be seen. "See if you can locate the girl. My guess is she doesn't want to be seen from the entrance. Let me see if I can find Dominick."

"Will do."

Given the hour and the day of the week, there were only a few parishioners inside the church. While Dominick had a modest home located a few miles away, he often spent the night in the two rooms he used as an office.

I suspected after what he'd told me two nights before, he was here, his attempt at consoling his guilt all he could think about. My footsteps echoed as I moved down the left side of the church, a couple of people who were praying tipping their heads in my direction. As always seemed to happen, they watched me intently as if I was here to make trouble. There was no sign of her, but this wasn't the only location where she could find solace in her prayers.

I moved closer to the altar while keeping a respectable distance, staring up at the stunning stained glass arched window.

The last time I'd been inside had been for Raleigh and Maxwell's wedding, the incredible event the first time I'd felt anything other than anger after my father's death. At least I could smile thinking about it. I shoved my hands into my pockets, noticing Dom's approach from the shadowed corridor leading to the set of offices a few seconds later.

As he held out his hand, I was surprised by his gesture but accepted. Then he pulled me into a bear hug, clapping me on the back.

“What are you doing here? Coming to confession?” he asked, keeping his voice low.

It used to surprise me seeing the man in his cassock, the long, dark garment his choice when inside his church. Now nothing surprised me any longer. “She’s here.”

“Who?”

“Christiana Lorenzo. She’s being married off to Dante Bianchi.”

He pulled me closer to the hallway opening, shaking his head. Then he glanced at the few people in the pews, his face pensive. “I haven’t seen her, Fran.”

“Would you tell me if you had, Dom? It’s important I talk with her.”

“Not inside this church.”

“Then I’ll wait until she’s finished.”

His expression soured. “What did you do?”

“I haven’t done anything yet. As I said, I need to talk to her. She’s being used. And what I’m doing is business, Father. She happened to be in a restaurant suffering her engagement party. Before I had a chance to talk with her, she was removed from the premises. This is about a conversation and nothing else unless I can be the one to offer her refuge.”

“No, all you want to do is incite a war. I can’t and won’t allow you to do that inside my parish. I know how you feel about her, but you need to question whether or not you’re using her as well for retaliation or to garner more power. That’s not fair to that girl and I won’t be a part to it. Do you understand?”

“The bullets that killed my two men were meant for Maxwell. Do you want that on your conscience?”

I’d gone too far, pushing our friendship to the brink. We both knew it and it was something I’d never done before. He

glanced over my shoulder, which prompted me to do the same, watching as a woman in a cloak headed for the confessional box. I could feel it was Christiana.

I searched for Cayman, unable to see him from where I was standing. Then Dominick moved into my line of sight, preventing me from seeing who entered the confessional boxes.

“How dare you, *Mr. Arturo*. Out there you might be able to command people what to do but inside this church, I’m the man in charge. If that’s something you can’t understand, then I suggest you remove yourself, Fran. Now, I have work to do.”

He tried to walk away and I stopped him with a savage yank.

“What do you think you’re doing?” he snapped.

I took a deep breath, glancing away because in truth, I found it difficult to look into his eyes. “This is my Chrissy. Christiana Lorenzo. What are the odds, Father, that she was brought into my life a second time? I was a fool to let her go before. I can’t do that again. Dante will hurt her and if he finds out I was her first, then he’ll kill her. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“Do you care about anyone but yourself?”

“You know the answer to that question. My family is all that matters to me.”

His exhale was ragged. “You have a significant dilemma, my friend. If everything you told me about that night is true, you hurt her terribly. It doesn’t matter how much passion you shared. What did matter was what you said to push her aside. Don’t do this unless you intend on caring about more than just business. Don’t do this unless your entire world is rocked by that woman. Is she the one you live and breathe for? Is she the one you can’t stop thinking about, the girl you’ll take a bullet for? Is she the one you’re ready to give your whole heart to?”

I finally looked him in the eyes. “Yes. I love her, Dom. I think I fell in love the moment she jumped in front of my car on that rainy night. I was just too stubborn to admit it. She is all I want and I’ll do anything to keep her safe.”

The quiet between us was haunting. He was so fucking right that I could barely breathe.

“After you lost your mother and father, you refused to get close to anyone. You shut yourself down, pretending that if you dared care about a single human being then you’d lose your grip on reality as well. The night Christiana smashed into your life you were at one of your lowest points because of Joey’s death. Did you know I asked Maxwell to call me when you left the birthday party that night?”

“Why?” I hadn’t seen this level of concern in his eyes since the night Joey had been killed. The man had literally tackled me to the ground to keep me from doing something stupid. What he and my other buddies had experienced in trying to keep me out of jail and from slaughtering the assholes responsible had been horrific and admirable.

“Because I was certain you were going to put a bullet in your brain and I was determined to keep that from happening. Because I care about you.”

Fuck. I hadn’t realized I’d seemed that bad off. “I don’t know what to say.”

“That girl saved your life. After that, you had hope again. Why you pushed her away I can’t understand entirely but the reason she’s back into your life is because you wished and prayed for it to be true. Yes?”

The man could see right through me every damn time. Half laughing, I nodded. “Yeah, maybe.”

He patted my arm, glancing to the side. “I’ll help you to a point, Fran, but if you screw this up, we will no longer be friends. That girl is in love with you. I’m certain of it. But she also refuses to allow herself to be hurt. Again. I won’t allow that to happen either. Do you hear me?”

I glanced toward the confessionals and sighed. “Loud and clear, my friend.”

“Then stay here and out of sight or you’ll spook her. Can you do that?”

“You know how I am.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.” After giving me a hard look, he walked away, heading for the confessional boxes.

I hung my head, rubbing my scruffy jaw as I tried to figure out what I could say to the beautiful creature other than I was sorry for my atrocious behavior.

Dom’s words had affected me more than he would likely realize. He’d been a friend even when I hadn’t been able to stand myself. The man was as close to being pure and holy as anyone I’d ever met.

Only Max and my sister came close.

A smile curled across my face and I moved out of view, trying to keep from feeling anxious and excited. A man like me didn’t deserve a second chance. That was in the rule book somewhere for monsters and bad men. I was more than a bit of both.

I yanked out my phone, my patience already wearing thin. Fortunately, Maxwell picked up on the second ring.

“Francesco. I’m surprised. Is everything okay?” Max asked, the concern in his voice obvious.

“I need to talk with you in the morning. There have been some developments you need to know about.”

“I’m more than curious since I just noticed a message from our beloved mayor.”

I laughed softly. “That’s part of it. I have a plan, one you’re not going to like, but I will explain.”

“Then I’ll make time. Why don’t you come to the office?”

“I will.”

“Incidentally, a threat was made.”

“What?” I bristled. “Against the family?”

“Yes.”

Fuck. I was going to kill the Bianchis with my bare hands.

“Then I’ll send some soldiers.”

“Don’t worry. We’re safe. It was a shot across the bow.”

“Alright. But this will end, Max. And this time, I want to do it my way.”

“I trust you, Francesco. You’re coming into your own.”

I ended the call, bringing the phone to my head. I refused to place her life in danger, but I had to talk with her. I needed to convince her that I would never allow her to be placed in harm’s way.

And that I loved her.

Exhaling, I turned my head just as I noticed the silhouette of a woman, both Dom and his visitor headed into the cramped box that I’d always found claustrophobic. Then I turned toward the confessionals just as the door was closed.

My God. Excitement and need tore through me, so much so I couldn’t think clearly.

I was angry but also frustrated with myself. I was elated and furious with the situation. And I needed her more than anything. Pushing my closest friend wasn’t something I’d ever intended on doing. Thank God, he knew me better than anyone and understood me even when I usually had no freaking clue about myself. I did what I could to hold still, my heart racing. Fuck this. If she thought she was getting away from me, she had another think coming.

She was mine. Forever mine.

We’d painted each other with our scents. We’d forged a moment in time, one that far too many people had tried to strip away. But fate wanted us together.

So be it.

CHAPTER 20



*F*rancesco

I took aimless steps toward the confessional boxes, determined to remain until he was finished. I never offered an apology but to him, I would make an exception. I sat down only a few feet away, dropping my head into my hands.

This wasn't seeking solace or absolution for anything. I was simply trying to find a different way to retaliate. If I had Dante and his father assassinated, his soldiers would likely retaliate. That's what they'd been trained to do. All it would take was for my niece or nephew to be in a less protected environment and their lives would be taken.

God. Why was I even entertaining the idea of having a family, arranged or not? I rocked back and forth, coming to the conclusion that preventing the wedding was the right thing to do. That meant keeping the girl on lockdown until Maxwell, Viper, and I determined a course of action. Then maybe I'd become the girl's salvation, attempting to provide her protection until I could send her back to her life.

The idea was foreign to me.

I was a selfish creature by nature. I was used to collecting and keeping what I didn't want anyone else to touch. While that hadn't included human lives up to this point, another one of Maxwell's influences, that didn't mean I wasn't interested in doing so. I was greedy by nature and by birth, the money and trinkets I'd collected never enough to satisfy me.

I'd amassed a fine collection over the years, toys and bobbles others would consider treasures. To me they'd become expected, passé. My flexible morals and my sadistic needs made for a man no woman would ever want to enter into a relationship with, even though at least a dozen women had made the suggestion.

God, I'd turned into an egotistical pig. The thought brought yet another smile to my face. I'd never once thought about apologizing for it, yet here I was twice in one night thinking I owed the entire world an apology for existing.

That shit had started the night I'd fucked a virgin.

No. The crude words didn't fit the scenario even a little bit. That had been the first and only time I'd made love with a woman. I'd felt closer to her than I had to anyone, the powerful emotions impossible to forget.

I rubbed my jaw then clenched my fist just as Cayman eased onto the pew beside me.

"I didn't see her."

"That's okay. She's talking with Father Saltori."

Cayman nodded. "Do you need me to find out about the wedding?"

"Yeah. Every detail. Then I'll decide when to take her. I also have a plan in mind that I'm going to talk to Maxwell about tomorrow. We will play this carefully. I want Dante and his father comfortable with what's going to happen. Whatever happens tonight, I want at least two soldiers watching Christiana at all times. And I want to know what Dante is working on, his plans."

"What about Dante himself? Are you going to handle him prior to the wedding?"

There was nothing I wanted more than to put a bullet between his eyes, but I was listening to more than just the words Maxwell had told me. I was paying attention to my gut. About damn time I did so.

“If Bianchi hurts her, I want to know. Otherwise, have the soldiers remain in the background, far enough away they aren’t seen. If you get wind of that anyone has detected our presence, she will disappear. That cannot happen. Period.”

I thought about three years before, the stupid foot soldier in my employ who’d been Dante’s friend. That’s when I hadn’t checked the men I’d considered employing as thoroughly as I did now. The asshole had acted as if he believed he’d done nothing wrong by supplying information about the bachelor party and the details about the wedding. Now I’d return the favor.

But my way.

“Understood, boss. You have my word I’ll protect her with my life.”

“I know you will.”

A single sound drew my attention and I glanced over my shoulder, immediately jerking to my feet. Both confessional doors opened, Christiana stepping out first. She hesitated, lifting her head, the hood of her cape falling to her shoulders. As she looked toward me, it seemed the world had stopped revolving.

When the girl stepped from the dark confines, the shadowed light and closeness allowed me to see her beautiful face, the one I’d seen in my dreams so often.

“She is incredible,” Cayman half whispered.

“More than you know, brother. More than you know.”

I pressed my hand against my chest as our eyes locked, just as they’d done on a dark, stormy night three years before.

Dominick eased by her side, whispering something to her. She glanced at him then back to me, nodding only once.

“Chrissy,” I stated, my deep voice causing her to flinch.

There was such sadness in her eyes as she glanced down the length of me. At least she didn’t run away like I’d feared she would do, instead taking a single step toward me.

I shifted closer, realizing I was holding my breath. I wanted to touch her, taste her. I needed to be inside of her, but that wasn't going to happen tonight. Too much had happened, too many years passing by.

But goddamn it, I needed her more than the air required to breathe.

“Francesco Arturo.”

Christiana stated my name as if announcing that she knew me. She'd changed, but not only in the sense of her hair color. She was taller, her hourglass figure more pronounced, her face carved as if out of diamonds. Only where her eyes had once been filled with joy from sharing our moments of passion, they were now dull and lifeless, smudges of her eyeliner from crying creating far too many shadows.

And the bruise on her cheek couldn't be hidden by any amount of makeup. When I took another step closer, she threw out her arm.

“Don't,” she begged. “He'll hurt you. I can't allow that to happen.”

“No, my little dove. Dante can't hurt me, and I certainly won't allow him to touch you.”

“Don't make promises you can't keep.” Her lower lip quivered, her eyes searching mine. For truth. For reality.

For love.

I fisted my hands, obviously not finding the right words. “We need to talk for a few minutes. There are some things you need to hear.”

“That you're a bad man, Francesco? That you're no different than Dante? I already know that. It no longer matters. I just...”

“I didn't lie to you three years ago.”

“No, you didn't. We both wanted the fantasy, not the reality of who and what we are as people. Our families. Our lives. It's complicated and ugly.”

“It doesn’t have to be, at least not always. You need to try and trust me, Chrissy.”

“Don’t call me that. Chrissy was a girl who believed in love and knights in shining armor. I’m not that girl any longer. Besides, if Dante discovers me here, he’ll burn down the church.”

I glanced at Dom who moved directly beside her.

“Child. Talk to Francesco. Allow him to help you. My church will be protected by God. This is a house of worship. No man will ever be able to take it from all of us.”

“I wish I had your faith, Father, but I can’t. My own father has decided to throw me away.”

The sound of her voice was heartbreaking.

“Please. Just talk with him. He’s willing to give up his life to protect you. What happened between the two of you has haunted him as well. He tried to find you. You were all he could think about for years.”

Hearing Dominick’s conviction forced me to suck in my breath.

My gorgeous, innocent dove glanced into Dom’s eyes, searching his very soul for the truth I hadn’t been man enough to give her. Finally, she nodded, taking careful steps toward me. When she lowered down in the pew several feet away, I didn’t push her, stiff as I sat down. Cayman immediately left us alone, moving toward the entrance to ensure we wouldn’t be interrupted.

“You’re a criminal,” she said after a few seconds had passed.

“I am the Underboss of the Arturo–Powers syndicate. My godfather is the Don.”

“Your father was murdered.”

“Yes. What I told you was the truth.”

“Hmmm... My mother was too.”

“I know.”

When she lifted her head, turning it toward me, a single tear slipped past her lashes. “How do you know?”

“I guessed who you were based on what Dante said at the restaurant. I only know a little bit about your life, Christiana, and that wasn’t acceptable. Dante is using you to increase his power. I had to find out everything I could about you.”

“I’m not a fool, Francesco. I did grow up in a mafia family. My father honestly never bothered to hide who or what he was from his only child, a girl I finally realized he didn’t want anything to do with.”

“Then he’s a fool.”

I noticed she pressed her hand against her mouth. “He’s a savage and nothing more. Did you learn that my father had her killed?”

“Do you know why?” The anger continued to increase.

“Because she was in conversations with the Feds. At least that’s what he told me only days ago when he threatened me.”

“Do you believe it?”

I’d never heard a laugh so bitter. “Honestly? Yes, I do. I guess I’d thought they were in love but as I think back about her actions and some things she’d told me only weeks before her death, I can tell she was planning on escaping. I’m not just sure if she was going to take me with her. Isn’t that terrible? How could a mother not want her child? If I was so lucky...”

She couldn’t finish the sentence, lowering her head and rocking her body. I couldn’t help myself, easing closer to her but still keeping a distance. Right now, all I wanted to do was wrap my arms around her, holding her close. Fuck. Why was this so difficult?

What if I took her tonight, keeping her safe? The action would be dangerous, a war starting immediately. I had to play this smarter, but she already didn’t trust me. Fuck.

“The two of you are enemies,” she said before I made up my mind.

I thought about how to answer that. “I’m not going to lie. Yes, we are. More so than I originally thought.”

“Because of territory? Money?” She glanced into my eyes, a hopeful look in them. She longed to find a good man behind my dark eyes. I hated to tell her that I was the same kind of monster, only with different attire.

But she deserved the truth.

“Revenge. Sweet retaliation. A few nights before we met, Dante’s older brother came after my best friend at his bachelor party. He was shot down in cold blood, leaving his fiancée not only a grieving widow but a future single mother.”

“That’s horrible. I’m so sorry,” she whispered, inching closer. There was such emotion in her eyes that I could easily fall into them.

“I wanted to burn down the world and almost did. That’s the way I feel about you.”

“Why?”

“Why? Because I truly believe the connection we had, the passion we shared was the beginning of something special.”

“Then why make me leave?”

I laughed, the sound bitter. “Ironically because Joey was murdered by Dante’s older brother. I killed the man in cold blood, which almost started a war.”

Christiana half smiled. “Do you think Dante knows about us?”

“I don’t know how he could unless someone close to me fooled me for years. Other than my family members and the Consigliere of the regime, only two people know about your existence. However, until tonight, I didn’t know your full identity.”

She pressed her hand across her mouth, another tear falling. Then she wiped both away fiercely. “Do you believe in coincidences?”

“Not in the least. However, Dante will never be allowed to take you from me. You’ve always belonged in my bed and in

my life.”

“Don’t. I don’t belong to you. I’m not sure I ever did. Even if you really do care about me, I wouldn’t dare put you in harm’s way.”

“You underestimate me, little dove.” She needed more from me.

“It doesn’t matter, Francesco. There is a contract requiring me to marry Dante, but it’s not legal. I know that because I will be an attorney one day.”

I couldn’t help the smile crossing my face. “An attorney. How amazing.”

“For the right side of the law.”

Sighing, I scrubbed my jaw before dropping my head. “I’m not a good man, Christiana. I never said I was three years ago, but through the requirements of my godfather, most of our businesses are legitimate. We give to charities and families in need.”

“And you come to church praying for absolution?”

There was such sadness in her tone, the life sucked out of her the last few days.

“Dominick and I grew up together.”

“Oh.” She smiled, even giving the man another look. “He’s been very supportive. He offered to allow me to stay here. I can’t. I know what could happen.”

“You need to listen to me, my little dove. You do belong to me. You have since that night. I was a goddamn fool to allow you to walk away. That’s not happening again. But you will need to trust me. Do you think you can do that?”

She shook her head and looked away. “I want to, Francesco. But so much has occurred. We’re not the same people any longer. Plus, there’s too much at stake right now.”

“What are you talking about? Tell me what your father is holding over your head and I’ll fix it.” I meant what I said.

She let off an agonizing moan, the sound ungodly, shattering my last attempt at keeping my resolves around her. I moved closer, pulling her into my arms. At first, she tensed. Then she allowed me to hold her close, taking gasping breaths. “I can’t, Francesco. Just let me go.”

“Not this time.”

When she jerked into a standing position, I immediately did the same until she threw out her hand, this time the fire in her eyes also holding absolute terror. “No!”

“Talk to me, baby. What hold does your father have over you?”

“I can’t. I just can’t.” Her sobs were gut-wrenching.

I gave Dominick a quick look and his eyes were open wide. He lifted his gaze, shaking his head. She’d told him whatever shit her father had threatened her with. I knew it in my gut.

“We can’t go back, Francesco. I know how these games work. I know what will happen if I don’t marry that man. He’ll kill my father. As much as I hate the man, I don’t want him dead. I can’t have that on my conscience.”

Why did I have the distinct feeling she was holding something back? Whatever the wretched secret was, she was willing to go through with the ceremony in order to protect it.

“That’s not it. You and I both know it. Tell me the truth!” The tone was far more demanding than I’d intended. That forced her to scuttle backwards, almost tripping.

“Stop, Francesco. I love you but we can’t do this. I’m sorry. Just forget you know me. I just... No. No!”

Was she out of her mind? How could she ever think I’d forget or leave her alone for that matter? The possessive side of me had already breached the surface. All the planning and politics meant nothing if I couldn’t be with her.

“I am going to make certain you don’t marry that pig. You belong to me and you will always.” Repeating myself was only shaking her even more.

She backed away, glancing toward Dominick as he shook his head. The slowing of time allowed me to see the horror of the bruise on her cheek more clearly, rage bursting to the surface. “I will kill the motherfucker who hurt you. I will break Dante and his entire family.”

“You can’t do that, Fran.” Dominick attempted to move in front of me but I pushed him aside.

“Like hell I can’t. No one touches what belongs to me.”

“I don’t belong to you, Francesco. You made that perfectly clear three years ago. What we shared means nothing.” The defiance in her tone was entirely different. She was trying to push me away on purpose. What had the motherfuckers done to her? What?

I snapped, issuing an intense growl as I took two long strides forward. Dominick jumped in the way and I shoved him aside, terrifying the woman I was trying to protect.

“Yes, it does. You’re coming with me.” When I reached out for her, she scuttled backward, but the single touch of her skin, the electricity shooting between us was undeniable. Just like it had been before. The connection remained, one so intense and white-hot that my fingers felt blistered.

She rubbed her arm, tears forming in her eyes. “Please. Just leave me alone. Please. I beg you to honor my wishes.”

“No,” I snarled.

“Listen to me, Fran. You need to think about this.” Dominick’s reasoning voice barely registered. “For God’s sake, breathe and listen for once in your life. She doesn’t belong to you. She doesn’t want to be with you. Do you hear me?”

Blinking several times, I turned in his direction, furious at his words and interference. Then I could see the pain in her eyes, the anguish I’d caused by turning her away on a dark and lonely night.

Karma was a bitch but one I planned on using. That made me more than just a pig. I truly was a monster.

“Francesco,” she whispered then threw her hand out palm up, shaking her head. “You can’t. I don’t want you. You never meant anything to me, and I won’t allow you to interfere with my life. Be happy. Find someone else. Please.”

Her words were practiced, which meant she’d recognized me at the restaurant. What she couldn’t know was how aroused her sensual voice and firm words made me. She was entirely different than before, the realization of how much she’d changed pushing my cock into a painful fullness. She was much more self-assured, her anger given the situation fueling her actions. But she obviously had no idea what Dante would end up doing to her.

I took a deep breath, studying her intently.

“I’m afraid I can’t do that, little dove.” Dominick physically stopped me from moving any closer. It took everything I had not to punch him in the face.

“Don’t,” he hissed. “You need time. She does too.”

“I’m not your little dove and never was. Remember? You were the one who gave me wings, remember? I can’t do this. You just don’t... You can’t understand.”

What the fuck was going on?

“That won’t happen again. Wherever you go, I will find you. If that takes the rest of my life, then you will be mine. Hear me, Christiana. Your fate was sealed the day you walked in front of my car. You are mine. Always mine.”

I could tell she’d heard me, another tear slipping down her lovely cheek. There was such hesitation in her eyes, her expression something that would haunt me.

I issued another husky growl and as soon as I shoved Dominick away, she turned around and fled. Dominick refused to be treated as a pawn, remaining in my way. I could tell the man was prepared to fight me physically if necessary. What the hell was I doing? What game was being played?

