



THE LEADER

SHANNA BELL

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THE LEADER

SHANNA BELL

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He thinks he owns me because he chose me.

I'll prove Mister Dominant Alpha Male wrong because this girl doesn't go down without a fight.

HIM...

I will avenge my parents' deaths.

I will make those who are responsible suffer.

All I need is her; the key to my plans.

HER...

I'm going to leave everything behind and start over.

I won't bow down to anyone.

The last thing I need is him; the shackles to my freedom.

Game on...

CHAPTER 1

GIO

Giovanni Detta stared at the gritty pictures of Gina, Jocelyn, and Mary Rossi: his selection of potential brides. He had less than a month to put a ring on one of their fingers. None of the girls were on social media, so he only had a handful of pictures they had been able to find within their limited timeframe. Considering the line of work their patriarch, Antonio Rossi, was in—laundering money for the mob, amongst other things—it made sense to not have their pictures plastered all over the internet.

“I still can’t believe you agreed to this,” his brother Vincent said, from the couch on the other side of his desk.

Vince was a firm believer in variety being the spice of life. Co-owning an adult club, where he shared women with his business partner, had made him an even worse player than the born womanizer he already was. Vince couldn’t fathom the thought of being with one woman for the rest of your life. Or, per Antonio Rossi’s demand, for at least two years, in Gio’s case. But that was the deal. Stay married to one of the Rossi girls for that time, in exchange for Rossi Enterprises; an asset that was crucial in their plan to avenge the murder of their parents. Of course, with the way Rossi’s business was going, the old man didn’t have much choice but to entrust his legacy to Gio instead of a looming hostile takeover, but Gio couldn’t take the chance that this deal might go awry. Rossi might have

come to him first, since he had been friends with his father, but in the end, business was business. If a better offer came along, he wouldn't hesitate to pawn one of his granddaughters off to another man.

He leaned back in his chair. "Yeah, well, I did. So, help me pick a bride so we can move on." Sharing his name with one of the Rossi girls was just a means to an end.

"I'm just saying, you're only thirty, for Christ's sake," Vince continued. "Far too young to get hitched to just one woman. You should be sowing your oats for at least another decade."

"Says the king of sowing his oats all over the West Coast," Jackson scoffed.

Vince flipped him off, earning a grin from their youngest brother, who sat on the corner of the desk.

"I have four weeks, tops, before a hostile takeover." Which was the reason why he had to pick a bride in such a short timeframe. He looked at Jackson, the smart one. The lawyer with a brain, who never forgot a thing. "Talk to me, Jax."

Jackson leaned over the desk and pointed at the first picture. "Meet Gina Rossi. Twenty-three. Currently working as an interior designer. Though, working might be a bit of an exaggeration. According to her tax returns, she only works a job or two a year. Spends most of her time spending Antonio's money."