“Goddamn it. Let her go, Francesco. You don’t understand what she’s dealing with.”

“And you do?” I spat, shaking him roughly then shoving him backwards until he almost tripped over a pew.

“Stop, Francesco. There’s more than just both your lives to consider. That’s why she’s so terrified.”

When he righted himself, I hissed. “I’m sorry.”

“No, you’re not, Francesco. You bulldoze your way through everything. You can’t do that now. Do you understand me?”

I took a deep breath, nodding.

“Just calm down. Think this through,” he encouraged.

“She is mine. I will have her in my life. I will ruin her father and kill that bastard Bianchi and his entire family. What the fuck were you getting at? Tell me. Tell. Me!”

Dominick glanced at Cayman as he flanked my side. “Then you’re going to need to listen to me. And I mean listen and not talk. Do you think you can do that?”

The tension between us was indescribable and I hated myself for what I’d just done.

Exhaling, I thought about his question and nodded. “Sure. Why not?”

“Good. Because what I’m going to tell you will likely damn my soul for all eternity, but it’s something you need to know. If it’s the truth, then it changes everything. Damn it.”

When he spoke, all the anger faded, replaced with an emotion I could barely understand. Gasping, I glanced up at the stained glass works of art.

For the first time, making the sign of the cross felt right.

And necessary.

Then I ran out after her, determined to show the stunning woman how much I loved her.

The beautiful girl who’d come into my life years before had returned, a perfect bird with injured wings.

Now it was time to make good on the promise I’d made to her.

Soon, she would belong to me. Only this time, the little bird would never be allowed to fly away.

CHAPTER 21



*C*hristiana

I knew he'd followed me.

The man I'd dreamt of. The man I desired.

The man I hoped to marry.

Francesco...

I waited in the courtyard, uncertain of almost everything else in my life except for the fact Francesco wouldn't be able to stay away. I believed him when he said he'd burn down the world in order to find me. A part of me wanted him to.

As I wrapped my hand around the iron railing facing the street, my heartbeat echoing loudly, I sucked in my breath.

There was more traffic than normal, cars whizzing by on the residential road as if determined to get to their destinations quickly. Yet in my mind, just like had happened before, the entire world stopped turning on its axis. I was risking so much by even being here, yet my father was far too busy being embroiled in business with Dante to pay any attention to the fact I still wasn't wearing the ankle monitor, finding a way to pretend I'd returned it into position. Given the device was a GPS tracker only, I'd simply slid it under the covers, using pillows to make it seem as if I was fast asleep.

Childish? Yes. Risky? Without a doubt, but the moment I'd laid eyes on Francesco, everything had changed.

Seconds later, I felt his presence and my pulse increased to the point I could feel it in my throat. The sound of his footsteps as he moved closer sent a wave of tingles starting at my chest, drifting slowly to my toes. The slight chill in the air brought a round of goosebumps, but the warmth between my thighs was increasing with every inch he drew closer. I closed my eyes, pretending we were the only two people in the world and that no one could ever find us. As I turned my head, I tried to keep from making a single sound.

We were stealing another few precious moments in time, creating another memory. I only hoped this one would lead to another.

And another.

“You thought you could run away from me,” he growled from right behind me, his heated breath skipping across my cheek. “You seem to forget that I’m the Big Bad Wolf.”

“You might be but I’m not Little Red Riding Hood.”

“I’m not certain about that, little dove. You are all grown up. The better to eat you.”

I don’t know why his teasing words created such a rumble of butterflies in my tummy other than to hear the deep longing in his voice was captivating. I kept my fingers tightly wound around the iron posts, moaning when he placed his hands on top of mine. Then he pressed his full weight against me and I arched my back, resting my head on his shoulder.

He pressed kisses against my cheek and I shuddered in his hold. “Take me away from all this, Francesco. Forever.”

“I will, baby. That much I promise you.” When he backed away, I stiffened but he quickly spun me around, cupping both sides of my face. “I’ve waited far too long for this moment, my sweet lady. I want you. I need you. I will have you.”

Francesco reeked of passion, so much so I was captured into a moment of sweet abyss, able to block out everything but the man standing in front of me. As he crushed his mouth over mine, I rolled my arms over his shoulders, tangling my fingers in his hair. I leaned into him, the kiss sweet yet explosive. My

blood pressure increased, my mind a whirl of thoughts and longings, incapable of putting two coherent words together.

The electricity was as if several bottle rockets were going off inside, fighting with the elements of fear. I no longer cared whether I was a good girl or not, preferring to be sullied by the powerful man and his insatiable needs. The taste of him was just as explosive as his touch, which seared every inch of my skin.

I was lightheaded, longing to laugh and cry at the same time. I'd thought this would never happen again. And I'd never wanted something so much. He pulled me off my feet and I couldn't help but wrap a leg around his, pulling myself in even closer. Just the feel of having his thick hair in my hands was incredible, so much so lights flashed in my periphery of vision.

He pulled me further into the shadows and against the aging brick, rolling his hips back and forth. The feel of his hardness pressed against me left me breathless. There was something so enigmatic about the way he dominated my tongue, tasting me as if he'd been abandoned in a desert for months, only now able to quench his thirst. When he broke the kiss, he raked his teeth from one side of my jaw to the other, his heavy breathing forcing me to laugh.

I clamped one hand around his arm, fearful he'd suddenly vanish, nothing more than an apparition, a wish manifesting itself into a bubbled fantasy. But as I squeezed his muscles, gyrating my hips back and forth, there was no denying he was very real.

And scorching hot.

A few seconds later, the rumbling sound of an engine sent a horrible wave of fear cutting through me like a sharp knife.

He eased back another few inches, grinning when I tried to bite back a whimper. "You're safe, baby. That's my driver. You're coming with me, if only for a little while."

"Where are we going?"

"Somewhere safe to talk. We have plans to make."

“Plans, huh?”

“Yes, little dove. From now on, our destiny is what we decide to make it. I’m surprised. You’re not wearing the ankle monitor.”

“How did you know about that?”

He chuckled. “You’re going to learn very quickly that there is little that goes on in my city I don’t know about. The Bianchis aren’t welcome here. My family and I plan on sending them back to Jersey where they belong.”

“What about me?” Every word out of his mouth dripped of superiority and ruthless power. It was exciting and terrifying at the same time.

“You’re not leaving the city unless I’m right by your side. Now, come with me.”

“What if something happens?”

He brushed his fingers lightly down my face. “Then we’ll deal with it.” He took a long stride away, taking my hand into his. I could tell he was giving me a single choice.

There wouldn’t be another.

I nodded, wanting nothing more than to spend time with him, basking in the moment of intense passion.

He kept me behind him as he led me from the courtyard, careful to keep me hidden from view as he opened the back door of a dark SUV, pushing me inside. After he scanned the area, he climbed in after me, immediately pulling me close then closing the door.

The driver tipped his head, glancing in the rearview mirror. “Where to, boss?”

“Anywhere but here, Cay. I need a little private time with the woman I love.”

“I have the perfect place in mind.”

To hear Francesco’s words made me tense. I lifted my head, peering into his eyes as the driver took off. Within seconds, the streetlights and those of open businesses, signs, and traffic

lights faded into a muted splash of colors as the man drove. He turned on the radio to a classical station, which caused another smile.

“Cayman is a friend as well as my Capo.”

“Capo. He goes with you everywhere?”

“Much to my chagrin,” Cayman said. I hadn’t noticed his island accent until now.

I laughed, the sound filtering into the space. Then Cayman did as well.

“He has missed you, pretty lady.”

“Cay. I will beat your ass if you provide any additional secrets.”

The boisterous laughter coming from the cab wasn’t something I’d expected. Then again, neither was anything about this night. I rolled the tip of my finger down the side of his face. “It’s really you.”

Francesco grabbed my hand, pulling my fingers to his mouth. I shivered to my core as he took the time to kiss one knuckle then another. His eyes never blinked, as piercing as they’d been before. I could do nothing more than get lost in them, even though there was much to say, horrible things to admit. I wasn’t certain how I’d manage because I knew what he’d do and how hard he’d take the news.

When we were a safe distance from the street where I’d been kept incarcerated, Francesco shifted his attention to what appeared to be a small bar I hadn’t noticed before. “Would you like a drink?”

“Why not? This night has been unexpected. Scotch, right?”

“You remember. I wish I’d prepared by bringing champagne or wine.”

“You mean now that I’m of age?” I laughed and it felt good to do so. “Scotch is fine. I quite like a smooth glass of Macallan or Old Rip Van Winkle. You should try 21 Hibiki. The taste is fabulous.”

He gazed at me in amusement before pulling out a bottle of Macallan, plopping two ice cubes in each crystal tumbler before pouring a hefty amount. As he handed me a glass, our fingertips touched, and I was thrown by the electricity of the lingering effects.

There was a series of vibrations, a light hum that kept me alive and on fire. As I brought the glass to my lips, I wasn't certain I could swallow without coughing. But I did. He turned slightly in his seat, placing his hand on my thigh possessively. I couldn't help but do the same so we were facing. For what seemed like forever, we studied each other, our heated gazes and scattered breaths likely fogging up the glass.

I couldn't care less, the moment a wish fulfilled. After taking a sip of my drink, I allowed it to remain in my mouth and leaned closer, wrapping my other hand around his shirt. When I pulled him down, the growl he issued sent another wave of tingles dancing through me.

Our lips touched and I was certain a jolt of electricity had crackled inside the dense space. Taking my time, I gingerly opened his lips, forcing the liquid into his mouth. Then I swept my tongue back and forth before pulling away, dragging the tip of my tongue around his full lips.

“Be careful, little girl. I am a predator.”

“So I've heard. But I'm no longer a little dove but a vixen in disguise.”

“Oh, really? Is that true?”

I bit my lower lip, keeping a pouting look on my face, marveling at the way the lights of the city illuminated his face as if his skin was shimmering. Then I took my time exploring his face, trailing the tip of my index finger across his forehead then down the bridge of his nose.

I shifted my gaze to his eyes, biting my lower lip as he watched me with amusement. Then I ripped at his tie, using one hand to try to yank the knot, groaning in frustration seconds later when I failed.

“It would seem my baby is hungry.”

“Yes.” The single word held so much emotion. I sucked in my breath, holding it as I wiggled my finger between two buttons, issuing a slight purr when I touched his chest.

His growl was deep and throaty, as if he was going to eat me alive. “Careful, my wild bird.”

“I’ve grown up and know exactly what I want. Why be careful?”

“Because I won’t be able to stop and you already know I have zero patience. This isn’t a game any longer, Christiana. I’m about to enter into battle to protect a woman that I should have claimed years before. You can either tell me to stop right now and I’ll walk away, or you can accept the fact that if we go any further, I will make good on the promise I made you three years ago.”

“The one you reneged on?” I don’t know if I was out to hurt him because of the suffering I’d endured but the look on his face was full of sadness, so haunted I was thrown by it.

He gripped my chin with enough force a hint of fear swept through my system. “I was a fool to want to protect you by turning you away. I’m not usually a man who has regrets, but this is the single one I will claim. I never want to hurt you.”

“You did.”

His firm hold turned into a soft caress, his fingers dancing across my skin. There was a point when thinking about the past no longer mattered. I wasn’t a little girl any longer and he was right in that this wasn’t a game. What we were doing was dangerous, but I had a sense his recklessness couldn’t be stopped. “I don’t want to ever leave your arms, Francesco. I’ve always belonged to you.”

His exhale was telling and he tensed, taking a deep breath. “Then so be it. If we’re damned, then we will accept that together.”

“Mmm...” I murmured then raked my finger down his chest to his leg, darting another quick look before licking my lips in an exaggerated motion. When I dared drag my fingertip across his thick bulge, he shifted in his seat uncomfortably.

“Goddamn it, woman.”

“I’ve missed you. There’s so much to say.” I could barely talk, my voice little more than a whisper. I had to tell him, to share the horror that had almost destroyed me the last few days. I just didn’t know how to say the words.

“You’re right, little dove, but not right now.” He threw back more of his drink then pried the glass from my fingers, placing both in two holders. Then without any conversation, he whisked me into his lap, forcing me to straddle his thighs. “I want you.”

“Here?”

He chuckled then slipped his hand around the back of my neck, squeezing. “Anywhere is perfect with you.” As he captured my lips again, I was aware Cayman had slowed, making a turn. When he stopped altogether, I glanced from one side of the SUV to the other, realizing we were near the water, staring out at the bright lights of the stunning yet dangerous city across the bay.

Almost immediately, Cayman stepped out, leaving us very much alone. I wasn’t worried about anyone looking in through the windows. Not only were they darkened but the parking lot of what appeared to be a harbor was empty.

“A view,” I said softly.

“Nothing but the best for my beautiful woman. No more talking. Right now, you are all mine.” Everything about him was possessive, more so than I remembered, yet there was also a gentleness that I wasn’t expecting, his white-hot touches and rippled growls keeping me on edge. I was wet and hot, my pulse racing as he wrapped his hand around my long strands of hair.

“Do you like the color?”

“Anything on you would look amazing, but nothing is better.” He ripped back my head then made a predatory sound as he licked and nipped my earlobe. “Make no mistake and hear me once and for all. After tonight, you are mine. No man will ever touch you again.”

“What about Dante?”

“As I said, no more talking. At least until after I ravage you.” The deep growl continued and as he bit down on my neck, I laughed and whimpered, incredible vivid lights flashing in front of my eyes. The entire world was spinning, my mind frozen in a state of increasing desire.

He raked his teeth across my neck before using his teeth to lower one spaghetti strap then the other, exposing my breasts. Every sound he made added fuel to the fire, every ragged breath creating a dangerous fog.

I could feel myself slipping into never-neverland, wishing I could stay here forever.

Somehow, I knew the sweet abyss wouldn't last for long, his hunger increasing exponentially. When he flicked his tongue back and forth across my nipple, I rocked against his thick bulge. That caused him to bite down on my already fully aroused bud until I cried out. The pain was glorious, everything I'd missed from the dominating man.

“Oh, my. You're so bad.”

He laughed, the hum of his voice tickling my skin. He took his time sucking on the already sensitive tip, finally rolling his lips to my other breast. Every sound he made accentuated the moment, pushing me further into a beautiful sublime state. The scents of our desire mixed together, filling the vehicle with a sweet smell of ambrosia, musky and tangy at the same time.

The thought as well as how sensitive I'd become made me laugh nervously, blinking several times in order to focus.

He issued a ragged breath in response, sliding his lips to my other nipple. When he bit down, there was no way to keep a cry from erupting. He was the kind of man who could fulfill every girl's fantasy, pushing her to the point of no return. Pure ecstasy was all I could think about, my beautiful and blurry mind accepting the delicious emotions that came with being with him.

While he took his time sucking and licking, I sensed he was starting to lose control. When he pushed me down onto the

seat, I pressed both hands against his chest, already breathless.

“What are you doing?” I asked, my voice barely recognizable.

“Feasting. I’m a famished man.” He rolled his hands under my dress, pushing it up past my waist. Then he rolled my thong down, his eyes never leaving mine as he performed the sinful deed.

I bent my knees, even lifting my legs to provide assistance. As soon as the material had been tossed aside, he lifted and opened my legs, immediately scooting back then hovering over me. “It’s been far too long, baby. I can’t wait to drive my cock deep inside of you.”

Gasping, I pressed my palms against his chest, half laughing as a wave of embarrassment rolled through me. The man was more than just insatiable. He was as wicked and dangerous as they came.

And I loved every moment of it.

His expression positively evil, he dragged his tongue down my abdomen, rolling the tip around my belly button, acting as if he had all the time in the world. If only I could reach his cock, I’d make certain he had other things on his mind than just teasing me. The heat continued to build between us, every nerve standing on end. Saying I was lost was an understatement.

When he breathed a swath of hot air across my pussy, I almost lost it, my toes curling and goosebumps now popping across every inch of my body. I tossed my head back and forth as he continued to keep full control, lowering his head, sticking out his tongue then pulling back.

After he repeated the action three times, I grabbed a fistful of his hair, pushing down his head. His deep baritone laugh filtered into the small space, echoing as did every other sound.

A brutal smack of his fingers against my slickened pussy was obviously a reminder that I had to follow his rules.

“Three years is a long time, I see,” he said in husky voice, the gravelly sound creating a wave of vibrations.

“Too long. Who are you?”

I was shocked either one of us could be playful, but as had occurred before, spending time with him was easy, as if we'd known each other for a long time.

As if we were soul mates.

“Let me remind you, sweet dove, that I own you. That means you follow my rules. Period.” As if to reiterate, he smacked my pussy three times in rapid succession. The pain was instant yet adding to the yearning.

Every sound I muttered was just as animalistic as his. I couldn't help but grin as I watched his expression go from playful to famished, his nostrils flaring and his jaw clenching seconds before he dropped his head again, darting his tongue around my clit several times.

“You know what happens if you disobey me.”

“Uh-huh,” I managed, almost ready to push him as I'd done all those years ago, but I was far too intoxicated with his scent, the burning need driving me to the point of madness.

“Tell me you'll be good.”

I bit my lower lip and he cracked his fingers down two more times, the sting creating an explosive wave of heat. “I'll be a very good girl.”

For a few seconds, he took his time soothing the ache, slathering my clit with the wetness of his tongue. I could easily climax this way and I had a feeling he knew it. Panting, I fisted his hair, marveling in how luxurious it felt, every muscle in my body already aching.

Then he wrapped his arms around my thighs, spreading them as wide open as they would go, immediately burying his head.

And in that moment, I said the words I hadn't thought I ever would again, the years fading into the distance as if they'd never happened.

“I love you.”

CHAPTER 22



*F*rancesco

For the second time I'd given Christiana a choice.

That wasn't like me.

I took everything I wanted. That was well known, my reputation created and grown by my actions. Granted, when I was around her everything seemed different, as if I could smash the hands of time or the effects of war. Maybe both.

What I didn't want to say to her was that while this wasn't a game, the strategies needed were similar to an act of war. I was completely cognizant that I was playing with her life, although if the bastard dared touch a hair on her head, I'd bring the wrath of God down so fast he wouldn't have time to take a single breath.

And I'd ensure that the agony he would endure was the worst of anything I'd inflicted.

What I did know for certain was that Christiana Lorenzo had always belonged to me. Fate had determined it years ago. It had simply taken eighteen years to bring the decision made upon our births to fruition.

Did that make me sound weak or perhaps superstitious? What the fuck did I care?

I was done waiting to lay claim to her for the final time. Tasting her was just the beginning. Fucking her into

submission would happen next.

After that? I'd save her from the atrocities of her life before I perfected our union inside a church.

My soul be damned if necessary.

"My perfect baby," I mused and buried my tongue into her tight channel, longing to drown myself in her like a man dying of thirst. As I lapped her cream, every sound she made enflamed the fire, every savage tug of her hand fisted around my hair continuing to drive me into insanity.

No other woman had done this. Only her. Always her.

My little dove.

My precious flower.

My lioness.

The taste of her was sweeter than before. If that was even possible. I swirled the tip of my tongue around her clit, pulling the tender tissue between my teeth and sucking. As she thrashed on the seat, I dug my fingers into her soft skin, drinking in her delicious essence.

I wanted to spend the entire night doing this instead of letting her go, requiring her to return to what I considered little more than a prison.

Hopefully, she would understand the next few days would need to be handled carefully in order for this to work without fear of continuous retaliation.

It was time for the bloodshed to end.

My sentiment was something else that surprised me.

As I dragged my tongue down her sweet pussy, her juice covering my tongue, she continued to writhe in my hold. I enjoyed watching her reaction, the way heated embarrassment floated across her jaw more than once. She was still so innocent no matter how tough she tried to make herself out to be.

However, being with me would tarnish every inch of her. I couldn't wait to do so, teaching her about the joys of BDSM,

watching the precious rosebud turn into a stunning flower. I licked fervently, thrusting my tongue inside. I rolled my hands over her legs, sliding open her pussy lips and exposing every inch of her.

She was far too delicious, delicate in a way that I still wasn't prepared to handle. I wanted to think that she'd been with no one else since we'd been together but that was ridiculous. However, what I'd told her was true.

No man would ever touch her again.

I spread her as wide open as possible, thrusting my tongue in long, even strokes, never blinking as I watched her pleasure continuing to increase. She'd turned into a powerful woman, one who didn't mind speaking her mind or baring her soul. However, with me, she was nothing but a kitten waiting to be nurtured, longing for praise in every aspect of her life.

I would shower her with that and so much more.

"Oh, God. Oh..." She licked her lips several times, kicking out her legs until she lost her heels. Then she pressed the ball of her foot against my shoulder, fighting to rise onto her elbows. When she finally managed to do so, her lips were twisted in amazement, her eyes glassy and unfocused. "What you do to me."

"Tell me," I muttered, pressing kisses against the inside of one thigh then the other, issuing a deep growl before shaking my head as I kissed her tender tissue. My face was slickened with her wetness, the scent of her delicious pussy a powerful aphrodisiac.

"You make me crazy with... desire and... I need you, all of you and..." She raked one hand through her hair, fighting to maintain a position as her body shook. "I'm going to come."

"Not yet. Not until I allow you to."

"My God. You're so mean!"

I lifted my head, nipping her clit then lifting my eyebrows. "Yes. I am." When I resumed the intimate action, she threw her head back, gasping for air as she laughed. Her body continued to shake, more violently than before. I could tell she

was doing everything she could to obey me, but that would only last but for so long.

After pulling one arm away, I teased her tender bud then thrust all four fingers inside, flexing them open.

“Oh. My. God!” Her scream had to be heard outside the SUV and I could only imagine Cayman grinning, perhaps saying that it was about time. I refused to stop even as she smacked her foot against my shoulder several times.

“Please. Oh, please let me come. I’ll do anything.”

“Anything?” I roared.

“Yes, sir. Oh, yes. Please.”

I needed to be inside of her. This was as much torture to me as it was to her. After a few seconds, I sucked on her clit then lifted my head. “Come for me, little dove. Come on my tongue so I can fuck your pussy raw.” I barely had time to drop my face into her wetness when she bucked up from the seat, the fingers of one hand wrapping around my long strands of hair, the other clawing the leather seat.

And her squeals could set the world on fire.

“Yes. Yes. Yes!”

As a climax roared into her, I shook my head back and forth, savoring every drop of her sweet cream as she filled my mouth. I could do this for hours except my cock was aching like a son of a bitch, throbbing with the same irregular beat as my thumping heart. The woman had some kind of crazy hold over me. There would never be a way to get enough.

A single orgasm morphed into a giant wave, her entire body remaining tense, her eyes open wide and now her screams were silent. Strangled.

I rolled one hand up to her long neck, wrapping my fingers around her throat, applying gentle pressure. That’s the moment she erupted again, bucking so hard I had to fight to keep her on the seat.

“Yes. Yes...” When she flopped back onto the seat, only then did I slow my actions, still licking. Still sucking. Causing her

to float into a wave of nirvana. When she lolled her head to the side, I pressed another series of kisses on one inner thigh then the other before easing back.

I fought with the tight confines of the jacket, ripping it off as she finally opened her eyes, staring at me in wide-eyed wonder. Then a sly smile crossed her face as I jerked at my tie, yanking it over my head. I wasn't expecting her to sit up with a hard tug, taking both hands and ripping my shirt wide open, buttons flying everywhere.

"I need to see you. Feel you." Christiana pressed every fingertip against my chest and the heat and electricity became combustible.

"Fuck," I managed, taking gasping breaths as she raked her nails down my chest, tugging at my belt. I allowed her the few seconds of control, unfastening the buckle. As soon as she did, she darted her eyes up to my face, her cheeks glistening from perspiration and the warm glow of the single light outside the back window. "Careful, baby. I might burn you."

"Is that a threat or another promise?"

Oh, the woman liked playing with fire. "Maybe a little of both."

"Don't worry, bad man. I can handle the heat." She jerked at the leather strap, fighting to get it undone.

"Enough." With that, I yanked her down on the seat by several inches, straddling her as I finished unfastening both the belt and my trousers. This was... incredible.

She laughed softly as she rubbed her leg against mine, teasing me relentlessly. I wanted to turn her over and spank her tight little ass, but I was far too hungry, my needs off the charts. I allowed her to fumble, her hands shaking as she tugged the material over my hips, revealing my fully engorged cock.

Then she purred and licked her lips, and all my control was almost tossed out the window. The second the feisty kitten wrapped her hand around the base of my shaft, I slammed my hand against the back of the seat, gasping for air as I'd done

before. Her touch alone sent a spark of electricity into my system, driven so deep my bones ached.

She knew exactly what she was doing to me, lifting her gaze, her eyelids half open. When she dared roll her other hand between my legs, cupping and squeezing my balls, my entire body tensed.

“So big. So in need,” she whispered, twisting her other hand around the base of my cock, the friction creating tingles of anguish as well as extreme pleasure. I hadn’t been with anyone in so long I couldn’t think straight, my muscles aching. She rolled her hand up and down, squeezing my cockhead. Within seconds, a glisten of pre-cum appeared. She promptly rolled the tip of her pinky through it, taking her time bringing her hand to her mouth.

“So bad. You will pay for this,” I told her.

“I can’t wait to see you try.” She slipped her finger into her mouth, sucking in an exaggerated manner.

I watched her intently for a few minutes until I couldn’t take it any longer, shifting up by a few inches. “Open your mouth, little girl.”

“And if I don’t?”

“You do remember what spankings feel like. Yes? If not, you’ll soon learn.”

Christiana pouted at first then opened her mouth, her eyes glassing over as I thrust my cock inside. The way her hot little lips clamped around the thick invasion was euphoric and I threw my head back, issuing a strangled sound that erupted into something more animalistic.

Her tongue darted back and forth as she savored the required action, making soft moaning sounds the entire time. I was certain her mouth was on fire, my body shaking from a crazed adrenaline rush.

I placed my hand on the passenger window, leaning over and pumping deep into her mouth. When the tip hit the back of her throat, the slight gagging sound made me smile. “That’s it, baby. Take all of me. Every inch.”

As I peered down at her, watching several emotions cross her face, I was enthralled not only by her beauty but also the glisten in her eyes. For a few minutes we were both at peace, our desire outweighing every aspect of danger or anything else.

I continued pumping, the tension increasing. She swirled her tongue around my shaft, every slurping sound adding to the electric moment. I could easily erupt into her throat or enjoy painting her with strings of cum, but I refused to waste the moment. The need to be buried deep inside of her outweighed everything else.

Beads of sweat formed across my brow from doing what I could to keep control. Finally, I'd had enough of waiting.

Seconds later, I pulled out, taking a full minute to calm my breathing as she whimpered underneath me, brushing her fingertips against my heated skin.

"Fuck me," she whispered hoarsely.

As I lowered my head, the sight of her entire face lit up, her eyes sparkling in the light did more to me than I could imagine. I loved this woman. It seemed impossible I could have the deep-seated emotion within me, but it was the truth. I not only wanted to protect her. I needed to make her happy, to have her bear my children.

And I wanted to grow old with her by my side.

I lifted one of her legs, pressing kisses against her skin, dragging my tongue up and down her knee. She continued to reach for my cock, her chest rising and falling from her labored breathing. Did the wild girl have any idea what she was doing to me?

The change in her was fantastic, but I adored the little dove still nested inside of her. As I positioned the tip of my cock between her swollen folds, she tilted her head, never blinking as she stared at me.

This time the connection was different. This was creating one sense of being, two people becoming one. In the craziest

moment possible. In the back of an armored SUV. In the middle of an empty parking lot.

The thought was ridiculous but telling of how close we'd become. In truth of how intense our relationship had been from the start.

While karma was a cruel bitch, she also allowed us to return to each other through space, time, and danger.

I slipped just inside, holding my stance as I peered down at her once again. I wanted this to last all night, the passion entirely different. She pressed her hands against me, gathering my shirt into her fingers and arching her back as much as the tight confines would allow.

"I love you," she whispered.

"And I love you, little dove. You are mine. Then again, you always were." As I sank the rest of my cock inside, I threw my head back, thanking God for bringing her back to me. This wasn't about selling my soul any longer but about showing the woman I loved that there was good inside of me.

Was it crazy? Absolutely.

Necessary? Maybe.

But it was exactly what I wanted for her. For us.

And for our children.

As I pumped deep inside, a single tear slipped from her lashes, sliding ever so slowly down her shimmering cheek. I could tell it wasn't one of sadness but joy that we were together. Leaning over, I dragged my tongue through the salty bead, the flavor just as sweet as the woman lying underneath me.

She pulled my shirt, her increasing needs evident by the look on her face. Everything about this moment was powerful, one that no one could ever take away. I developed a rhythm, driving in and out, her pussy muscles clamping and releasing, pulling me in even deeper. She was so hot and wet, our bodies on fire and I was crazed with continued need.

I yanked one arm over her head then the other, easily wrapping my fingers around her wrists. However, it was apparent she

had no desire to go anywhere. As she wrapped her leg around my hip, using her thigh muscles to keep me close, we locked eyes, the moment frozen in time. The sounds were animalistic, my actions more brutal than minutes before, but I couldn't seem to get deep enough.

The sound of our skin smashing together was just as powerful as everything else, the hard rocking likely seen from a hundred feet away. But I didn't give a shit. This was what life was made of.

Not wealth.

Not power.

Certainly not influence.

It was made by being with someone I cared about.

She pursed her lips, her eyes half closing and I could tell she was close to coming.

“That’s it, baby dove. Come for me. Come on my cock. Come with me. Together, we’ll make a beautiful family.” As soon as the words slipped past my mouth, she opened her eyes wide, the deep concern and sadness something that would haunt me for weeks to come.

But there was no stopping what we’d started, no time to reflect on what this or anything else could mean. As her muscles clamped around my thick invasion, her body writhing and shaking under mine, I held on as long as I could.

“Oh. Yes. Yes. Yes!” She jerked up from the seat, fighting my hold as an orgasm swept through her.

I lifted my head, taking several deep, ragged breaths. Then I let go, erupting deep into her womb, filling her with my seed.

Seconds later, beads of sweat trickled down from both sides of my face to her neck and shoulders and I was gifted with a lovely laugh. As I lowered my head, both of us trying to relearn to breathe or think clearly, I watched as she licked her parched lips.

“I need to tell you something, Francesco, something I only recently learned. I’m so sorry. I just...”

I placed a finger over her lips, shaking my head. “I already know, baby. I already know. You’re going to need to trust me because some shit is going down that will be dangerous, risky to both of us. But I promise you that nothing is going to happen to my family. Nothing. Can you trust me, little dove? Will you work with me?”

Christiana pressed her hand against my face, a slight smile offering a sense of hope as well as continued peace. “You’re the only person I can trust. Bring our family together. I love you, my knight.”

Some knight I’d turned out to be.

However, I made another silent promise. To myself.

To the woman I loved.

And to the little boy I’d never known I had.

I would find our son.

CHAPTER 23



*F*rancesco

“You’re certain this is going to work out?” I asked as I glanced from Viper back to Maxwell. The two men had followed me from the main office on the top floor of a building we owned in the heart of Manhattan. Everyone in the city knew the building belonged to the Arturo–Powers Corporation, the exclusivity and posh interior of the rental offices considered the finest in the world. No expense had been spared, including providing a five thousand plus square foot courtyard full of greenery and nature, a respite for those in need.

We often had meetings in the lush space, enjoying the sunshine or occasionally a snowfall.

But today the three of us stood on the street, the traffic sounds more enjoyable than the coos of birds in the courtyard trees.

We’d completed our business, including meeting with the mayor and the prosecutor for the city of New York. In return for our support, he was providing necessary muscle in an entirely different way. The game we were playing was risky, but I had to give Maxwell credit. The ploy was one of the best I’d ever heard about.

Viper grinned. “He has little faith.”

“Oh, I have faith. But Dante has a hell of a lot to lose by taking the bait,” I told him in reply. All I’d been able to think about was Christiana and the sacrifices she’d been forced to

make over the last few days, the fear that must be eating her alive.

Maxwell clapped me on the back. “A wise man once told me that patience wasn’t just a virtue. It was a necessary evil in the world of violent men.”

“I’m curious, Don Powers, who was that wise man?” I couldn’t help but grin. After what Dominick had told me, I’d almost gone on a rampage, but Maxwell had offered his support, Viper remaining in town with his lovely wife for the duration. We were a force to be reckoned with.

“That would be a courageous man I served with in the Marines. We were in a foxhole, our unit almost destroyed. He’d shoved me into the dirt, protecting me as the bullets continued to whizz by. He’d been forced to punch me in the jaw to keep me from trying to protect more of our team. If he hadn’t, I would have died overseas. That brave man who’d taken a bullet for me was your father.”

It was a story he’d never told me, something that caught me off guard. “Why are you telling me this now?”

“Because it’s something you need to hear. Your father was a good man, but he had a job to do, and he did it well. You blamed him for his own death. I don’t need to tell you that it kinda pissed me off. The love of his wife and his children didn’t get him killed. Nor did it make him careless. I’ve learned since taking this position that life is far too short. It’s time for you to take control of it. You found the love of your life. You were given a second chance, something that almost never happens. Don’t take it lightly.”

There was a slight jovial sound to his tone, but I knew better. Max was reminding me how much of a dumb ass I’d been, a kid with a chip the size of a boulder strapped to his shoulder.

“That’s why I need her with me right now, Max. Every day spent apart is a day too many.”

He glanced at Viper, as if tossing the baton. Viper grabbed his sunglasses, shoving them onto his face before patting me on the shoulder. “Patience can be a virtue. That allows the perfect

situation to be created, a trap that is foolproof,” Viper said curtly.

“I want Roberto’s and Dante’s blood.” As soon as I issued the words, I knew they’d been testing me. “But that will begin a period of retaliation dangerous to all of us.”

“He’s getting it,” Viper said. “It usually takes hotheads longer.”

“Very funny. I’m standing right here. Fine. A few more days. I’m counting them down.”

The Consigliere shifted in front of me. “Her father is a piece of work. I will tell you that.”

Snuffling, I rolled my eyes. “Another one I’d like to put a bullet in.”

“Prison will better serve him. You know that,” Maxwell said from beside me.

Granted, that was the current plan given he held the fate of my child in his hands. We’d yet to locate him, although we’d hired professionals to help determine if the boy I was calling Tony for my father was alive or just a lie to try to keep Christiana on a short leash.

Up to this point, there’d been no birth records found, no indication that the original lie wasn’t the truth.

That the baby had been stillborn.

I couldn’t imagine putting Christiana through another tragedy. But I knew her well enough to know I wouldn’t be able to keep whatever truth I found. If I wanted her in my life.

“I’m waiting for a call from the man I hired,” Viper added. “But I need to tell you not to get your hopes up, Francesco. Without the picture or any concrete information, it’s like looking for a needle in a haystack.”

I nodded, cinching my eyes closed. “I will kill that motherfucker.” She’d provided details about the picture she’d been allowed to see, but it meant nothing. Hell, it could have been swiped from a picture frame in a luxury home goods store.

“Yeah, well, I might let you do it,” Viper added. “Let’s just get through the wedding.”

Laughing, I knew Dominick was eager to play his part, which had surprised me. For a few seconds, I’d thought the man had betrayed me. He was family. “Yeah. I hear you. Everything is in place.” And the wedding was the next day. Goddamn it. This shit was risky as hell.

Maxwell glanced out at the street, a slow smile spreading across his face. “I think the show is about to begin, boys. Are you ready?”

I took a deep breath and for all the right reasons maybe at the wrong time, Christiana’s face popped into and remained in my mind.

Just as I heard the screech of tires.

And several popping sounds.

But with every well-established plan, there was always a way for something to go wrong. As bullets tore into my shoulder, pitching me forward, the look of horror on Maxwell’s face couldn’t blot out the vision of the woman I’d fallen head over heels in love with.

* * *

Christiana

Trust.

Yes, I did trust the man I was hopelessly in love with, but I was still fearful he’d underestimated Dante and his father, especially since I’d neither seen nor heard anything from Francesco or any of his men. Up until late the night before, I’d sensed their presence. Then they’d disappeared, or maybe my nerves were getting the better of me.

Was there such a thing as life after death?

I continued to ask myself that question given the only acceptable way out of a marriage within a mafia organization was death.

Murder was acceptable.

I smiled to myself at the thought, wondering whether my mother had considered the same thoughts during her term of obvious imprisonment with my father.

Was it possible my mother was with me, holding my hand through the worst time in my life? The priest had mentioned that my mother had always been by my side, protecting me. Guiding me. I wasn't certain I could believe that any longer.

Agony tore through me, the horrible act my father was holding over my head the only reason I was here today. But what good would it do me now? How could I change anything?

Francesco. Where are you? Time is running out.

Trust.

I repeated the word in my head. That wasn't the issue. The nagging feeling in the pit of my stomach was.

Swallowing, I glanced into the mirror. I was gaunt and lifeless, barely a shell of the woman I'd been before. Death. Birth. Life. They were all comingled into a web of absolute deceit. But I doubted I had a hero coming to save me.

It felt as if something terrible had happened to Francesco.

My father's smugness. Dante's confidence.

The fact I was standing here in a goddamn ugly wedding dress.

Stop it. Just stop it.

My stomach churned and it was almost impossible not to allow another round of tears to fall. I'd cried myself to sleep more than once, but I'd only been this despondent twice in my life.

The death of my mother, murdered by a supposed stranger. A fucking lie.

And the death of...

Both had been horrible lies fabricated by a man I'd believed had my best interest at heart. What I'd been forced to accept over the last few lonely days was that saviors only came around once in your life. I'd had my opportunity and had almost allowed it to get away. Now I'd face not only the penance for my past sins but a life of misery as well.

Even now, even though the wedding was minutes away, all I could think about was Francesco. His face. His piercing eyes. His gorgeous body. The desire that had ignited the second we'd seen each other. Had I simply lived a dream the other night? I bit back a laugh. The man had filled me, fucked me, and I'd enjoyed every moment of it.

When Cayman had driven back to the brownstone, letting me off around the corner from the church, returning had been the most difficult thing I'd been asked to do. I understood why given everything Francesco and I had talked about, but that didn't mean leaving hadn't been horrible, painful in every way. Yet Francesco and his entire regime knew they had to shut down the Bianchi family once and for all or their soldiers would keep coming.

The memories of our time together remained prominent in the front of my mind. His face was the same yet different, as if three years had made him even more of a man. Gone was the hint of softness I'd seen before, replaced with a hard edge that was even more evident in his dark eyes as they'd roamed over my body.

I'd felt so electrified, just like I had so long ago, but the sadness inside both of us had been devastatingly difficult.

So had seeing his face upon admitting he knew about our son. Our son. I couldn't believe there was even a remote possibility that the little boy I'd thought I'd lost over two years before was alive. However, getting my hopes up wasn't in my best interest.

While there was a good reason, I was having difficulty believing what my father had told me, although the devastating news had certainly kept me on a tight leash. If

there was any possibility that I could affect someone's life in a positive way, I had to take it.

Hate. Hate. Hate.

Calm down. This isn't going to do you any good.

There was something off about my fabulous wedding day, at least two dozen of Dante's soldiers surrounding the church, the same church I'd sought refuge in. Did they anticipate a war? The man I was supposed to marry was obviously playing the same kind of cat and mouse game. Either that or placing my trust in Father Saltori had been a stupid move. Could it be possible that a priest would betray his best friend?

I wasn't certain what to believe any longer, but the agony of not knowing and being inside the building was tearing me apart. I wasn't stupid, the wedding meaning so much more for Dante than I'd originally believed. But with no attempt to rescue me as Francesco had promised, I feared the man I loved was already dead.

When the door opened, I was hopeful. Then my emotions tanked seeing Olga. Her expression was stern, but I sensed she wanted to lord over me that she was here to make certain I didn't try to escape.

There was no doubt something was going on in the background, but without any real information, I'd already assumed the worst.

No. you can't do that. I closed my eyes, allowing Francesco's image to form in my mind again. Then a trickle of electricity skittered down my spine.

Francesco had asked me to trust him. For what reason? How could I? Oh, God. How could I go through with this? Francesco...

Think positively. Everything will be okay.

Right.

Okay, think seductively.

At least that little command made me chuckle under my breath.

Debauchery.

For some crazy reason, the word continued to float into my mind, the tidal wave effect keeping the dull throb active between my legs. While I didn't have my handy, dandy vibrator with me, that didn't mean I hadn't indulged in pleasuring myself more than once, including in the shower. That had been with hopes still in my heart. Those were now gone, replaced with the ugliness of reality.

"Stand still," Olga told me as she continued fastening the tiny buttons on the horrifically gaudy wedding dress. One that I hated with a passion. Her harsh voice dragged me out of the pleasant moment. "It's almost time. You need to look perfect."

Perfect. Was there such a thing when marrying a beast?

"As if I care." She was used to hearing my nasty words, but I also had a feeling she relayed them back to Dante. I didn't care. I was finished with caring. At least once the wedding was over with, I could more adequately plan my husband's demise.

That was if my hero didn't come save me.

Stop it! Don't be a naïve fool.

What was I saying? I'd shoved Francesco aside with such efficiency that he hadn't chased me out the door. I'd shed the same ugly tears I had on the night I'd rushed back to the previous fiancé's house, only to be beaten to within an inch of my life. It was as if God had punished me for my sins, not the man I'd thought loved me.

Then things had gone from bad to worse.

I struggled not to think about the additional consequences, or the continued betrayal I felt from my father. Sighing, I knew I had to shove aside any thoughts of seeing Francesco again. I had to remind myself that he wasn't any different than Dante, just slightly more polished around the edges.

Even if tingling sensations remained. There was an electric vibe in the air, something I couldn't quite put my finger on. But I knew in my heart that something tragic was going to happen. Or maybe it already had.

Francesco Arturo. I'd tried to carefully find out everything I could about the insanely gorgeous and very powerful man, even able to sneak onto a computer for a few minutes. My search had done little more than confirm what I'd sensed. He hadn't lied to me. He simply hadn't wanted to tell me about his dangerous world. Another wave of anger rushed into me, and I finally forced myself to look into the full-length mirror, laughter bubbling to the surface.

Everything was spinning out of control.

"Try to smile," the older woman said out of the blue. "It is your wedding day. You are marrying the most eligible bachelor in New York."

"Not even close," I said without thinking.

Was there a girl anywhere who didn't fantasize about her wedding day? Granted, maybe I was creating a huge fairytale that normal girls in my generation didn't feel or accept, but I'd loved the thought of the pomp and circumstance.

I'd even tried on my mother's dress when I was a teenager, pretending as if I was walking down the aisle.

Sadly, my beautiful mother had been several inches taller, the gangly girl I'd been not providing a beautiful bride under the satin and lace. Death hadn't become her. I wasn't certain why the random thought entered my mind other than I hadn't been able to stop aching all week, my heart forever broken.

Now I stood in a couture wedding dress that likely cost two hundred thousand dollars, the ridiculous diamond-encrusted bodice alone worth significantly more than most people made a year. To me, there was nothing more disgusting than the sight of the woman standing in front of me, her reflection offering a tainted look at what was supposed to be an amazing day.

Four days had passed. I'd half expected to see Francesco burning down the house my father and I were staying in to get to me. However, I hadn't seen or heard a thing about him. Not that I'd been allowed to join into the conversations about what

was going on, but I was an observant woman, so much so that I'd managed to listen in on several conversations.

There was something going on, but I was so far in the dark, my mind was playing tricks on me.

What I did enjoy was the fact both men seemed extremely nervous, as if waiting for doomsday. I could only imagine how many soldiers were inside the church.

Since the night of my taste of freedom, I'd been kept mostly locked up, my privileges to leave the house revoked, even though I'd slipped back into the house sight unseen, returning the ankle monitor without incident.

Then I'd dreamt of my incredible lover, the imagery of the night we'd shared vivid, his scent remaining for hours after he'd dropped me off. I'd been shaken to the core, refusing to fall into a series of ridiculous emotions as I'd done before. I was an entirely different girl.

Francesco had promised to find our son.

And I believed him.

However, the passing hours were agonizing, and I suddenly wasn't certain who I was any longer. Maybe I'd never been.

"You will care if you're not ready. Master Dante doesn't like anything out of place. Suck in your breath."

"Master Dante? What's he the master of, pain?"

She jerked me around so fast I was shocked, her hard slap across my cheek even more so. "You do not talk about him that way! He will be your husband."

The pain was minimal in comparison to what I'd experienced only days before, and to the ache burning inside my heart. However, the anger in me had finally risen to the surface and I couldn't take it any longer. I snapped my hand around her scrawny neck, driving her against the wall with a powerful thud. "You listen to me, you bitch. This isn't my choice. You already know that. I assure you that one day I will drive a knife through his cold, black heart. And there's nothing you can do to stop it."

Olga been commanded to help me get ready for the blasphemous event, including making certain I didn't escape prior to walking down the aisle. Granted, it had entered my mind more than once, but the spry German would likely beat me to a pulp if I attempted to do so. She worked for Dante. I'd seen her twice before when I'd been required to go to his house for meetings about our disgusting wedding plans.

That meant nothing to me. She was little more than a gatekeeper. Maybe her warning would keep him on edge and away from me.

A cold shiver slammed into my system when I heard someone clapping behind me.

"Interesting display. However, you will be obedient today," my father said as he walked closer. There wasn't love in his eyes or even a hint of remorse, only the same look I'd seen a half dozen times.

Greed.

"Where is my son?" I barked.

"I told you already. He's safe and will remain that way if you continue cooperating."

"I need to see him."

"You aren't in a position to make any demands."

Unable to stop myself, I cracked my hand across my father's face. Within two seconds, he had my wrist in his hand, bending back my fingers. "You little bitch. I can't wait to be rid of you."

Olga smirked from the background, even cackling as if the situation was funny.

"Trust me, Father. It will be good to watch your blood being spilled."

He laughed. "By whom, the man who stole your virtue, the great Francesco Arturo, son of a former friend of mine Tony Arturo?"

He waited until the shock registered in my eyes before shoving me aside. I tumbled backward against the wall, gasping for air. Then I lunged toward him, pummeling him with my fists. “What have you done?”

“What was necessary to ensure this deal didn’t fall through. Dante had Francesco gunned down in front of his own office building, his godfather seriously wounded. The Bianchis ceremoniously shut down one of the most powerful crime syndicates in the country.”

Shock and disbelief tore through me. “I don’t believe you.”

He laughed. “I’m certain Dante kept a souvenir. I’ll have him bring it to you. Did you not think I knew who fathered that bastard child of yours? Please. I’m more powerful than you obviously gave me credit for.”

Oh, God. Oh, God. It couldn’t be true. No. No! I had to remind myself my father enjoyed goading me.

“You’re a lying sack of shit.” I could hear the waning of my confidence. Damn it.

“Is that so? Then why hasn’t your knight in shining armor collected you by now?”

Oh, my God. This wasn’t possible. I was sick, so much so I couldn’t breathe, but I refused to allow the bastard to see me cry.

“What?” How? If that was the truth then someone had betrayed Francesco. I backed away. Then reality dawned on me. There was no boy waiting for his mommy to come find him. It had all been a lie. A lie to keep me in line. And I’d fallen for it. “My son is no longer alive. Is he?”

While up until my fifteenth birthday I’d been protected by a family I’d thought loved me, I’d known there was evil in this world, but on this day of days, I stood in front of the devil himself, Dante his most trusted sidekick.

“No, Christiana. He is not. Born of sin, he died of sin before he had a chance to take a single breath. Now, be a good little girl and accept your fate. No one is coming to save you.”

“I will kill you,” I said. I felt nothing inside, absolutely nothing. My entire world had been yanked out from under me.

He laughed then glanced down the length of me. “I will return to walk you down the aisle. Then you won’t need to see me again. Isn’t that what you want?”

After saying something I couldn’t hear to Olga, he left. The sound of the door closing was as if an end had just occurred, my world shattered in the space of a short period of time. I moved toward the single chair in the room, so sick inside that I knew nothing would ever matter again.

Olga remained, but at least she was quiet. I eased my head into my hands, rocking as I tried to make sense of everything that had happened. Only a few minutes later I heard footsteps and bristled, fisting my hands. I’d been unable to stop the tears. When I heard Dante laugh, I lifted my head, immediately wiping away my tears. “You’re such a bastard. You and my father deserve each other.”

He burst into laughter, studying me as if I was nothing but a piece of furniture.

“What’s wrong, princess? So I hear you believed that your knight in shining armor was going to save the day? How naïve of you.”

Exhaling, I tried to hold my head high as I rose to my feet, inching closer. Then I managed to laugh even though it was obvious he was here to burst what was left of my bubble. “Maybe I am, Dante. At least I know what you’re made of, the brutality you enjoy inflicting. Is that something your father taught you?”

He snapped his hand around my neck, yanking me onto my toes. As he squeezed, stars floated in front of my eyes. I could tell by the darkness in his eyes how much he hated me.

“Don’t worry, my beautiful bride. I don’t want this any more than you do, but I’m required to have a wife prior to taking over from my father. You will do. For now. You will surrender to me at all times, or I will make good on my promises.” He shook me violently before pitching me backward. I caught my

heel in the long train, gasping from pain as my hip hit the corner of the desk.

“What did you do to Francesco?” I spit at him, an icy chill already forming. I had to be hard edged and find a way out of the situation by myself. Unfortunately, I wasn’t certain who I could trust.

“What was necessary. Your father said you needed proof Francesco was dead. I thought it would be the perfect wedding present. This is what’s left of the man you were supposed to marry. He thought he could fool me. He and his worthless family. What you don’t know is that the priest who is required to marry us will be the one who gives his best friend’s eulogy tomorrow. What a shame we won’t be able to attend.” He yanked out a photograph from his tuxedo, flicking it at me. Then he laughed when I didn’t pick it up right away. “You and your father saved me the trouble of finding out the man responsible for taking what should have belonged to me. Your fucking virginity. Francesco Arturo got what was coming to him. Finally. Now, I am the star of my family.”

The twisted smile remained on his face as I finally glanced down at the floor, the vivid photograph not unlike the one my father had handed me so gleefully.

Only this time, the picture depicted blood and death. Not life.

And I threw my head back and wailed.

The love of my life was truly dead, murdered in cold blood.

CHAPTER 24



The wedding day...
Francesco

The last twenty-four hours had been excruciating.

I'd been talked off the rails more than once. By Maxwell. By Dominick. By Cayman.

By my sister.

Hell, I'd spent more time with Meghan and little Brock in an effort to keep remembering there were decent things in the world. Why? So a bloodbath wouldn't rain in the streets. And I'd been staying out of sight. One night. That's all the patience that had been required but I could barely contain my anger.

Both Raleigh and Madisen, Viper's fiancée had consoled and nursed me, the bullet wound clipping my shoulder still hurting like a son of a bitch. The fucker who'd managed to drive a single bullet into my flesh instead of the bulletproof jacket I'd worn under my suit was a bad shot.

Fortunately, no one else had been hurt, the plans we'd put in motion quickly preventing loss of life. Plus, the drive-by had been on cue as planned, our soldiers able to provide notice the driver had been on his way.

The dangerous game could have gone terribly wrong on so many levels, but we'd gotten lucky. The police had swarmed in, tracking down the 'killers' in less than eight hours. I'd found it interesting that Dante had willingly sacrificed his

men, but he was certain he had the mayor, the police commissioner, and various law enforcement officials under his thumb.

We'd allowed him to think that way.

Meanwhile, I'd been forced to endure as much suffering as I knew Christiana had to be. Had she been told about my death? My guess was Dante had picked today to do so.

Her wedding day.

Up until now, she would have continued to believe I was putting a stop to the charade. I'd shared everything with her, except for a single detail. That we'd lured the Bianchis into making an attempt on my life. I'd been terrified she wouldn't be able to provide a real time appearance of shock. I hated that I'd lied to her, but there'd been no other choice with what the family had been forced to face.

Goddamn, I hated the ruse. I'd also learned that patience would never be a virtue. At least for a man like me who was far too jaded.

Granted, there hadn't been a second that Christiana had truly been alone, even if it was likely she believed I'd abandoned her. The game of cat and mouse was getting out of hand.

But today, it ended.

It didn't matter there were enemy soldiers surrounded the building. I knew of a secret passageway inside. The plan wasn't to create the scene of a massacre given the number of guests sitting in the pews. That would mean significant loss, something that our organization would be blamed for, not the Bianchis.

"You're sure you're ready for this?" I asked Ralph as we headed into the passageway.

"Boss. I've been back to work for days. You knew I couldn't stay away."

I laughed, shaking my head then glancing at Viper.

"He's tough. I told you," Viper said, having served alongside the man as well in the Marines.

“If your wife tracks me down on my honeymoon telling me you’ve further injured yourself, I will be pissed,” I told him. When I heard him sigh, I bristled from the callous words. Ralph’s wife had been ill.

“She won’t, boss. She knows how important this job is to me. To us.”

Fuck. I glanced at Cayman, making a mental note to arrange a special trip for the two of them. They deserved time to spend together.

We headed through the darkened catacombs, and I couldn’t stop fuming. The news reports had splashed my bloody murder and Maxwell’s horrific injury on every local television station and internet newspaper. In addition, we’d made the *Today Show*, which I thought hilarious. In our time of crisis, we’d become noteworthy. There were reporters not in the know who’d have egg on their face in the morning.

We neared the opening to the area where Christiana was being kept. Everything was in position but that didn’t mean something couldn’t go wrong.

I nodded to a group of my soldiers, who would do nothing but ensure that we weren’t bothered. Others were ready to take her father away for questioning when appropriate. I would torture the man until he gave up the truth about my son.

I’d waited for this exact moment, told Dante had gone into the room where Christiana had been patiently waiting for the ceremony to begin.

I stood in front of the closed door, unbuttoning my jacket yet keeping my weapon inside my pocket. I wouldn’t enflame the situation unless necessary.

Then I heard her scream and my patience was gone.

I burst into the room and in a split second had to comprehend what was happening. In the same amount of time, my hesitation was enough Dante grabbed Christiana’s arm, yanking her against him and backing away. He shoved the barrel of his weapon against her temple and took several steps backward.

Hissing, I already had my Beretta, holding it in both hands, leveling it at his head. Then I grinned. I should have known that best laid plans never went off without a hitch.

The other woman in the room pushed herself away, acting as if she was no one as she headed for the door.

“Keep her from going anywhere,” I instructed Cay.

“Gladly.” Cayman grinned as he stepped in front of the older woman, preventing her from leaving the party.

“Francesco,” Christiana managed, the shock in her voice evident.

“Did you really think I’d forget about you, babe? Not a chance. This stupid fuck thought he could have me gunned down. I must have nine lives.”

I walked closer, studying Dante’s shocked expression. Then I noticed the photograph on the floor, the one that been staged with the help of a local reporter who owed us a favor. When I stepped on it, I was certain I heard Dante growl. “I’m not that easy to kill,” I smiled.

Dante laughed, but I doubted he was amused in the least. “You always were hard to kill.”

“True. You should have figured that out when your brother died instead of me. Do you know how many bullets I put between his eyes? As if the man deserved any mercy for gunning down my friend.” The intent wasn’t to kill him, although I’d do so if necessary. It was to have him try to end my life, allowing for his arrest. However, I sensed he was nearing the end of his rope.

“Fuck you, Francesco. My brother was never fit to lead. I’m glad he’s dead.”

I laughed. “So much for family. Huh? So, it would seem you have something that already belongs to me.”

“You lost your right to her when you sent her away all those years ago.”

His statement caught me off guard. The man knew too much, enough that my hackles were raised. All it took was a quick

glance into Christiana's eyes to know she had an idea of who'd betrayed me.

Swaggering closer, I kept the hard, cold expression. "Your world is about to come crashing down all around you."

"That's not going to happen. How do I know?" he growled and pressed his lips against her cheek. "Because this little bitch is your weakness. Now, I suggest you walk out that door or I have no issue killing the girl you left behind. I assure you that I'd rather see her dead than back in your arms."

When he squeezed his arm around Christiana's neck, she struggled, the wheeze she issued indicating she couldn't breathe.

I tightened my hold on the gun, taking several deep breaths. While the last thing I wanted to do was to risk her in any way, I could tell he was serious about ending her life.

"Careful," Cayman hissed, moving to one side, Viper to the other. We weren't stupid. Dante was an excellent shot. He'd take her life, losing his in order to drag what was left of my soul straight to hell. I couldn't allow that to happen.

In a few seconds, I studied the girl who'd turned into a woman right before my eyes, allowing her to see exactly how I felt about her. I could sense an even stronger resolve building just like the electricity between us was increasing tenfold with every minute that passed. While it was possible our human bodies would be taken, fate and karma had already made us one.

We would find each other again.

And one way or another, we would rule the world.

After managing to offer a smile, she struggled in his arms, jamming her elbow into his gut. Then the gorgeous woman who refused to be a victim did the unexpected.

She stomped on his foot, immediately lurching forward, breaking the connection enough for me to get a clear shot.

I'd listened to the man I respected the most, Max's advice remaining in the forefront of my mind. I hadn't intended on

starting a war but there were times that fate had a way of interfering. I had to believe that was the case this time. As Dante lunged for the woman I loved, pointing his weapon at her head, I didn't hesitate to do what was necessary to save her life.

Pop! Pop!

The thing about fate was that it often had a cruel side.

And sometimes monsters refused to die.

Before I had a chance to push Christiana to safety, I heard a noise from behind, forcing me to spin.

“She has a weapon!” Christiana’s cry had a strange echo and it was followed by a high-pitched snarl of a predator.

As the woman I adored lunged through the air, another shot went off. Then all hell seemed to break loose, soldiers rushing into the room, Cayman flying in my direction. All I could think about was getting to her, saving her.

Protecting her.

As the fierce battle cry continued, I stared in disbelief and awe as Christiana smashed the older woman’s arm against the wall several times, the weapon finally flying from her hand. The bullet had missed everyone, slamming into the ceiling instead.

“Christ. You need to put her on the payroll,” Cayman said as he immediately dropped to the floor, grabbing and pocketing the gun.

“I have other plans for the lady. Take the baggage off her hands,” I instructed.

“You got it, boss.”

As Cayman approached, I could tell Christiana was ready to rip into the older woman.

“Let me take her,” he said quietly, his tone encouraging.

When she didn’t react right away, I backed against the wall, allowing the beautiful redhead to clearly see me. “You can let go of her now, little dove. She’s not going to hurt anyone.”

Christiana took a deep breath, the electricity humming from her body intense. Then she turned her head, blinking several times. “You came for me.”

“Did you misunderstand what I told you, baby? You belong to me.”

I could sense she was struggling with my words. Then she let the woman go, backing away slightly.

“You will pay for this,” the woman said. “You will die.”

I’d heard wild animals in pain and those on the hunt. The sound emitted from my little dove was an eerie combination of both as she reared back, issuing a savage punch to the woman’s jaw. As the mystery guest slid down the wall, the look of satisfaction on Christiana’s face was well worth the additional anxiety.

“Whew,” Cayman teased.

“No one fucks with the people I care about,” Christiana said smartly, then turned to face me. “You’re late. I thought you were dead. You made me worry.”

“I’m sorry, baby.” I yanked her into my arms, pressing our foreheads together. “Are you okay?”

She took several deep breaths then shoved me back by a full foot. “What did you do? You took chances. I told you not to take any unnecessary chances.”

“A match made in heaven,” Viper said as he crouched down, checking Dante’s pulse then shaking his head.

“You know what they say. Better late than never. It was necessary. I’ll explain later,” I told her.

“I’ll have a soldier on the lookout for her father. It’s almost time,” Ralph said.

“Good.” I returned my attention to the woman close to me. There were so many things to share. We would have a lifetime to do so.

One way or the other.

She shook her head, clearly angry. Then once again, despair took over. “He’s gone. Our baby is gone. It was all a ploy. A lie.”

I took a deep breath as Viper stood, walking closer.

“You’re certain of it?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said, several tears slipped down her face. “A mother knows these things. I felt his little soul leaving before he was born. I should have known and followed my instincts. I’m so sorry. I’m just so sorry.”

There were no words that could be said, no comfort I could give to either one of us. The agony was real but the anger would force me to retaliate. “You have nothing to be sorry for. The man will pay for what he did to you.”

“He’s not worth it,” she managed. Then she flew into my arms, fisting my shirt.

Jesus Christ, I was angry, enraged to the point I couldn’t think clearly. I gave Cayman a look and he shook his head. I slipped my hand across the back of her head, pulling her back by several feet. Then I slid my hand to her jaw, lifting her head. “Baby. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” As I captured her mouth, I could feel some of the tension easing as she clung to me.

She slid her arm around my shoulder, tangling her fingers in my hair. Having her in my arms meant the world to me, something I would never take for granted. She was the woman I was destined to be with.

And the one I’d consume for hours once I got her home.

Maybe for once the house I lived in would finally feel like a home.

I thrust my tongue inside, allowing ours to dance together for a few seconds before breaking the kiss, pressing my forehead against hers. We were breathless and the way she had her fingers wrapped around my shirt was a beautiful indication she didn’t want to let me go.

“Listen to me. You’re going to be taken somewhere safe until this charade can be finished.”

“No!” she snapped, then softened and nodded once.

“I’m not taking any additional chances with you. This is still very dangerous.”

Christiana twisted her mouth, her frustration increasing. “Where are you going?”

“Nowhere, baby. I just need to make an announcement that there won’t be a wedding.” I grinned and she narrowed her eyes. “As I told you before. You need to trust me.”

“You aren’t killing anyone else, are you?”

“Not my intentions. However, I do have some business to take care of.”

She took my arm, glancing from Cayman to Viper. I allowed her to lead me toward the back of the room. “Someone betrayed you. They knew about us from all those years ago. This was a plan to use against you and your family.”

I took another deep breath, realizing she was no longer trusting of Cayman at this point. “I’ll find out the identity of the rat. You’ll be with family, which means you’ll be completely safe. Okay? You can trust them. I promise you that.”

“Please, Francesco. Let this be over. I can’t do this any longer.”

“I know, little dove. We won’t need to.” Who the fuck had betrayed me? There were only two people possible. As I locked eyes with Cayman, I sensed his nervousness. If I were the same man I’d been years before, I’d put a bullet in his head right now. But I couldn’t risk doing that.

As the door opened, Maxwell walking inside, he lifted his eyebrows when he noticed Dante’s body. Then he exhaled. “You’ve been busy. At least the bride to be is safe.”

“I’m not getting married,” she said in defiance.

Chuckling, I led her close to my godfather. “This is my brother-in-law, Maxwell, known to everyone else as Don Powers. He’s going to take you to one of our estates. Can you trust me?” I purposely didn’t say which one and fortunately, only Maxwell and Viper knew. To think I couldn’t place trust

in my best friend, a priest, or my most trusted Capo was debilitating.

She glanced at Max, offering him a slight smile. “As long as there’s liquor. I need a drink.”

I couldn’t help but laugh even though I knew she was still in shock from learning about the death of our son. Again. “Trust me. You’ll find everything you need.” When I released her, Viper moved closer.

“It’s good to finally meet you, Christiana. This man has driven his entire family crazy for years pining away for you.” Maxwell grinned, relief on his face.

“You’ll need to tell me everything,” she said, as she glanced in my direction. There was still a haunted look in her eyes, the acceptance our son was really dead something she needed to heal from.

I wasn’t ready to do that just yet. A hell of a lot didn’t add up.

What she’d been told had gutted me all week, but the fact her father had removed any doubt about the possibility disgusted me. Then again, the fucker enjoyed playing games. One way or the other, I had plans on ripping her father’s heart out with my bare fingers.

“I do trust you, Francesco. It’s the rest of the world I don’t have any faith in,” she said with such angst in her voice that I was ready to carve her name into her father’s chest.

I watched as she was led out the door toward the awaiting vehicle. Max nodded once, trying to offer me some sense of comfort. Now wasn’t the time to let my guard down, not when the party was just getting started.

Viper moved closer, keeping his voice down. “I don’t have any updated news, Francesco. But my man found another dead end. Especially after what Christiana said, I think her father was using the information on your son as a tool. Just like I’ve thought the entire time.”

“Yeah, I know.” I glanced at Cayman who was more nervous than I was used to seeing him, continuously glancing at me as

he arranged to have the German woman taken from the room.
“But I need to know for certain.”

I noticed Ralph entering the area, motioning to Viper.

“Her father is on the way,” Viper said with a grin on his face.

“Good. Then we can end this bullshit.” I grabbed a chair, pulling it near Dante’s body, my men moving to the outskirts of the room.

I sat with my legs open, my weapon resting in one hand. When the door opened, the look of shock on Michael Lorenzo’s face was exactly what I was expecting.

“Come in. Join the party,” I told him.

“What the fuck is this? Where is my daughter?” It took him that long to glance down at the dead body. Then he realized what he was facing.

“Take a look around you, Don Lorenzo. You have nowhere to go. In fact, this city’s entire law enforcement apparatus and the other syndicates have been put on notice that you and the Bianchis are under the false assumption that you’re running the show now. I was surprised how helpful our mayor has been in directing the police commissioner to do whatever it takes to round up Dante’s and Roberto’s men. That is being done as we speak.”

I allowed for a dramatic pause, curious as to his reaction.

Deadpan.

He hadn’t gotten into a position of power without being able to hide his emotions. We were all good at it in this profession. Or at least the ones who’d succeeded.

I wasn’t certain where on the echelon to consider myself at this point.

“What do you want?” he finally asked, as if finally resigned to the inevitable.

“What do I want?” I jerked to a standing position, moving toward him slowly. I stood almost five inches taller, outweighed him by at least seventy-five pounds. As soon as I

was within a few inches, he flinched. “First, let me tell you what’s going to happen. As the future husband of your bride to be, I will be acquiring your entire regime since you won’t be needing it any longer, given your upcoming prison term.”

“What?”

“Yes, you are about to be arrested.” I motioned to Cayman who opened the door even wider, allowing officers of the law to enter the room.

I enjoyed seeing him so uncomfortable.

But now wasn’t the time to back down. I needed answers.

“Fuck you, Francesco. I have excellent attorneys. I’ll be out within hours. No charges will ever stick.”

“I doubt it since there’s clear evidence you orchestrated the murder of your wife. No statute of limitations on murder.” It felt good to laugh, the fucker truly believing that he could get one over on me or my family.

Or his.

The fact he’d forsaken his own daughter would likely get him killed in prison. Who was I to give a shit?

I snapped my hand around his throat, lifting then pitching him against the wall. With his feet dangling, trying to touch the floor, he looked like a flopping seal. Adding pressure, I could sense the cops weren’t too keen on my behavior, but they’d been warned. At least I believed they had been.

“You’re going to provide a single answer, Michael. One. I don’t care what life you were forced to live or that you extended your hatred to your own daughter, your flesh and blood. What I do care about is a little boy who will not suffer the same fate. He will be cared for. Is he alive?”

When he said nothing, I pressed the weapon against his forehead, eager to pull the trigger. Both the officers of the law and Viper were on edge, the Consigliere moving closer.

Michael laughed until I jammed my arm into his windpipe. As he struggled to breathe, his face turning purple, I grinned. Then I backed off, allowing him to catch his breath.

“One last chance. Then I’ll start with your kneecaps and work my way up.”

“As I said. Fuck you.”

Exhaling, I placed the barrel of the weapon above his right knee, pointing down. “I heard you were a gambling man. Do you really want to toss the dice?”

He hissed and as soon as I acted as if I was going to pull the trigger, his body began to shake. “Cavalini. Joe Cavalini.”

I stared into his eyes, calculating whether he was telling me the truth. “If I find out you’ve fucked with me, I will finish this. It won’t matter where you’re being kept like the fucking rodent you are. Do you hear me?”

“I’m not lying.”

There was some conviction in the man’s voice. I pulled the gun away, nodding to the police officers.

Viper shook his head, clapping me on the back. “I’ll make the phone call. What now?”

I pulled away, allowing the officers to move forward. “Now it’s to make an announcement that the wedding has been postponed.”

“Postponed, huh?” Viper grinned.

“Yeah, and not for long. I’m not a man with any patience. Remember?”

After that? Three things were in order.

One—asking the woman I loved to marry me.

Two—hunting and eliminating the traitor to my family.

And three—providing the greatest gift of all...

CHAPTER 25



“Everything that you love you will eventually lose. But in the end, love will return in a different form.”

—Susan Cain

Francesco

Love was difficult at best, something that had haunted me for years. I hadn't understood its power or how it changed a person, which had given me a jaded outlook on life. Then Maxwell had entered my life and through the years, I'd had a vicarious view of what true love was supposed to look like. I'd done everything in my power to shove it aside, pretending as if it didn't matter to me.

Hell, I'd become damn good at ignoring the signs and desires over the years.

Until Christiana.

After that, I'd lived in a shell for three years, refusing to accept I'd found the one. I almost laughed at how ridiculous I'd been. What it had done was prepare me when I'd learned the news of who'd betrayed me.

Not that it made me feel any better about what was necessary, but perhaps it allowed me an understanding of why the rat had made certain decisions.

He was important to me, yet I'd allowed Max and Viper to come with me. My beautiful bride to be was safely tucked away in Max's estate, likely hearing stories about me and the rest of the family. I'd yet to ask her to marry me, trying to find the right time. I knew it wouldn't matter until questions were finally answered. Sadly, I wasn't certain when or if that could happen. The goose chase seemed real, the information provided by her father garbage.

What I was about to handle was also kicking me in the gut.

As I pulled up to the modest house, I took a deep breath, keeping the engine running until both Max and Viper pulled against the curb on one side or the other of the two-way street. When I cut the engine, I realized these were the moments when I realized I no longer liked my chosen profession.

I'd told my father I wanted to be a doctor. It was strange that I remembered that since I couldn't have been more than eight or nine. What I also remembered was that he sat me down in his office in one of the massive leather chairs and he'd told me I could be anything I wanted to be. And that he'd encourage and support me. That's why he'd cared so much about Raleigh and her choice of becoming a ballerina.

Reminiscing wasn't going to make this any easier.

Joe Cavalini had been nothing but a dead end. There was no such name, no trail that led me to finding my son. It would appear her father and the Bianchis had won another battle. Sadly, at this point I couldn't get my hands on him. I should have put a bullet in his head when I'd had the chance.

I climbed out, studying the gorgeous sky. What I wanted was a little time spent on the islands. Maybe that wasn't a bad plan. I owned a house on St. Barts but couldn't remember the last time I'd been there.

I leaned against my Corvette, folding my arms as I studied the house. As Max and Viper flanked my sides, their silence added to the heavy air and weight of what we needed to do.

"Pride," Viper said absently.

"Agreed," Max added.

Exhaling, I glanced from one to the other. “Meaning the reason he didn’t come to any of us with his troubles?”

“Exactly.” Max was more disturbed than he wanted to let on, not only angry for the closeness he’d felt to the man but that he’d recommended I accept him as a trusted member of my work family.

“What are you going to do?” Viper asked.

I thought about his question as I’d mulled over it for almost two full days since the shit at the church. Dozens of the Bianchi soldiers had been rounded up, the illegal gambling establishments they’d formed suddenly swarmed by members of the DEA. I’d been shocked that various law enforcement agencies had worked together, including the FBI in Chicago.

The two cities’ mayors had come out heroes in sweeping their streets of unwanted criminals. Even though most of the Bianchi crimes had been done in Jersey, what Mayor Santiago had helped orchestrate had given him a serious boost in ratings with families living in Jersey and in New York.

There was no doubt he’d be reelected, the police commissioner keeping his beloved and very posh job as well. The alliances we’d made had also helped the other crime syndicates breathe easier, at least for the next few months.

All was right with the world.

Except in mine.

“I’ll know the right thing when I see his face. Let’s get this over with.” I kept my sunglasses on, pushing away from the vehicle then heading toward the man’s front door. I’d didn’t need to remove my weapon from my jacket. In my mind we were all civilized men, capable of making decent choices.

Even if they were some of the most difficult to do.

Viper and Max stood behind me as I knocked on the thick wooden slab. It wasn’t long before I heard footsteps and as the door was opened slowly, I sensed Max tensing.

There was no doubt as I looked on Ralph’s aging face that he knew exactly why we were there. His entire face fell, a

knowing settling in.

“I’ll be a few minutes, honey,” he called then closed the door behind him.

I allowed him some space. There was no reason to push him at this point. His wife certainly didn’t deserve to deal with anything else than her stage four lung cancer. It hadn’t taken long to figure out what had happened, the pieces fairly easy to put together.

I’d confronted Cayman, who’d realized he’d opened his mouth and revealed certain details of my life, trusting Ralph as I’d done for years. There was no reason to think otherwise. Not one.

Ralph glanced at Max and it was one of those moments that would be frozen in time in my mind. “How did you figure it out?”

“It wasn’t difficult, Ralph. It was someone who was privy to inside information. The only thing that confused me was that you didn’t warn Carmine the intended target wasn’t going to be able to make the meeting at the restaurant. Then it dawned on me that Max called my private cellphone and you were told nothing until we were close to the venue. You didn’t have time to expose the change in itinerary. But once I realized your wife was gravely ill, I had your finances checked.”

I was surprised when Max lost it, driving the man against the front of his house with a booming thud.

“How could you? I trusted you! I fucking saved your life in Afghanistan. Why? Why didn’t you just come to me?”

Max’s outburst was understandable.

The tears in Ralph’s eyes were genuine, this time the gesture not something that sickened me.

“Because a man is supposed to take care of his wife! Do you think I wanted to do it? I just... Cash appeared on my doorstep one day. I didn’t know from whom, but I needed it desperately.”

“So you spent it,” Viper said.

“Yeah. Twenty thousand dollars. It paid for Maggie to go to the Cleveland Clinic. There was a new experimental drug, but insurance wouldn’t pay for it. After four sessions, the drug seemed to be working. Four. Then the money ran out. I don’t know how the fuckers knew but they did. They made an offer. Information. That was all they wanted. Nothing more.”

“As Max said. You should have come to us. Any one of us.”

“And say what at that point?” He was close to being hysterical, tears sliding down his face. “The treatments could cost as much as three hundred thousand dollars. More with living expenses. I have a small pension from the military and I’d be forced to leave your employ, which would mean no money. Every cent of savings was burned. Every cent. I’m sorry.”

This was more taxing than I realized it would be. “How is Maggie now?”

“The tumor markers are low. They say she might be in remission. But she must stay on the infusions. I don’t have anything else, Francesco. I’ve drained it all.”

I glanced at Max and for the first time since I could remember, I sensed he’d run out of patience as well as compassion.

Fuck.

“Please, if you’re going to kill me, don’t let Maggie see it. I beg of you. I know you don’t owe me anything, but she’s endured so much that this will break her.” When no one answered him right away, he sucked in his breath, wiping his eyes. “Maggie and I wanted children. That’s all she could talk about when we were first together. When she got pregnant, we were both so happy. We even found out the sex, a little boy. We decorated a tiny room in blue. Then when she was four months pregnant, I was deployed. It was going to be the last time, the last mission. At least that’s what I told my Maggie.”

I placed my hand on Max’s shoulder, nodding to encourage him to back down, at least for now.

In another surprising move, he did.

“The baby was stillborn and I was still overseas. I couldn’t help her. I couldn’t be there for her. Can you believe that? I wasn’t allowed to leave my unit because of the mission we were on. I don’t think she truly ever forgave me. We tried again and she miscarried. Then a third time. By then we realized her body was too weak.”

“Why are you telling us this?” Viper asked.

Ralph rubbed his eyes. “Joe Cavalini is a riddle. I’m certain of it.”

“Meaning what?” I asked, trying to keep from snapping.

“It’s a fictional character in a book. I’ve read it. It’s set in Virginia, somewhere near Smith Mountain Lake. I know that’s not very helpful, but I’ll guess you’re going to find your boy there. It’s a small town.”

“What’s the name of the book?” Viper asked.

“I’ve got a copy. I’ll get it for you. You deserve to have a chance at getting to know your boy. You’ll make a good father, Francesco. Your pops would have been proud.”

The statement he made was genuine, classy in a way I hadn’t expected.

“Just let me say goodbye to Maggie and I’ll get the book. That’s all I ask and I know I don’t deserve it.”

It was at that moment I knew what needed to be done. Plus, Christiana’s face slipped into the back of my mind.

“Get the book, Ralph, but don’t say goodbye to Maggie. Just let her know you’re going to move to Cleveland to a lovely house near the hospital. All expenses will be taken care of. But you will never return here. And if I learn that you provide any secrets to anyone about this organization or my family, I will hunt you down. Do you hear me?”

As I turned my head, I could tell Ralph was shocked. I hadn’t realized until now how much the poor man had aged.

He nodded, tears returning to his eyes. Then he slipped inside.

Max exhaled, the sound exaggerated.

“I need to make a phone call,” Viper said, a grin on his face. As I tipped my head, I couldn’t help but notice the look of respect on his face. I nodded in return, smiling as he walked away, a slight spring to his step.

“Why?” Max asked.

I thought about his question and it was glaringly clear. “Because you came into my life. You taught me more about experiencing the good in this world than my own father did. You also taught me that I have a good man underneath the thick armor. I feel closer to him now than I ever have before. And because if I’m lucky enough to have children, I want them to grow up with both their mother and father in their lives.”

“Your father would absolutely be proud and I’m honored not only to call you my godson but also my Underboss. It’s almost time to turn over the reins.”

I laughed softly. “If you don’t mind, I’d like a few weeks to see if I can convince the woman I love to spend the rest of my life with me.”

“That sounds more than reasonable to me. You’re a good man.”

Perhaps that remained to be seen but I was determined to take a new path.

I only hoped my son would be by my side.

CHAPTER 26



*C*hristiana

“What are we doing here? Are you finally going to tell me?” I asked for at least the fifth time since the love of my life had insisted that I pack an overnight bag. To a destination unknown. Francesco had dragged me onto his private jet, refusing to tell me a single thing. I wouldn’t have known we were in Virginia if I hadn’t caught a sign on the side of the road after he’d picked up a rental car.

While Cayman and another soldier had come with us, they remained in the distance, allowing us some privacy. As if we were just a normal couple taking a short vacation. Only I had a feeling this wasn’t just about enjoying a few days for us.

“Not a chance. Then it wouldn’t be a surprise.” Laughing, Francesco pulled the rental car to a stop, glancing at the GPS then toward the street sign.

“Please do not tell me you think we’re getting married here. It’s quaint but our family isn’t here.”

“Our family? You’ve claimed the members of my strange, blended family now?”

I couldn’t help but shrug. “You’re the only strange one. And I’ve adopted your sister and Madisen. They are the bomb.”

“The bomb?”

“You’re old. They are fun to be around. And I adore your niece and nephew.”

He gave me a stern look and all I could do was laugh. In the week that had passed since the almost wedding at the church, everything had seemed like such a blur. Getting to know his family had been amazing as well as maddening. I hadn’t known what to expect and I certainly hadn’t realized how much being near to so many people would make me feel.

I missed my mom more now than ever before. She would have adored Francesco, even if he was a little rough around the edges.

But not nearly as much as I loved him, a man who’d risked so much to save me.

He’d handled business during the day, spending time cleaning up the mess the Bianchis had created.

But the nights had been ours. To enjoy our passion. To get to know each other. To share long dinners. However, there was a bubble surrounding us that at some point would be burst. It terrified me about when that would happen.

“This appears to be it.” He pulled down the street, glancing over at me several times.

“It?”

“Where we’re staying for a couple days.”

The cottages were beautiful, beachy in style and design. When he rounded a bend, it was impossible not to smile. The afternoon sun was glistening across a massive body of water. “This is incredible. Where are we again?” I’d also seen mountains. The terrain was beautiful, lush and green, the air only slightly humid. I had to admit there were butterflies in my stomach from the eagerness I felt. Maybe just being able to get away from New York was exactly what the doctor had ordered.

What we also hadn’t talked much about was the estranged relationship with my father. I’d seen him once, attending the grand jury hearing regarding my mother’s murder. I’d felt it important that I be there. Of course Francesco had been right

by my side. But I'd found no need to say anything to the man who'd spawned me. Perhaps someday I could find it within myself to forgive him, but not for a long time.

And until after I'd healed.

If that made me a bad girl, then so be it.

"It's just a couple days in a rental place. By ourselves. It will give us time to get to know each other even better." There was a teasing sound to his voice, a devilish look on his face. I'd never really seen this side of him. Not quite carefree but enjoying what life had to offer more than I thought he could. The change also seemed as if a weight had been lifted off his shoulders.

"You mean other than biblically?" I couldn't help but taunt him in return.

"Oh, I assure you that there will be some of that as well."

I issued a slight purr, shuddering when he placed his hand on my knee, the action as possessive as usual. His touch was constant, his need to be close as determined as mine. At this point, we were inseparable.

When he finally pulled into a driveway, I unfastened my seatbelt, leaning forward. The view was spectacular with the sunset casting golden rays over the water, huge trees with thick limbs providing a beautiful shadow across the back of the green lawn. From where I sat, I could see a long wooden walkway leading to a dock and a sandy beach surrounding the water's edge.

The house itself was a perfect gingerbread cottage, turquoise in color with the most adorable ornate features. There were flowers in massive pots on the front porch and a swing attached to the ceiling near the front door. The house backed up to the lake and I couldn't wait to jump out, which I did as soon as he had the gear in park.

"Hold on!" he yelled as he struggled to jump out after me.

I raced away, getting at least twenty yards out before turning around and beckoning him with a single finger. "You'll need to catch me. If you can."

“You are such a brat.” He took his time swaggering toward me, the light breeze tousling his hair, curls dipping across his forehead. Instead of a suit, he’d chosen a pair of jeans and a tight tee shirt, the thin material highlighting his spectacular six-pack abs.

After biting my lower lip, the heat between my legs building, I took off running again, heading toward the beach. I didn’t hear a thing until he toppled us both to the soft sand, pitching us over several times as I fought him playfully. Then he pressed the full weight of his body against mine, yanking my arms over my head.

“Did you really think you were getting away from me, little dove?”

“I’m not your little dove any longer.”

“You’re not, huh?” He took a deep breath, holding it for a few seconds then slowly blowing the heated air across my cheeks and jaw.

I wiggled under him, my entire body tingling with desire. There was a carnal look in his eyes, but so much more than before. I’d never believed I could feel so close to someone in my life. With him, everything seemed different, as if I was experiencing the world for the first time.

“I’m a lioness now.”

“Hmmm... That you are, lady.” His voice was deep and husky, his lips barely an inch away from mine. “And you’re all mine.” As he captured my mouth, I swooned, lights flashing in front of my eyes. The kiss was sensual and sweet yet captivating every one of my senses.

The need I felt was explosive, my mind a beautiful blur, unable to process that we were here together. He thrust his tongue inside and I arched my back, longing to wrap my arms around him. But as usual, the man was in full control, refusing to allow me to grasp a moment’s worth. He’d made it very clear that I was to follow his rules at all times and that he was the master.

But I was his weakness and could easily get to him, wrapping the man around my little finger.

Just like Raleigh had done with Max and Madisen had done with Viper. God, I adored this man. The kiss continued and my core became nothing but flames of needs, every inch of my skin seared from his touch.

When he broke the kiss, he nipped my lower lip then lifted his head. “You’re a bad girl.”

“Nope. I’m a very good girl. I think you told me that last night.”

“Hmmm...” As he pulled back, he dragged me with him, immediately plopping onto his butt and yanking me over his legs.

“What are you doing?”

“Reminding you who’s in charge.” His laughter floated into the air as he yanked my dress over my bottom, exposing my naked skin, the G-string hiding nothing. He whistled some lilting tune as he brought his hand down not once but at least six times, moving from one side of my buttocks to the other.

“You are terrible and that hurts.”

“How many times do I need to tell you that a spanking is supposed to hurt?” The strange song continued as he performed the horrible deed, cracking his hand with enough force my body was jarred. The pain was real, shifting almost immediately from discomfort to anguish, electric jolts driving all the way down to my toes.

There was no doubt he was enjoying himself, wriggling on the sand as if to get more comfortable.

The moment I tried to claw my way off, he yanked me back across his lap.

And his thick bulge.

I wiggled again, undulating my hips to continue teasing the hell out of him.

“You will learn, little dove,” he growled, smacking me six more times. Then without warning, he pulled me into his lap, cocking his head and locking his eyes with mine. “Yes, you will learn.”

I was breathless from the quick action as well as the raging desire. I nipped his chin, biting down until he laughed, rolling my fingers down his chest and tugging on the material.

He snagged my hand, jerking it away before I had a chance to get to his cloth-covered cock. Damn him. He knew how to steal my fun. When he pulled my hand to his lips, rolling them across my knuckles, I was almost ready to forgive him.

Almost.

“We have plenty of time for that. Come with me.”

“Where are we going?”

“To see the house, of course.”

As he pulled me to my feet, I glanced at the water, shielding my eyes from the sun. “I could live near the ocean or a lake. It’s relaxing.”

“We already own a house on St. Barts.”

“We? I didn’t know we owned any property.”

“When we get married, you’ll have half of everything I do.” His grin was infectious.

I gave him a hard glare, pulling from his hold and planting my hands on my hips. “You haven’t formally asked me to marry you.” I flicked my left hand at him, wiggling my fingers.

“Good things come to those who wait.”

“I’m not a patient woman.”

He laughed and held out his hand. “Come on. Trust me.”

“Uh-huh. Said the spider to the fly.” As soon as our fingers touched, it was another moment of bottle rockets going off. I wondered how long that would last or if we’d get to be an old couple forgetting to enjoy every moment together.

Just thinking about that brought a wave of sadness. Family. I'd wanted a family for so long that having Francesco's sister in my life as well as her two kids was wonderful yet haunting. I hadn't been able to get our lost little boy out of my mind for long. I knew how hard Francesco had tried to find him. I'd overheard phone calls. I'd seen the blank looks on his face and the way his eyes reflected his deep sadness.

For some reason, we'd yet to be able to talk about it or to acknowledge his death. I'd read somewhere that providing his spirit a place to rest such as a gravestone was a good idea. While I knew in my heart Anthony's spirit wouldn't be in the small grave but in my heart, the thought wasn't a bad one. Maybe I'd talk to Father Saltori when we returned.

He dragged me up the slight hill toward the house to the back door, his expression telling me in no uncertain terms he had something up his sleeve.

As soon as he let go of my hand, he slipped his into his pocket, pulling out a small set of keys, one fitting the back lock easily. As soon as he opened the door, pushing it open, he fumbled with the keys. "You might find a few surprises inside."

"You are the most amazing if not the most hardheaded man I know."

He lifted his head, furrowing his eyebrows on purpose. "*Moi?*"

"Yes, you." I pushed his chest then walked inside and into a bright, beautiful kitchen with stainless steel appliances and granite counters. On the island was a basket with a bottle of wine and two crystal glasses. I headed it toward it, laughing softly. It was filled with all kinds of goodies. Cheeses. Cookies. Crackers. Potted meats. Candy. The tented card on the side was positioned on top of the envelope, the calligraphy writing on the outside with two words that held such a special meaning.

Welcome Home.

"You bought this house, didn't you?" When he didn't answer me right away, I tilted my head. I could swear there were tears

in his eyes. Even though he tried to look away, he couldn't hide his emotion.

"I saw it online and couldn't resist. I thought we could come here every so often for a quick getaway."

"I love it. And I love you."

He grabbed my arm, yanking me toward him. "You better."

"Or what?"

"Or else. You know what that means." He slid his hand under my dress, cupping and squeezing my bottom, the grin on his face returning. "I do so enjoy punishing you."

I pushed against him, pursing my lips. "Let me guess. The refrigerator is stocked, the pantry as well."

"Of course. I am going to be a full-service husband." He let me go and I immediately skipped toward the fridge, throwing one of the doors open.

"Oh, goodie. I'll keep that in mind when I develop a list of chores."

"Very funny." I noticed wine and beer, steaks and vegetables. Yogurt and berries. And milk. I pulled out the carton, glancing at him. "Milk? I learn something new about you every day." Then I moved to the pantry, laughing as I saw a combination of cookies, rice, and cereal. Including Cap'n Crunch. A sudden tickling sensation tore through me.

When I glanced back in Francesco's direction, he was actively opening the bottle of wine from the basket, his face turned away from me.

Backing away, I pressed my hand against my lips then walked out of the kitchen without saying anything. What I found was equally gorgeous, a living room that wasn't stuffy but inviting, as if it was meant for a coastal area. Light and bright, I was able to see the entire porch and front yard, the lovely lawn well-manicured but not fussy.

Then I headed into another living space, a family room that had a deck attached, chairs and a table with an umbrella already positioned in the center. There were already books in

the bookcases, a television and surround sound system ready to enjoy nights of movies. As I walked closer to the floor-to-ceiling shelves, I realized there were already several dozen DVDs waiting to be watched.

Then two of them caught my eye. *Toy Story*. *Cars*. There were also other Disney movies. Another shiver tore through me as my eyes fixated on a shelf with books. Children's books.

I backed away, shaking my head, my heart thumping. Then I fled the room, racing down the hallway to an open door. I stopped just as I stepped inside, the master bedroom gorgeous and inviting.

But I couldn't care less about it.

I passed a bathroom to the single closed door, drifting in front of it, suddenly frozen. I glanced down the hall, wanting nothing more than to call for Francesco, but I didn't have a voice. With my hand shaking, I reached for the handle, slowly turning it. Then I closed my eyes as I opened the door, willing myself to walk just inside.

When I opened them, I almost crumpled to the floor. It was a perfect room created to look like a fantasy with a little racecar bed complete with a colorful comforter. There was an autographed picture of a racecar driver on the wall and toys. My God, the number of little boy toys was unreal. Cars. Trucks. Lego sets. Books. So many books. A choke left my throat and I gasped for air.

"I don't know very much about him other than he loves cars. The people caring for him said he's well adjusted, highly intelligent, and always laughing."

I heard Francesco's voice, but it was as if the sound was echoing. I couldn't move, my limbs paralyzed. Then I sensed him standing right behind me and finally found the courage and energy to turn around. Yet I still couldn't talk, tears streaming down my face. "How?" I finally managed.

He cocked his head, his eyes darting back and forth. Then he rubbed his thumb through several tears, bringing it to his

mouth. I pressed my hand against his shirt, crinkling my fingers around the material.

“The man who betrayed me gave me a beautiful gift. For that, I allowed him to live.”

I gasped. “He knew all along?”

“Not directly. Your father didn’t want the child found, not really. He left a riddle, knowing it would drive us both to madness. My traitorous soldier read books about Smith Mountain Lake, this quaint city, and figured it out.”

As my knees started to buckle, he wrapped his arm around my waist, holding me close. Then he guided me out of the room, pressing kisses against my forehead. I was still in shock, unable to say anything as he led me toward the front door.

“What are you doing?” I no longer recognized the sound of my voice.

The entire world seemed to be enshrouded in shadows, the reflection of the waning afternoon sun hiding the view. But I heard a noise. An approaching vehicle.

“We’ll be here for a few days,” he continued. “There are a few legal issues we need to work through. I already have my attorney working on them. In the meantime, we’ll have a chance to bond with our son.”

I lifted my head, trying to look into his eyes as the sound of brakes being applied sent a wave of apprehension straight through me. I couldn’t stop the tears from falling as I heard doors open and close. Francesco guided me down the stairs, still holding onto me with a firm grip. Within seconds, the light had shifted enough for me to see in front of me.

As a man and woman walked forward, I sucked in my breath. They were both smiling; the woman had her hand wrapped around a little boy’s.

She bent down, whispering in his ear. The sweet child had no expression at first, merely staring at us. Then he cocked his little head, nodding to something she was saying. In his hands was a stuffed animal that he clung to. Dark curls framed his cherub face and I noticed a slight dimple in his chin.

Just like his father had, although it was usually shadowed by two- or three-day stubble.

I pulled away from Francesco, moving closer very slowly then crouching down.

The couple approached, the man nodding toward Francesco.

“Mr. Arturo. I’m Frank Walker. This is my wife, Angela. We spoke several times on the phone.”

As the two men shook hands, I couldn’t take my eyes off the little boy. I couldn’t breathe or think, other than I was terrified I’d scare him.

When Francesco knelt beside me, the little boy glanced up at Frank then back toward us.

“We were surprised when you called him Tony since the church named him Anthony after the patron saint of the poor,” Frank said. “I knew then that this was meant to be. We always knew his real parents would find him. Anthony, this is your mother and father, the people I told you about?”

I’d missed all the special early days. Breastfeeding, crawling for the first time. When he said the word ‘mama’ and ‘daddy’ and stood and walked. But this... this was the best day of my life and one I would never forget.

I crawled slightly closer, making certain I was on his eye level.

“It’s okay, Anthony,” Angela whispered. “He’s a good little boy.”

There was no doubt the two of them had cared for him. I glanced up at both, miming the ‘thank you’ then sat down on the grass, allowing Anthony to decide whether or not it was safe to come to us.

Seconds later, he pulled away from Angela’s hand, taking a single tiny step closer. And if I didn’t believe in miracles before, I did now.

The little boy, my little boy, rushed into my lap, throwing his arms around me. And I heard the word I’d longed to hear.

“Mommy.”

EPILOGUE



“*F*amily is not an important thing. It is everything.”
—Michael J. Fox

Jamaica

Four months later...

Francesco

I stood with a drink in my hand, surveying the scene as it unfolded. There was music blaring and people dancing, the colorful lights that had been strung from one palm tree to another adding to the dazzling spray of colors crisscrossing the late afternoon sky. Fortunately, the weather was perfect, the predicted tropical storm moving in another direction.

Nothing could be more serene than standing in my bare feet by the edge of the ocean, watching my entire family acting as if they were children.

A pig was currently roasting in the pit Viper, Max, and I had created the day before, the scent and smoke adding to the festive atmosphere. Between the shrieks and booming laughter of the children from my blended family as well as that of Cayman and his sisters, it was honestly difficult to hear myself think.

But I'd been doing just that, reflecting on the moment so I would never forget how important it was. Today was my

wedding day, something that would never happen again. Christiana and I had made the decision to wait until Anthony was more settled in his new home to tie the knot. I also wanted it to be special and this was the only place we'd wanted to come.

I caught the sound of Mama Martisha's laughter floating across the sound. She was a powerful woman in her own right, Cayman not doing her enough justice as to just how special his mother truly was. As a single mom, she'd beaten the odds, raising four kids by herself in an area embroiled in poverty.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Maxwell's approach, the man swaggering through the sand as if he owned the entire island. I did love that about him, which was why I couldn't help laughing. Granted, maybe the two shots of tequila or the copious amounts of alcohol at the very intimate and very controlled bachelor party the night before was the reason I felt relaxed.

Or maybe it was the fact my blushing bride to be couldn't take her eyes off me and vice versa. In her tropical dress, one designed by one of Cayman's sisters, hand sewn by another, she was the epitome of an island princess.

And the insanely beautiful mother of my little boy. Who was never far from his mother.

Max followed my gaze as he flanked my side. "You are a lucky man."

"I know I am. Blessed."

"I'm glad to hear you say that."

Huffing, I shot him a look. "I know. Maybe old dogs can learn new tricks. Eh?"

"Always, my godson. Always." We both laughed and he clapped me on the back. "This is perfect."

"Yeah, it is. Cayman had a good idea."

"He's a good man."

"Something else I realized." I laughed when Cayman suddenly scooped Anthony into his arms, swinging him around in circle

after circle. My little boy couldn't seem to stop giggling.

"I heard you asked Viper to be Tony's godfather."

I took a deep breath, holding it for a few seconds before exhaling. "You're my godfather, Max, as well as Raleigh's. I wanted little Tony to also have a strong bond with Viper. I hope you don't mind."

"Oh, my God. Of course not. That kid is so special." A few seconds passed, both of us content. "I also wanted you to know that Christiana asked that I walk her down the aisle of flowers."

I nodded several times, trying not to become emotional. "She told me. She already feels very close to you. Thank you for the honor, Max. It means a lot to both of us."

"I'm the one who's honored, Francesco. And I have a small wedding gift for you." He pulled an envelope from his pocket, turning to face me.

"Uh-oh. What's this?"

"Just open it. Jesus."

I fumbled with getting the single piece of paper from the envelope, noticing nothing more than a date. "What is December 31st?"

"The date of my retirement party. We already booked a caterer. After that, you will be Don Arturo, taking your rightful place."

There was so much to say to him, so much history between us, but at this point instead I gave him a dip of my head as a nod of respect. "As you wish, Don Powers."

He chuckled as only Max could do.

As the women suddenly clambered around Christiana, I sensed it was almost time for the wedding. They would take her for the last moments of being prepared to accept the position of wife. Whatever that meant.

"I wanted you to know that we've decided on Tony's full name," I said to him. "It will be formalized at the christening."

"What did you two decide on?"

“Anthony Maxwell Arturo.”

Max slowly turned his head, surprise in his eyes. Then he pulled me in for a bearhug. “You’ve turned out to be something, kiddo. Your father would be so proud.”

“Yeah, I think he would.” I finished off my drink, suddenly needing another one. I wasn’t used to the mushy shit.

As my sister approached, I could tell she had something on her mind. Raleigh usually did. In her hand was a boutonniere, the single white rose a favorite of Christiana’s.

“Aren’t you supposed to be with the bride, oh sister of mine?”

“I thought it was time for some sisterly advice,” she said as she adjusted the collar on my tropical shirt, taking her time to attach the flower.

“Stick me with the pin and there will be hell to pay.”

“You are still a mean brother,” she snarked, giving me a hard look, her nose scrunching as it used to when she was a kid.

“And I plan on staying that way.” Max and I laughed while she shook her head.

Then she rose onto her tiptoes, kissing my cheek. “I love you, little brother. I always will. I’m so glad to see you happy. But if you fuck it up with Christiana, I will disown you. Do you hear me?”

She pointed her index finger at me, her expression serious.

“Yes, ma’am. I realize she’ll be your sister first and foremost.”

“You got that right.” She gave Max a sly look then backed away. “Enjoy your last few minutes of freedom. There won’t be any more of them.”

Her laugh sparkled into the breeze as she walked away. In her place Viper, Cayman, and Dominick approached, the priest looking almost every bit the part since he was performing the ceremony, except someone had convinced him wearing shorts in the heat was acceptable.

“Where’s your drink, Father?” I asked.

Dominick grinned. “Not while I’m on duty. As soon as you kiss the bride, all bets are off.”

All of us laughed. Then a strange quiet settled in. The last few months had been peaceful, no retaliation from any of the Bianchi soldiers. The Feds were off our backs and the political forefront was spinning as usual.

Would there always be a chance of some other syndicate or cartel attempting to destroy our regime? Yes, but we’d become stronger as a family, able to face anything. Whether we were blood relations or not, we were closer than I’d ever thought we’d be. At least I knew my wife and son, and any future children Christiana and I decided to bring into our lives would have family surrounding them.

Caring for them.

Loving them.

This was my world and I’d been given a second chance. And nothing and no one would ever take it away from me.

God willing.

Cayman started filling our glasses with an amber-colored liquid.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“Rum, my friend, a tradition in Jamaica for every wedding.” He winked, as usual his accent more pronounced.

“Ah,” I told him, grinning at the way Dominick shook his head.

“A toast. To the bride and groom. May you walk into the golden years of life while enjoying the fruits of your labor and the beauty of the world around you. May your children bring you joy and happiness, and your difficulties help to provide you with wisdom. And above all, may you enjoy the wealth of love instead of money.” As Cayman lifted his glass, I was shocked by how emotional the entire experience was.

We clinked glasses, the moment of camaraderie a wonderful memory.

“And to Joey and his family. I think he’s looking down on us.”
I glanced toward the sky, giving my dead friend a nod.

Dominick grinned. “I know he is. So is your father. Come on, my friend. It’s time.”

We threw back our drinks, placing the glasses on one of the decorated tables then made our way to the trellis covered in flowers, rose petals lining the sandy aisle leading to a group of palm trees where my bride was being primped and prepared.

I’d never valued the concept of family and friends, at least not like my sister always had. She was a sweet soul, where I’d been more like my father. Or so I’d believed, fighting everything about Maxwell and his world: my sister and her love and the organization that had been changed before my eyes into an even more powerful organization.

Now I stood in the simplest of worlds needing and wanting for nothing, feeling more honored to be here than I could in any other location in the world. This was what heaven was made of. Family. Friends. Children. And the love of the woman I’d always considered mine.

As I thought about Cayman’s toast, I knew he was right.

The only truly happy man was one who had the wealth of love, not of gold pieces and trinkets.

In my mind, I had it all.

As the small crowd gathered around, my godfather held the arm of my bride to be and I couldn’t stop the tears from falling. With every step she took, the last vestiges of armor fell away. And as I took her hands into mine, I knew I was the most powerful man on earth.

Because of her love.

“I love you, my almost husband.”

“I love you, my soon to be wife.”

She rose onto her tiptoes, pressing her lips against my ear.

“Don’t you forget it.”

And so, it began...

The End

AFTERWORD

Stormy Night Publications would like to thank you for your interest in our books.

If you liked this book (or even if you didn't), we would really appreciate you leaving a review on the site where you purchased it. Reviews provide useful feedback for us and our authors, and this feedback (both positive comments and constructive criticism) allows us to work even harder to make sure we provide the content our customers want to read.

If you would like to check out more books from Stormy Night Publications, if you want to learn more about our company, or if you would like to join our mailing list, please visit our website at:

<http://www.stormynightpublications.com>

BOOKS OF THE RUTHLESS EMPIRE SERIES

The Don

Maxwell Powers swept into my life after my father was gunned down, but the moment those piercing blue eyes caught mine I knew he would be doing more than just avenging his old friend.

I haven't seen him since I was a little girl, but that won't keep him from bending me over and belting my bare backside... or from making me scream his name as he claims my virgin body.

He's twice my age, and he's my godfather.

But I know I'll be soaking wet and ready for him tonight...

[Buy on Amazon](#)

The Consigliere

As consigliere of New York's most ruthless crime syndicate, Daniel Briggs rules with an iron fist. But here in Los Angeles, he's just my big brother's best friend, forbidden in every way.

This stunningly handsome billionaire may be the most eligible bachelor on the West Coast, but to him I'm still just a little girl in need of protection from men who would ravage her brutally.

Men like him.

But he'll soon realize I'm all grown up, and then it won't be long before my teenage crush finally shows me the side of him he's kept hidden from me—the savage side that will blister my bare ass for talking back and then take what has always been his with my hair gripped in his fist.

I don't know what comes after that. I just know everything he does to me will be utterly sinful...

[Buy on Amazon](#)

BOOKS OF THE TAINTED REGIME SERIES

Cruellest Vow

D'Artagnan Conti was born into poverty, raised to be a soldier in my father's savage regime. I grew up in luxury, longing to escape my family's cruel machinations, and the young man with sapphire eyes and the voice of an angel became not just my forbidden crush but my everything.

Then he was taken from me, killed in a brutal attack by our enemies. Or so I was led to believe...

For twenty years I did my best to forget him, until a devilishly handsome stranger awakened my desire in a way that I hadn't thought possible, baring my body and soul and setting them both ablaze with passion so intense it burns hotter than the lash of leather across my naked backside.

Every taste of his lips, every whisper in my ear, and every quivering climax pulled me deeper into this dark, twisted rapture, and only when I was already under his spell did I learn the truth.

The man I thought I'd lost is the one who has made me his.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Twisted Embrace

Enzo Lazaro is my best friend's brother, yet the fact that it was taboo only left me even more desperate for him to undress me with those piercing eyes and then strip me bare and ravage me.

But until he found out a secret I hadn't even known myself, I never thought I'd be screaming his name in bed with my belted ass still burning because he decided I needed a lesson in obedience.

...or that he'd be claiming me as his bride.

It turns out I'm the daughter of a Russian mobster, and even though my adopted parents never told me, that means I have dangerous enemies. He says he's making me his wife to protect me.

But we both know he would have taken what he wanted eventually anyway.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Captured Innocence

When Mattia DeLuca paid my father handsomely for the right to claim me as his bride, it didn't matter that I wanted nothing to do with my own Cosa Nostra family, let alone someone else's. Long before he put a ring on my finger, my own screams of climax told me I was his forever.

Even when I ran away, hoping to leave my family's mafia world behind, I always knew Mattia would track me down one day and take his belt to my bare ass before taking me to his bed again.

But when he came for me, it wasn't just to punish, ravage, and then wed me.

It was to rescue me.

Buy on Amazon

BOOKS OF THE CARNAL SINS SERIES

Required Surrender

My first mistake was agreeing to participate in a charity auction. My second was believing I could walk away from the commanding billionaire with a brogue accent and dazzling green eyes.

It was supposed to be one date, but a man like Lachlan McKenzie plays by his own set of rules.

As the owner of Carnal Sins, DC's exclusive kink club, his reputation is as dark and demanding as his desires, and before I knew it I ended up his to enjoy not for just one night but a full week.

I fought his control, but I knew I wouldn't win... and in my heart I don't think I even wanted to. Not after he called me his good girl, stripped me bare and spanked me with his belt, and then made me blush and beg and come so hard I forgot all about being his only for a few more days.

That didn't matter anyway. We both know he's keeping me forever.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Demanded Submission

When he came to my aid after a head-on collision that seemed not to have been an accident, Jameson Stark offered me a ride, help with my car, and a job at the most exclusive club in town.

He also bared me, spanked me until I knew better than to argue with him again, and then showed me what it means to be in the debt of a billionaire who isn't afraid to take everything he's owed.

But as the owner of the Miami branch of Carnal Sins, it isn't just Jameson's wealth and good looks that draw attention, and I knew a man like him must have enemies. I just didn't care.

Not when his every smoldering glance all but demanded my submission...

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Compelled Obedience

Grant Wilde is as arrogant as he is rich and powerful, and if I didn't need his help so desperately I'd tell him exactly where he ought to shove his money, his exclusive club, and his cocky smirk.

But I do need his help, and it will come at a price...

[Buy on Amazon](#)

BOOKS OF THE KINGS OF CORRUPTION SERIES

King of Wrath

After a car wreck on an icy winter morning, I had no idea the man who saved my life would turn out to be the heir to a powerful mafia family... let alone that I'd be forced into marrying him.

When this mysterious stranger sought to seduce me, I should have ignored the dark passion he ignited. Instead, I begged him to claim me as he stripped me bare and whipped me with his belt.

He was as savage as I was innocent, but it was only after he made me his that I learned the truth.

He's the head of the New York Cosa Nostra, and I belong to him now...

[Buy on Amazon](#)

King of Cruelty

Constantine Thorn has been after me since I saw him kill a man nine years ago, and when he finally caught me he made me an offer I couldn't refuse. Marry him and he will protect me.

Only then did I learn that the man who made me his bride was the same monster I'd feared.

He's a brutal, heartless mafia boss and I wanted to hate the bastard, but with every stinging lash of his belt and every moment of helplessly intense passion, I fell deeper into the dark abyss.

He's the king of cruelty, and now I'm his queen.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

King of Pain

Diego Santos may be wealthy, powerful, and sinfully gorgeous, but his slick veneer doesn't fool me. I know his true nature, and I had planned to end this arranged marriage before it even began.

But it wasn't Diego waiting for me at the altar.

By all appearances the man who laid claim to me was the mafia heir to whom I'd been promised, but I sensed an entirely different personality, one so electrifying I was swept up by his passion.

A part of me still wanted to escape, but then he took me in his arms and over his knee, laying my deepest, darkest needs bare and then fulfilling them in the most shameful ways imaginable.

Now I'm not just his bride. I'm his completely.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

King of Depravity

When Brogan Callahan swept me off my feet, I didn't know he was heir to a powerful Irish mafia family. I didn't find that out until after he'd taken me in his

arms... and over his knee.

By the time I learned the truth, I was already his.

I went on the run to escape my father's plans to marry me off, but it turns out the ruthless mob boss he had in mind is the same sinfully sexy bastard who just stripped me bare and claimed me savagely.

He demands my absolute obedience, and yet with each brutal kiss and stinging lash of his belt I feel myself falling ever deeper into the dark abyss of shameful need he's created within me.

At first I wondered if there were bounds to his depravity. Now I hope there aren't...

[Buy on Amazon](#)

King of Savagery

I knew Maxim Nikitin was a man to be reckoned with when I went undercover to help the FBI bring him down, but nothing could have prepared me for his raw power... or his icy blue eyes.

He caught me, and now he's determined not just to punish me, but to tame me completely.

Every kiss is brutal, every touch possessive, every fiery lash of his belt more intense than the last, yet with every cry of pain and every scream of climax the truth becomes more obvious.

He doesn't need to break me. I belong to him already.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

King of Malice

When I met Phoenix Diamonds, I didn't know anything about him except that he had a body carved from stone and a voice that left me hoping he'd order me to strip just so I could obey.

By the time I learned he's the head of a Greek crime syndicate intent on making me pay for the sins of my father, he'd already mastered me with his touch alone, belted my bare ass for daring to come without permission, and ravaged me thoroughly both that night and the next morning.

All I can do is try to pretend he isn't everything I've always fantasized about...

But I think he knows already.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

BOOKS OF THE SINNERS AND SAINTS SERIES

Beautiful Villain

When I knocked on Kirill Sabatin's door, I didn't know he was the Kozlov Bratva's most feared enforcer. I didn't expect him to be the most terrifyingly sexy man I've ever laid eyes on either...

I told him off for making so much noise in the middle of the night, but if the crack of his palm against my bare bottom didn't wake everyone in the building my screams of climax certainly did.

I shouldn't have let him spank me, let alone seduce me. He's a dangerous man and I could easily end up in way over my head. But the moment I set eyes on those rippling, sweat-slicked muscles I knew I needed that beautiful villain to take me long and hard and savagely right then and there.

And he did.

Now I just have to hope him claiming me doesn't start a mob war...

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Beautiful Sinner

When I first screamed his name in shameful surrender, Sevastian Kozlov was the enemy, the heir of a rival family who had just finished spanking me into submission after I dared to defy him.

Though he'd already claimed my body by the time he claimed me as his bride, no matter how desperately I long for his touch I vowed this beautiful sinner would never conquer my heart.

But it wasn't up to me...

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Beautiful Seduction

In my late-night hunt for the perfect pastry, I never expected to be the victim of a brutal attack... or for a brooding, blue-eyed stranger to become my savior, tending to my wounds while easing my fears. The electricity exploded between us, turning into a night of incredible passion.

Only later did I learn that Valentin Vincheti is the heir to the New York Italian mafia empire.

Then he came to take me, and this time he wasn't gentle. I shouldn't have surrendered, but with each savage kiss and stinging stroke of his belt his beautiful seduction became more difficult to resist. But when one of his enemies sets his sights on me, will my secrets put our lives at risk?

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Beautiful Obsession

After I was left at the altar, I turned what was meant to be the reception into an epic party. But when a handsome stranger asked me to dance, I wasn't prepared for the passion he ignited.

He told me he was a very bad man, but that only made my heart race faster as I lay bare and bound, my dress discarded and my bottom sore from a spanking, waiting for him to ravage me.

It was supposed to be just one night. No strings. Nothing to entangle me in his dangerous world.

But that was before I became his beautiful obsession...

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Beautiful Devil

Kostya Baranov is an infamous assassin, a man capable of incredible savagery, but when I witnessed a mafia hit he didn't silence me with a bullet. He decided to make me his instead.

Taken prisoner and forced to obey or feel the sting of his belt, shameful lust for my captor soon wars with fury at what he has done to me... and what he keeps doing to me with every touch.

But though he may be a beautiful devil, it is my own family's secret which may damn us both.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

BOOKS OF THE BENEDETTI EMPIRE SERIES

Cruel Prince

Catherine's father conspired to have my father killed, and that debt to the Benedetti family must be settled. Just as he took something from me, I will take something from him.

His daughter.

She will be mine to punish and ravage, but when she suffers it will not be for his sins.

It will be for my pleasure.

She will beg, but it will be for me to claim her in the most shameful ways imaginable.

She will scream, but it will be because she doesn't think she can bear another climax.

But when she surrenders at last, it will not be to her captor.

It will be to her husband.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Ruthless Prince

Alexandra is a senator's daughter, used to mingling in the company of the rich and powerful, but tonight she will learn that there are men who play by different rules.

Men like me.

I could romance her. I could seduce her and then carry her gently to my bed.

But that can wait. Tonight I'm going to wring one ruthless climax after another from her quivering body with her bottom burning from my belt and her throat sore from screaming.

She will know she is mine before she even knows she is my bride.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Savage Prince

Gillian's father may be a powerful Irish mob boss, but he owes a blood debt to my family, and when I came to collect I didn't ask permission before taking his daughter as payment.

It was not up to him... or to her.

I will make her my bride, but I am not the kind of man who will wait until our wedding night to bare her and claim what belongs to me. She will walk down the aisle wet, well-used, and sore.

Her dress will hide the marks from my belt that taught her the consequences of disobeying her husband, but nothing will hide her blushes as her arousal drips down her thighs with each step.

By the time she says her vows she will already be mine.

Buy on Amazon

BOOKS OF THE MERCILESS KINGS SERIES

King's Captive

Emily Porter saw me kill a man who betrayed my family and she helped put me behind bars. But someone with my connections doesn't stay in prison long, and she is about to learn the hard way that there is a price to pay for crossing the boss of the King dynasty. A very, very painful price...

She's going to cry for me as I blister that beautiful bottom, then she's going to scream for me as I ravage her over and over again, taking her in the most shameful ways she can imagine. But leaving her well-punished and well-used is just the beginning of what I have in store for Emily.

I'm going to make her my bride, and then I'm going to make her mine completely.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

King's Hostage

When my life was threatened, Michael King didn't just take matters into his own hands.

He took me.

When he carried me off it was partly to protect me, but mostly it was because he wanted me.

I didn't choose to go with him, but it wasn't up to me. That's why I'm naked, wet, and sore in an opulent Swiss chalet with my bottom still burning from the belt of the infuriatingly sexy mafia boss who brought me here, punished me when I fought him, and then savagely made me his.

We'll return when things are safe in New Orleans, but I won't be going back to my old home.

I belong to him now, and he plans to keep me.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

King's Possession

Her father had to be taught what happens when you cross a King, but that isn't why Genevieve Rossi is sore, well-used, and waiting for me to claim her in the only way I haven't already.

She's sore because she thought she could embarrass me in public without being punished.

She's well-used because after I spanked her I wanted more, and I take what I want.

She's waiting for me in my bed because she's my bride, and tonight is our wedding night.

I'm not going to be gentle with her, but when she wakes up tomorrow morning wet and blushing her cheeks won't be crimson because of the shameful things I did to her naked, quivering body.

It will be because she begged for all of them.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

King's Toy

Vincenzo King thought I knew something about a man who betrayed him, but that isn't why I'm on my way to New Orleans well-used and sore with my backside still burning from his belt.

When he bared and punished me maybe it was just business, but what came after was not.

It was savage, it was shameful, and it was very, very personal.

I'm his toy now, and not the kind you keep in its box on the shelf.

He's going to play rough with me.

He's going to get me all wet and dirty.

Then he's going to do it all again tomorrow.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

King's Demands

Julieta Morales hoped to escape an unwanted marriage, but the moment she got into my car her fate was sealed. She will have a husband, but it won't be the cartel boss her father chose for her.

It will be me.

But I'm not the kind of man who takes his bride gently amid rose petals on her wedding night. She'll learn to satisfy her King's demands with her bottom burning and her hair held in my fist.

She'll promise obedience when she speaks her vows, but she'll be mastered long before then.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

King's Temptation

I didn't think I needed Dimitri Kristoff's protection, but it wasn't up to me. With a kingpin from a rival family coming after me, he took charge, took off his belt, and then took what he wanted.

He knows I'm not used to doing as I'm told. He just doesn't care.

The stripes seared across my bare bottom left me sore and sorry, but it was what came after that truly left me shaken. The princess of the King family shouldn't be on her knees for anyone, let alone this Bratva brute who has decided to claim for himself what he was meant to safeguard.

Nobody gave me to him, but I'm his anyway.

Now he's going to make sure I know it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

BOOKS OF THE MAFIA MASTERS SERIES

His as Payment

Caroline Hargrove thinks she is mine because her father owed me a debt, but that isn't why she is sitting in my car beside me with her bottom sore inside and out.

She's wet, well-used, and coming with me whether she likes it or not because I decided I want her, and I take what I want.

As a senator's daughter, she probably thought no man would dare lay a hand on her, let alone spank her thoroughly and then claim her beautiful body in the most shameful ways possible.

She was wrong. Very, very wrong. She's going to be mastered, and I won't be gentle about it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Taken as Collateral

Francesca Alessandro was just meant to be collateral, held captive as a warning to her father, but then she tried to fight me. She ended up sore and soaked as I taught her a lesson with my belt and then screaming with every savage climax as I taught her to obey in a much more shameful way.

She's mine now. Mine to keep. Mine to protect. Mine to use as hard and as often as I please.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Forced to Cooperate

Willow Church is not the first person who tried to put a bullet in me. She's just the first I let live. Now she will pay the price in the most shameful way imaginable. The stripes from my belt will teach her to obey, but what happens to her sore, red bottom after that will teach the real lesson.

She will be used mercilessly, over and over, and every brutal climax will remind her of the humiliating truth: she never even had a chance against me. Her body always knew its master.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Claimed as Revenge

Valencia Rivera became mine the moment her father broke the agreement he made with me. She thought she had a say in the matter, but my belt across her beautiful bottom taught her otherwise and a night spent screaming her surrender into the sheets left her in no doubt she belongs to me.

Using her hard and often will not be all it takes to tame her properly, but it will be a good start...

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Made to Beg

Sierra Fox showed up at my door to ask for my protection, and I gave it to her... for a price. She belongs to me now, and I'm going to use her beautiful body as thoroughly as I please. The only thing for her to decide is how sore her cute little bottom will be when I'm through claiming her.

She came to me begging for help, but as her moans and screams grow louder with every brutal climax, we both know it won't be long before she begs me for something far more shameful.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

BOOKS OF THE EDGE OF DARKNESS
SERIES

Dark Stranger

**On a dark, rainy night, I received a phone call. I shouldn't have answered it...
but I did.**

The things he says he'll do to me are far from sweet, this man I know only by his
voice.

They're so filthy I blush crimson just hearing them... and yet still I answer, my
panties always soaked the moment the phone rings. But this isn't going to end when
I decide it's gone too far...

I can tell him to leave me alone, but I know it won't keep him away. He's coming
for me, and when he does he's going to make me his in all the rough, shameful
ways he promised he would.

And I'll be wet and ready for him... whether I want to be or not.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Dark Predator

**She thinks I'm seducing her, but this isn't romance. It's something much more
shameful.**

Eden tried to leave the mafia behind, but someone far more dangerous has set his
sights on her.

Me.

She was meant to be my revenge against an old enemy, but I decided to make her
mine instead.

She'll moan as my belt lashes her quivering bottom and writhe as I claim her in the
filthiest of ways, but that's just the beginning. When I'm done, it won't be just her
body that belongs to me.

I'll own her heart and soul too.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

BOOKS OF THE DARK OVERTURE SERIES

Indecent Invitation

I shouldn't be here.

My clothes shouldn't be scattered around the room, my bottom shouldn't be sore, and I certainly shouldn't be screaming into the sheets as a ruthless tycoon takes everything he wants from me.

I shouldn't even know Houston Powers at all, but I was in a bad spot and I was made an offer.

A shameful, indecent offer I couldn't refuse.

I was desperate, I needed the money, and I didn't have a choice. Not a real one, anyway.

I'm here because I signed a contract, but I'm his because he made me his.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Illicit Proposition

I should have known better.

His proposition was shameful. So shameful I threw my drink in his face when I heard it.

Then I saw the look in his eyes, and I knew I'd made a mistake.

I fought as he bared me and begged as he spanked me, but it didn't matter. All I could do was moan, scream, and climax helplessly for him as he took everything he wanted from me.

By the time I signed the contract, I was already his.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Unseemly Entanglement

I was warned about Frederick Duvall. I was told he was dangerous. But I never suspected that meeting the billionaire advertising mogul to discuss a business proposition would end with me bent over a table with my dress up and my panties down for a shameful lesson in obedience.

That should have been it. I should have told him what he could do with his offer and his money.

But I didn't.

I could say it was because two million dollars is a lot of cash, but as I stand before him naked, bound, and awaiting the sting of his cane for daring to displease him, I know that's not the truth.

I'm not here because he pays me. I'm here because he owns me.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

BOOKS OF THE CLUB DARKNESS SERIES

Bent to His Will

Even the most powerful men in the world know better than to cross me, but Autumn Sutherland thought she could spy on me in my own club and get away with it. Now she must be punished.

She tried to expose me, so she will be exposed. Bare, bound, and helplessly on display, she'll beg for mercy as my strap lashes her quivering bottom and my crop leaves its burning welts on her most intimate spots. Then she'll scream my name as she takes every inch of me, long and hard.

When I am done with her, she won't just be sore and shamefully broken. She will be mine.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Broken by His Hand

Sophia Russo tried to keep away from me, but just thinking about what I would do to her left her panties drenched. She tried to hide it, but I didn't let her. I tore those soaked panties off, spanked her bare little bottom until she had no doubt who owns her, and then took her long and hard.

She begged and screamed as she came for me over and over, but she didn't learn her lesson...

She didn't just come back for more. She thought she could disobey me and get away with it.

This time I'm not just going to punish her. I'm going to break her.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Bound by His Command

Willow danced for the rich and powerful at the world's most exclusive club... until tonight.

Tonight I told her she belongs to me now, and no other man will touch her again. Tonight I ripped her soaked panties from her beautiful body and taught her to obey with my belt.

Tonight I took her as mine, and I won't be giving her up.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

MORE MAFIA AND BILLIONAIRE ROMANCES BY PIPER STONE

Caught

If you're forced to come to an arrangement with someone as dangerous as Jagger Calduchi, it means he's about to take what he wants, and you'll give it to him... even if it's your body.

I got caught snooping where I didn't belong, and Jagger made me an offer I couldn't refuse. A week with him where his rules are the only rules, or his bought and paid for cops take me to jail.

He's going to punish me, train me, and master me completely. When he's used me so shamefully I blush just to think about it, maybe he'll let me go home... or maybe he'll decide to keep me.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Ruthless

Treating a mobster shot by a rival's goons isn't really my forte, but when a man is powerful enough to have a whole wing of a hospital cleared out for his protection, you do as you're told.

To make matters worse, this isn't first time I've met Giovanni Calduchi. It turns out my newest patient is the stern, sexy brute who all but dragged me back to his hotel room a couple of nights ago so he could use my body as he pleased, then showed up at my house the next day, stripped me bare, and spanked me until I was begging him to take me even more roughly and shamefully.

Now, with his enemies likely to be coming after me in order to get to him, all I can do is hope he's as good at keeping me safe as he is at keeping me blushing, sore, and thoroughly satisfied.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Dangerous

I knew Erik Chenault was dangerous the moment I saw him. Everything about him should have warned me away, from the scar on his face to the fact that mobsters call him Blade. But I was drawn like a moth to a flame, and I ended up burnt... and blushing, sore, and thoroughly used.

Now he's taken it upon himself to protect me from men like the ones we both tried to leave in our past. He's going to make me his whether I like it or not... but I think I'm going to like it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Prey

Within moments of setting eyes on Sophia Waters, I was certain of two things. She was going to learn what happens to bad girls who cheat at cards, and I was going to be the one to teach her.

But there was one thing I didn't know as I reddened that cute little bottom and then took her long and hard and oh so shamefully: I wasn't the only one who didn't come here for a game of cards.

I came to kill a man. It turns out she came to protect him.

Nobody keeps me from my target, but I'm in no rush. Not when I'm enjoying this game of cat and mouse so much. I'll even let her catch me one day, and as she screams my name with each brutal climax she'll finally realize the truth. She was never the hunter. She was always the prey.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Given

Stephanie Michaelson was given to me, and she is mine. The sooner she learns that, the less often her cute little bottom will end up well-punished and sore as she is reminded of her place.

But even as she promises obedience with tears running down her cheeks, I know it isn't the sting of my belt that will truly tame her. It is what comes next that will leave her in no doubt she belongs to me. That part will be long, hard, and shameful... and I will make her beg for all of it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Dangerous Stranger

I came to Spain hoping to start a new life away from dangerous men, but then I met Rafael Santiago. Now I'm not just caught up in the affairs of a mafia boss, I'm being forced into his car.

When I saw something I shouldn't have, Rafael took me captive, stripped me bare, and punished me until he felt certain I'd told him everything I knew about his organization... which was nothing at all. Then he offered me his protection in return for the right to use me as he pleases.

Now that I belong to him, his plans for me are more shameful than I could have ever imagined.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Indebted

After her father stole from me, I could have left Alessandra Toro in jail for a crime she didn't commit. But I have plans for her. A deal with the judge—the kind only a man like me can arrange—made her my captive, and she will pay her father's debt with her beautiful body.

She will try to run, of course, but it won't be the law that comes after her. It will be me.

The sting of my belt across her quivering bare bottom will teach Alessandra the price of defiance, but it is the far more shameful penance that follows which will truly tame her.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Taken

When Winter O'Brien was given to me, she thought she had a say in the matter. She was wrong.

She is my bride. Mine to claim, mine to punish, and mine to use as shamefully as I please. The sting of my belt on her bare bottom will teach her to obey, but obedience is just the beginning.

I will demand so much more.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Bratva's Captive

I told Chloe Kingstrom that getting close to me would be dangerous, and she should keep her distance. The moment she disobeyed and followed me into that bar, she became mine.

Now my enemies are after her, but it's not what they would do to her she should worry about.

It's what I'm going to do to her.

My belt across her bare backside will teach her obedience, but what comes after will be different.

She's going to blush, beg, and scream with every climax as she's ravaged more thoroughly than she can imagine. Then I'm going to flip her over and claim her in an even more shameful way.

If she's a good girl, I might even let her enjoy it.

Buy on Amazon

Hunted

Hope Gracen was just another target to be tracked down... until I caught her.

When I discovered I'd been lied to, I carried her off.

She'll tell me the truth with her bottom still burning from my belt, but that isn't why she's here.

I took her to protect her. I'm keeping her because she's mine.

Buy on Amazon

Theirs as Payment

Until mere moments ago, I was a doctor heading home after my shift at the hospital. But that was before I was forced into the back seat of an SUV, then bared and spanked for trying to escape.

Now I'm just leverage for the Cabello brothers to use against my father, but it isn't the thought of being held hostage by these brutes that has my heart racing and my whole body quivering.

It is the way they're looking at me...

Like they're about to tear my clothes off and take turns mounting me like wild beasts.

Like they're going to share me, using me in ways more shameful than I can even imagine.

Like they own me.

Buy on Amazon

Ruthless Acquisition

I knew the shameful stakes when I bet against these bastards. I just didn't expect to lose.

Now they've come to collect their winnings.

But they aren't just planning to take a belt to my bare bottom for trying to run and then claim everything they're owed from my naked, helpless body as I blush, beg,

and scream for them.

They've acquired me, and they plan to keep me.

Buy on Amazon

Bound by Contract

I knew I was in trouble the moment Gregory Steele called me into his office, but I wasn't expecting to end up stripped bare and bent over his desk for a painful lesson from his belt.

Taking a little bit of money here and there might have gone unnoticed in another organization, but stealing from one of the most powerful mafia bosses on the West Coast has consequences.

It doesn't matter why I did it. The only thing that matters now is what he's going to do to me.

I have no doubt he will use me shamefully, but he didn't make me sign that contract just to show me off with my cheeks blushing and my bottom sore under the scandalous outfit he chose for me.

Now that I'm his, he plans to keep me.

Buy on Amazon

Dangerous Addiction

I went looking for a man working with my enemies. When I found only her instead, I should have just left her alone... or maybe taken what I wanted from her and then left... but I didn't.

I couldn't.

So I carried her off to keep for myself.

She didn't make it easy for me, and that earned her a lesson in obedience. A shameful one.

But as her bare bottom reddens under my punishing hand I can see her arousal dripping down her quivering thighs, and no matter how much she squirms and sobs and begs we both know exactly what she needs, and we both know as soon as this spanking is over I'm going to give it to her.

Hard.

Buy on Amazon

Auction House

When I went undercover to investigate a series of murders with links to Steele Franklin's auction house operation, I expected to be sold for the humiliating use of one of his fellow billionaires.

But he wanted me for himself.

No contract. No agreed upon terms. No say in the matter at all except whether to surrender to his shameful demands without a fight or make him strip me bare and spank me into submission first.

I chose the second option, but as one devastating climax after another is forced from my naked, quivering body, what scares me isn't the thought of him keeping

me locked up in a cage forever.

It's knowing he won't need to.

Buy on Amazon

Interrogated

As Liam McGinty's belt lashes my bare backside, it isn't the burning sting or the humiliating awareness that my body's surrender is on full display for this ruthless mobster that shocks me.

It's the fact that this isn't a scene from one of my books.

I almost can't process the fact that I'm really riding in the back of a luxury SUV belonging to the most powerful Irish mafia boss in New York—the man I've written so much about—with my cheeks blushing, my bottom sore inside and out, and my arousal soaking the seat beneath me.

But whether I can process it or not, I'm his captive now.

Maybe he'll let me go when he's gotten the answers he needs and he's used me as he pleases.

Or maybe he'll keep me...

Buy on Amazon

Vow of Seduction

Alexander Durante, Brogan Lancaster, and Daniel Norwood are powerful, dangerous men, but that won't keep them safe from me. Not after they let my brother take the fall for their crimes.

I spent years preparing for my chance at revenge. But things didn't go as planned...

Now I'm naked, bound, and helpless, waiting to be used and punished as these brutes see fit, and yet what's on my mind isn't how to escape all of the shameful things they're going to do to me.

It's whether I even want to...

Buy on Amazon

Brutal Heir

When I went to an author convention, I didn't expect to find myself enjoying a rooftop meal with the sexiest cover model in the business, let alone screaming his name in bed later that night.

I didn't plan to be targeted by assassins, rushed to a helicopter under cover of armed men, and then spirited away to his home country with my bottom still burning from a spanking either, but it turns out there are some really important things I didn't know about Diavolo Montoya...

Like the fact that he's the heir to a notorious crime syndicate.

I should hate him, but even as his prisoner our connection is too intense to ignore, and I'm beginning to realize that what began as a moment of passion is going to end with me as his.

Forever.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Bed of Thorns

Hardened by years spent in prison for a crime he didn't commit, Edmond Montego is no longer the gentle man I remember. When he came for me, he didn't just take me for the very first time.

He claimed my virgin body with a savagery that left me screaming... and he made me beg for it.

I should have run when I had the chance, but with every lash of his belt, every passionate kiss, and every brutal climax, I fell more and more under his spell.

But he has a dark secret, and if we're not careful, we'll lose everything... including our lives.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Morally Gray

Saxon Thornburg is known to the world as a reputable businessman, but I knew his true nature even before he kidnapped me, bared, bound, and punished me, and then shamefully ravaged me.

He is not just the billionaire boss of a powerful crime family. He is the Patriarch.

Women drop to their knees on command for him, but he chose me because I didn't surrender.

Until he took off his belt...

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Vicious Intentions

Cain, Hunter, and Cristiano were heirs to some of the richest and most powerful families in the world, men who might as well have been kings. Ten years ago they caught me eavesdropping, and when they were done setting my bare ass on fire with a belt they claimed and ravaged me.

Or at least that's what happens in the fleeting memories I still have left after the car accident...

Though I'm a successful musician now, wealthy and famous myself, in my heart I know if one of those brutes—let alone all three—ordered me to strip and surrender to them in the most shameful of ways, I wouldn't even need the threat of another humiliating punishment to obey immediately.

I never expected to see them again, of course... or to find myself naked, wet, and blushing as a ruthless Chicago crime boss takes his time enjoying me along with two of his closest friends.

But even before the memory of their faces returned, my body remembered its masters.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

BOOKS OF THE MISSOULA BAD BOYS SERIES

Phoenix

As a single dad, a battle-scarred Marine, and a smokejumper, my life was complicated enough. Then Wren Tillman showed up in town, full of sass and all but begging for my belt, and what began as a passionate night after I rescued her from a snowstorm quickly became much more.

Her father plans to marry her off for his own gain, but I've claimed her, and I plan to keep her.

She can fight it if she wants, but in her heart she knows she's already mine.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Snake

I left Missoula to serve my country and came back a bitter, broken man. But when Chastity Garrington made my recovery her personal crusade, I decided I had a mission of my own.

Mastering her.

Her task won't be easy, and the fire in her eyes tells me mine won't either. Yet the spark between us is instant, and we both know she'll be wet, sore, and screaming my name soon enough.

But I want more than that.

By the time my body has healed, I plan to have claimed her heart.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Maverick

When I found her trapped in a ravine, I thought Lily Sanborn was just another lost tourist. Then she tried to steal my truck, and I realized she was on the run... and in need of a dose of my belt.

Holed up in my cabin with her bottom burning and a snowstorm raging outside, there's no denying the spark between us, and we both know she'll soon be screaming my name as I take her in the most shameful of ways.

But when her past catches up to her, the men who come after her will learn a hard lesson.

She's mine now, and I protect what's mine.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

BOOKS OF THE MONTANA BAD BOYS SERIES

Hawk

He's a big, angry Marine, and I'm going to be sore when he's done with me.

Hawk Travers is not a man to be trifled with. I learned that lesson in the hardest way possible, first with a painful, humiliating public spanking and then much more shamefully in private.

She came looking for trouble. She got a taste of my belt instead.

Bryce Myers pushed me too far and she ended up with her bottom welted. But as satisfying as it is to hear this feisty little reporter scream my name as I put her in her place, I get the feeling she isn't going to stop snooping around no matter how well-used and sore I leave her cute backside.

She's gotten herself in way over her head, but she's mine now, and I protect what's mine.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Scorpion

He didn't ask if I like it rough. It wasn't up to me.

I thought I could get away with pissing off a big, tough Marine. I ended up with my face planted in the sheets, my burning bottom raised high, and my hair held tightly in his fist as he took me long and hard and taught me the kind of shameful lesson only a man like Scorpion could teach.

She was begging for a taste of my belt. She got much more than that.

Getting so tipsy she thought she could be sassy with me in my own bar earned Caroline a spanking, but it was trying to make off with my truck that sealed the deal. She'll feel my belt across her bare backside, then she'll scream my name as she takes every single inch of me.

This naughty girl needs to be put in her place, and I'm going to enjoy every moment of it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Mustang

I tried to tell him how to run his ranch. Then he took off his belt.

When I heard a rumor about his ranch, I confronted Mustang about it. I thought I could go toe to toe with the big, tough former Marine, but I ended up blushing, sore, and very thoroughly used.

I told her it was going to hurt. I meant it.

Danni Brexton is a hot little number with a sharp tongue and a chip on her shoulder. She's the kind of trouble that needs to be ridden hard and put away wet, but only after a taste of my belt.

It will take more than just a firm hand and a burning bottom to tame this sassy spitfire, but I plan to keep her safe, sound, and screaming my name in bed whether she likes it or not. By the time I'm through with her, there won't be a shadow of a doubt in her mind that she belongs to me.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Nash

When he caught me on his property, he didn't call the police. He just took off his belt.

Nash caught me breaking into his shed while on the run from the mob, and when he demanded answers and obedience I gave him neither. Then he took off his belt and taught me in the most shameful way possible what happens to naughty girls who play games with a big, rough Marine.

She's mine to protect. That doesn't mean I'm going to be gentle with her.

Michelle doesn't just need a place to hide out. She needs a man who will bare her bottom and spank her until she is sore and sobbing whenever she puts herself at risk with reckless defiance, then shove her face into the sheets and make her scream his name with every savage climax.

She'll get all of that from me, and much, much more.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Austin

I offered this brute a ride. I ended up the one being ridden.

The first time I saw Austin, he was hitchhiking. I stopped to give him a lift, but I didn't end up taking this big, rough former Marine wherever he was heading. He was far too busy taking me.

She thought she was in charge. Then I took off my belt.

When Francesca Montgomery pulled up beside me, I didn't know who she was, but I knew what she needed and I gave it to her. Long, hard, and thoroughly, until she was screaming my name as she climaxed over and over with her quivering bare bottom still sporting the marks from my belt.

But someone wants to hurt her, and when someone tries to hurt what's mine, I take it personally.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

BOOKS OF THE EAGLE FORCE SERIES

Debt of Honor

Isabella Adams is a brilliant scientist, but her latest discovery has made her a target of Russian assassins. I've been assigned to protect her, and when her reckless behavior puts her in danger she'll learn in the most shameful of ways what it means to be under the command of a Marine.

She can beg and plead as my belt lashes her bare backside, but the only mercy she'll receive is the chance to scream as she climaxes over and over with her well-spanked bottom still burning.

As my past returns to haunt me, it'll take every skill I've mastered to keep her alive.

She may be a national treasure, but she belongs to me now.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Debt of Loyalty

After she was kidnapped in broad daylight, I was hired to bring Willow Cavanaugh home, but as the daughter of a wealthy family she's used to getting what she wants rather than taking orders.

Too bad.

She'll do as she's told or she'll earn herself a stern, shameful reminder of who is in charge, but it will take more than just a well-spanked bare bottom to truly tame this feisty little rich girl.

She'll learn her place over my knee, but it's in my bed that I'll make her mine.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Debt of Sacrifice

When she witnessed a murder, it put Greer McDuff on a brutal cartel's radar... and on mine.

As a former Navy SEAL now serving with the elite Eagle Force, my assignment is to protect her by any means necessary. If that requires a stern reminder of who is in charge with her bottom bare over my knee and then an even more shameful lesson in my bed, then that's what she'll get.

There's just one problem.

The only place I know I can keep her safe is the ranch I left behind and vowed never to return.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

BOOKS OF THE DANGEROUS BUSINESS SERIES

Persuasion

Her father stole something from the mob and they hired me to get it back, but that's not the real reason Giliana Worthington is locked naked in a cage with her bottom well-used and sore.

I brought her here so I could take my time punishing her, mastering her, and ravaging her helpless, quivering body over and over again as she screams and moans and begs for more.

I didn't take her as a hostage. I took her because she is mine.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Bad Men

I thought I could run away from the marriage the mafia arranged for me, but I ended up held prisoner in a foreign country by someone far more dangerous than the man I tried to escape.

Then Jack and Diego came for me.

They didn't ask if I wanted to be theirs. They just took me.

I ran, but they caught me, stripped me bare, and punished me in the most shameful way possible.

Now they're going to share me, and they're not going to be gentle about it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

BOOKS OF THE ALPHA DYNASTY SERIES

Unchained Beast

As the firstborn of the Dupree family, I have spent my life building the wealth and power of our mafia empire while keeping our dark secret hidden and my savage hunger at bay. But the beast within me cannot be chained forever, and I must claim a mate before I lose control completely...

That is why Coraline LeBlanc is mine.

When I mount and ravage her, it won't be because I want her. It will be because I need her.

But that doesn't mean I won't enjoy stripping her bare and spanking her until she surrenders, then making her beg and scream with every desperate climax as I take what belongs to me.

The beast will claim her, but I will keep her.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Savage Brute

It wasn't his mafia birthright that made Dax Dupree a monster. Years behind bars and a brutal war with a rival organization made him hard as steel, but the beast he can barely control was always there, and without a mate to mark and claim it would soon take hold of him completely.

I didn't know that when he showed up at my bar after closing and spanked me until I was wet and shamefully ready for him to mount and ravage me, or even when I woke the next morning with my throat sore from screaming and his seed still drying on my thighs. But I know it now.

Because I'm his mate.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Ruthless Monster

When Esme Rawlings looks at me, she sees many things. A ruthless mob boss. A key witness to the latest murder in an ongoing turf war. A guardian angel who saved her from a hitman's bullet.

But when I look at her, I see just one thing.

My mate.

She can investigate me as thoroughly as she feels necessary, prying into every aspect of my family's vast mafia empire, but the only truth she really needs to know about me she will learn tonight with her bare bottom burning and her protests drowned out by her screams of climax.

I take what belongs to me.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Ravenous Predator

Suzette Barker thought she could steal from the most powerful mafia boss in Philadelphia. My belt across her naked backside taught her otherwise, but as tears run down her cheeks and her arousal glistens on her bare thighs, there is something more important she will understand soon.

Kneeling at my feet and demonstrating her remorseful surrender in the most shameful way possible won't bring an end to this, nor will her screams of climax as I take her long and hard. She'll be coming with me and I'll be mounting and savagely rutting her as often as I please.

Not just because she owes me.

Because she's my mate.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Merciless Savage

Christoff Dupree doesn't strike me as the kind of man who woos a woman gently, so when I saw the flowers on my kitchen table I knew it wasn't just a gesture of appreciation for saving his life.

This ruthless mafia boss wasn't seducing me. Those roses mean that I belong to him now.

That I'm his to spank into shameful submission before he mounts me and claims me savagely.

That I'm his mate.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

BOOKS OF THE ALPHA BEASTS SERIES

King's Mate

Her scent drew me to her, but something deeper and more powerful told me she was mine. Something that would not be denied. Something that demanded I claim her then and there.

I took her the way a beast takes his mate. Roughly. Savagely. Without mercy or remorse.

She will run, and when she does she will be punished, but it is not me that she fears. Every quivering, desperate climax reminds her that her body knows its master, and that terrifies her.

She knows I am not a gentle king, and she will scream for me as she learns her place.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Beast's Claim

Raven is not one of my kind, but the moment I caught her scent I knew she belonged to me.

She is my mate, and when I claim her it will not be gentle. She can fight me, but her pleas for mercy as she is punished will soon give way to screams of climax as she is mounted and rutted.

By the time I am finished with her, the evidence of her body's surrender will be mingled with my seed as it drips down her bare thighs. But she will be more than just sore and utterly spent.

She will be mine.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Alpha's Mate

I didn't ask Nicolina to be my mate. It was not up to her. An alpha takes what belongs to him.

She will plead for mercy as she is bared and punished for daring to run from me, but her screams as she is claimed and rutted will be those of helpless climax as her body surrenders to its master.

She is mine, and I'm going to make sure she knows it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

MORE STORMY NIGHT BOOKS BY PIPER STONE

Claimed by the Beasts

Though she has done her best to run from it, Scarlet Dumane cannot escape what is in store for her. She has known for years that she is destined to belong not just to one savage beast, but to three, and now the time has come for her to be claimed. Soon her mates will own every inch of her beautiful body, and she will be shared and used as roughly and as often as they please.

Scarlet hid from the disturbing truth about herself, her family, and her town for as long as she could, but now her grandmother's death has finally brought her back home to the bayous of Louisiana and at last she must face her fate, no matter how shameful and terrifying.

She will be a queen, but her mates will be her masters, and defiance will be thoroughly punished. Yet even when she is stripped bare and spanked until she is sobbing, her need for them only grows, and every blush, moan, and quivering climax binds her to them more tightly. But with enemies lurking in the shadows, can she trust her mates to protect her from both man and beast?

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Millionaire Daddy

Dominick Asbury is not just a handsome millionaire whose deep voice makes Jenna's tummy flutter whenever they are together, nor is he merely the first man bold enough to strip her bare and spank her hard and thoroughly whenever she has been naughty. He is much more than that.

He is her daddy.

He is the one who punishes her when she's been a bad girl, and he is the one who takes her in his arms afterwards and brings her to one climax after another until she is utterly spent and satisfied.

But something shady is going on behind the scenes at Dominick's company, and when Jenna draws the wrong conclusion from a poorly written article about him and creates an embarrassing public scene, will she end up not only costing them both their jobs but losing her daddy as well?

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Conquering Their Mate

For years the Cenzans have cast a menacing eye on Earth, but it still came as a shock to be captured, stripped bare, and claimed as a mate by their leader and his most trusted warriors.

It infuriates me to be punished for the slightest defiance and forced to submit to these alien brutes, but as I'm led naked through the corridors of their ship, my well-punished bare bottom and my helpless arousal both fully on display, I cannot help wondering how long it will be until I'm kneeling at the feet of my mates and begging them take me as shamefully as they please.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Captured and Kept

Since her career was knocked off track in retaliation for her efforts to expose a sinister plot by high-ranking government officials, reporter Danielle Carver has been stuck writing puff pieces in a small town in Oregon. Desperate for a serious story, she sets out to investigate the rumors she's been hearing about mysterious men living in the mountains nearby. But when she secretly follows them back to their remote cabin, the ruggedly handsome beasts don't take kindly to her snooping around, and Dani soon finds herself stripped bare for a painful, humiliating spanking.

Their rough dominance arouses her deeply, and before long she is blushing crimson as they take turns using her beautiful body as thoroughly and shamefully as they please. But when Dani uncovers the true reason for their presence in the area, will more than just her career be at risk?

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Taming His Brat

It's been years since Cooper Dawson left her small Texas hometown, but after her stubborn defiance gets her fired from two jobs in a row, she knows something definitely needs to change. What she doesn't expect, however, is for her sharp tongue and arrogant attitude to land her over the knee of a stern, ruggedly sexy cowboy for a painful, embarrassing, and very public spanking.

Rex Sullivan cannot deny being smitten by Cooper, and the fact that she is in desperate need of his belt across her bare backside only makes the war-hardened ex-Marine more determined to tame the beautiful, fiery redhead. It isn't long before she's screaming his name as he shows her just how hard and roughly a cowboy can ride a headstrong filly. But Rex and Cooper both have secrets, and when the demons of their past rear their ugly heads, will their romance be torn apart?

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Capturing Their Mate

I thought the Cenzan invaders could never find me here, but I was wrong. Three of the alien brutes came to take me, and before I ever set foot aboard their ship I had already been stripped bare, spanked thoroughly, and claimed more shamefully than I would have ever thought possible.

They have decided that a public example must be made of me, and I will be punished and used in the most humiliating ways imaginable as a warning to anyone who might dare to defy them. But I am no ordinary breeder, and the secrets hidden in my past could change their world... or end it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Rogue

Tracking down cyborgs is my job, but this time I'm the one being hunted. This rogue machine has spent most of his life locked up, and now that he's on the loose he has plans for me...

He isn't just going to strip me, punish me, and use me. He will take me longer and harder than any human ever could, claiming me so thoroughly that I will be left in no doubt who owns me.

No matter how shamefully I beg and plead, my body will be ravaged again and again with pleasure so intense it terrifies me to even imagine, because that is what he was built to do.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Roughneck

When I took a job on an oil rig to escape my scheming stepfather's efforts to set me up with one of his business cronies, I knew I'd be working with rugged men. What I didn't expect is to find myself bent over a desk, my cheeks soaked with tears and my bare thighs wet for a very different reason, as my well-punished bottom is thoroughly used by a stern, infuriatingly sexy roughneck.

Even though I should have known better than to get sassy with a firm-handed cowboy, let alone a tough-as-nails former Marine, there's no denying that learning the hard way was every bit as hot as it was shameful. But a sore, welted backside is just the start of his plans for me, and no matter how much I blush to admit it, I know I'm going to take everything he gives me and beg for more.

Buy on Amazon

Hunting Their Mate

As far as I'm concerned, the Cenzans will always be the enemy, and there can be no peace while they remain on our planet. I planned to make them pay for invading our world, but I was hunted down and captured by two of their warriors with the help of a battle-hardened former Marine. Now I'm the one who is going to pay, as the three of them punish me, shame me, and share me.

Though the thought of a fellow human taking the side of these alien brutes enrages me, that is far from the worst of it. With every searing stroke of the strap that lands across my bare bottom, with every savage thrust as I am claimed over and over, and with every screaming climax, it is made more clear that it is my own quivering, thoroughly used body which has truly betrayed me.

Buy on Amazon

Primitive

I was sent to this world to help build a new Earth, but I was shocked by what I found here. The men of this planet are not just primitive savages. They are predators, and I am now their prey...

The government lied to all of us. Not all of the creatures who hunted and captured me are aliens. Some of them were human once, specimens transformed in labs into little more than feral beasts.

I fought, but I was thrown over a shoulder and carried off. I ran, but I was caught and punished. Now they are going to claim me, share me, and use me so roughly that when the last screaming climax has been wrung from my naked, helpless body, I wonder if I'll still know my own name.

Buy on Amazon

Harvest

The Centurions conquered Earth long before I was born, but they did not come for our land or our resources. They came for mates, women deemed suitable for breeding. Women like me.

Three of the alien brutes decided to claim me, and when I defied them, they made a public example of me, punishing me so thoroughly and shamefully I might never stop blushing.

But now, as my virgin body is used in every way possible, I'm not sure I want them to stop...

Buy on Amazon

Torched

I work alongside firefighters, so I know how to handle musclebound roughnecks, but Blaise Tompkins is in a league of his own. The night we met, I threw a glass of wine in his face, then ended up shoved against the wall with my panties on the floor and my arousal dripping down my thighs, screaming out climax after shameful climax with my well-punished bottom still burning.

I've got a series of arsons to get to the bottom of, and finding out that the infuriatingly sexy brute who spanked me like a naughty little girl will be helping me with the investigation seemed like the last thing I needed, until somebody hurled a rock through my window in an effort to scare me away from the case. Now having a big, strong man around doesn't seem like such a bad idea...

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Fertile

The men who hunt me were always brutes, but now lust makes them barely more than beasts.

When they catch me, I know what comes next.

I will fight, but my need to be bred is just as strong as theirs is to breed. When they strip me, punish me, and use me the way I'm meant to be used, my screams will be the screams of climax.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Hostage

I knew going after one of the most powerful mafia bosses in the world would be dangerous, but I didn't anticipate being dragged from my apartment already sore, sorry, and shamefully used.

My captors don't just plan to teach me a lesson and then let me go. They plan to share me, punish me, and claim me so ruthlessly I'll be screaming my submission into the sheets long before they're through with me. They took me as a hostage, but they'll keep me as theirs.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Defiled

I was born to rule, but for her sake I am banished, forced to wander the Earth among mortals. Her virgin body will pay the price for my protection, and it will be a shameful price indeed.

Stripped, punished, and ravaged over and over, she will scream with every savage climax.

She will be defiled, but before I am done with her she will beg to be mine.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Kept

On the run from corrupt men determined to silence me, I sought refuge in his cabin.

I ate his food, drank his whiskey, and slept in his bed. But then the big bad bear came home and I learned the hard way that sometimes Goldilocks ends up with her cute little bottom well-used and sore.

He stripped me, spanked me, and ravaged me in the most shameful way possible, but then this rugged brute did something no one else ever has before. He made it

clear he plans to keep me...

Buy on Amazon

Auctioned

Twenty years ago the Malzeons saved us when we were at the brink of self-annihilation, but there was a price for their intervention. They demanded humans as servants... and as pets.

Only criminals were supposed to be offered to the aliens for their use, but when I defied Earth's government, asking questions that no one else would dare to ask, I was sold to them at auction.

I was bought by two of their most powerful commanders, rivals who nonetheless plan to share me. I am their property now, and they intend to tame me, train me, and enjoy me thoroughly.

But I have information they need, a secret guarded so zealously that discovering it cost me my freedom, and if they do not act quickly enough both of our worlds will soon be in grave danger.

Buy on Amazon

Hard Ride

When I snuck into Montana Cobalt's house, I was looking for help learning to ride like him, but what I got was his belt across my bare backside. Then with tears still running down my cheeks and arousal dripping onto my thighs, the big brute taught me a much more shameful lesson.

Montana has agreed to train me, but not just for the rodeo. He's going to break me in and put me through my paces, and then he's going to show me what it means to be ridden rough and dirty.

Buy on Amazon

Carnal

For centuries my kind have hidden our feral nature, our brute strength, and our carnal instincts. But this human female is my mate, and nothing will keep me from claiming and ravaging her.

She is mine to tame and protect, and if my belt doesn't teach her to obey then she'll learn in a much more shameful fashion. Either way, her surrender will be as complete as it is inevitable.

Buy on Amazon

Bounty

After I went undercover to take down a mob boss and ended up betrayed, framed, and on the run, Harper Rollins tried to bring me in. But instead of collecting a bounty, she earned herself a hard spanking and then an even rougher lesson that left her cute bottom sore in a very different way.

She's not one to give up without a fight, but that's fine by me. It just means I'll have plenty more chances to welt her beautiful backside and then make her scream her surrender into the sheets.

Buy on Amazon

Beast

Primitive, irresistible need compelled him to claim me, but it was more than mere instinct that drove this alien beast to punish me for my defiance and then ravage me thoroughly and savagely. Every screaming climax was a brand marking me as his, ensuring I never forget who I belong to.

He's strong enough to take what he wants from me, but that's not why I surrendered so easily as he stripped me bare, pushed me up against the wall, and made me his so roughly and shamefully.

It wasn't fear that forced me to submit. It was need.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Gladiator

Xander didn't just win me in the arena. The alien brute claimed me there too, with my punished bottom still burning and my screams of climax almost drowned out by the roar of the crowd.

Almost...

Victory earned him freedom and the right to take me as his mate, but making me truly his will mean more than just spanking me into shameful surrender and then rutting me like a wild beast. Before he carries me off as his prize, the dark truth that brought me here must be exposed at last.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Big Rig

Alexis Harding is used to telling men exactly what she thinks, but she's never had a roughneck like me as a boss before. On my rig, I make the rules and sassy little girls get stripped bare, bent over my desk, and taught their place, first with my belt and then in a much more shameful way.

She'll be sore and sorry long before I'm done with her, but the arousal glistening on her thighs reveals the truth she would rather keep hidden. She needs it rough, and that's how she'll get it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Warriors

I knew this was a primitive planet when I landed, but nothing could have prepared me for the rough beasts who inhabit it. The sting of their prince's firm hand on my bare bottom taught me my place in his world, but it was what came after that truly demonstrated his mastery over me.

This alien brute has granted me his protection and his help with my mission, but the price was my total submission to both his shameful demands and those of his second in command as well.

But it isn't the savage way they make use of my quivering body that terrifies me the most. What leaves me trembling is the thought that I may never leave this place... because I won't want to.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Owned

With a ruthless, corrupt billionaire after me, Crockett, Dylan, and Wade are just the men I need. Rough men who know how to keep a woman safe... and how to make her scream their names.

But the Hell's Fury MC doesn't do charity work, and their help will come at a price.

A shameful price...

They aren't just going to bare me, punish me, and then do whatever they want with me.

They're going to make me beg for it.

Buy on Amazon

Seized

Delaney Archer got herself mixed up with someone who crossed us, and now she's going to find out just how roughly and shamefully three bad men like us can make use of her beautiful body.

She can plead for mercy, but it won't stop us from stripping her bare and spanking her until she's sore, sobbing, and soaking wet. Our feisty little captive is going to take everything we give her, and she'll be screaming our names with every savage climax long before we're done with her.

Buy on Amazon

Cruel Masters

I thought I understood the risks of going undercover to report on billionaires flaunting their power, but these men didn't send lawyers after me. They're going to deal with me themselves.

Now I'm naked aboard their private plane, my backside already burning from one of their belts, and these three infuriatingly sexy bastards have only just gotten started teaching me my place.

I'm not just going to be punished, shamed, and shared. I'm going to be mastered.

Buy on Amazon

Hard Men

My father's will left his company to me, but the three roughnecks who ran it for him have other ideas. They're owed a debt and they mean to collect on it, but it's not money these brutes want.

It's me.

In return for protection from my father's enemies, I will be theirs to share. But these are hard men, and they don't just intend to punish my defiance and use me as shamefully as they please.

They plan to master me completely.

Buy on Amazon

Rough Ride

As I hear the leather slide through the loops of his pants, I know what comes next. Jake Travers is going to blister my backside. Then he's going to ride me the way only a rodeo champion can.

Plenty of men who thought they could put me in my place have learned the hard way that I was more than they could handle, and when Jake showed up I was sure he would be no different.

I was wrong.

When I pushed him, he bared and spanked me in front of a bar full of people.

I should have let it go at that, but I couldn't.

That's why he's taking off his belt...

Buy on Amazon

Primal Instinct

Ruger Jameson can buy anything he wants, but that's not the reason I'm his to use as he pleases.

He's a former Army Ranger accustomed to having his orders followed, but that's not why I obey him.

He saved my life after our plane crashed, but I'm not on my knees just to thank him properly.

I'm his because my body knows its master.

I do as I'm told because he blisters my bare backside every time I dare to do otherwise.

I'm at his feet because I belong to him and I plan to show it in the most shameful way possible.

Buy on Amazon

Captor

I was supposed to be safe from the lottery. Set apart for a man who would treat me with dignity.

But as I'm probed and examined in the most intimate, shameful ways imaginable while the hulking alien king who just spanked me looks on approvingly, I know one thing for certain.

This brute didn't end up with me by chance. He wanted me, so he found a way to take me.

He'll savor every blush as I stand bare and on display for him, every plea for mercy as he punishes my defiance, and every quivering climax as he slowly masters my virgin body.

I'll be his before he even claims me.

Buy on Amazon

Rough and Dirty

Wrecking my cheating ex's truck with a bat might have made me feel better... if the one I went after had actually belonged to him, instead of to the burly roughneck currently taking off his belt.

Now I'm bent over in a parking lot with my bottom burning as this ruggedly sexy bastard and his two equally brutish friends take turns reddening my ass, and I can tell they're just getting started.

That thought shouldn't excite me, and I certainly shouldn't be imagining all the shameful things these men might do to me. But what I should or shouldn't be thinking doesn't matter anyway.

They can see the arousal glistening on my thighs, and they know I need it rough and dirty...

Buy on Amazon

His to Take

When Zadok Vakan caught me trying to escape his planet with priceless stolen technology, he didn't have me sent to the mines. He made sure I was stripped bare and sold at auction instead.

Then he bought me for himself.

Even as he punishes me for the slightest hint of defiance and then claims me like a beast, indulging every filthy desire his savage nature can conceive, I swear I'll never surrender.

But it doesn't matter.

I'm already his, and we both know it.

Buy on Amazon

Tyrant

When I accepted a lucrative marketing position at his vineyard, Montgomery Wolfe made the terms of my employment clear right from the start. Follow his rules or face the consequences.

That's why I'm bent over his desk, doing my best to hate him as his belt lashes my bare bottom.

I shouldn't give in to this tyrant. I shouldn't yield to his shameful demands.

Yet I can't resist the passion he sets ablaze with every word, every touch, and every brutally possessive kiss, and I know before long my body will surrender to even his darkest needs...

Buy on Amazon

Filthy Rogue

Losing my job to a woman who slept her way to the top was bad enough, and that was before my car broke down as I drove cross country to start over. Having to be rescued by an infuriatingly sexy biker who promptly bared and spanked me for sassing him was just icing on the cake.

After sharing a passionate night, I might have made a teensy mistake in taking cash from his wallet in order to pay the auto mechanic, but I hadn't thought I'd ever see him again...

Then on the first day at my new job, guess who swaggered in with payback on his mind?

He's living proof that the universe really is out to get me... and he's my new boss.

Buy on Amazon

ABOUT PIPER STONE

Amazon Top 150 Internationally Best-Selling Author, Kindle Unlimited All Star Piper Stone writes in several genres. From her worlds of dark mafia, cowboys, and marines to contemporary reverse harem, shifter romance, and science fiction, she attempts to delight readers with a foray into darkness, sensuality, suspense, and always a romantic HEA. When she's not writing, you can find her sipping merlot while she enjoys spending time with her three Golden Retrievers (Indiana Jones, Magnum PI, and Remington Steele) and a husband who relishes creating fabulous food.

Dangerous is Delicious.

* * *

You can find her at:

Website: <https://piperstonebooks.com/>

Newsletter: <https://piperstonebooks.com/newsletter/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/authorpiperstone/>

Twitter: <http://twitter.com/piperstone01>

Instagram: <http://www.instagram.com/authorpiperstone/>

Amazon: <http://amazon.com/author/piperstone>

BookBub: <http://bookbub.com/authors/piper-stone>

TikTok: <https://www.tiktok.com/@piperstoneauthor>

Email: piperstonecreations@gmail.com

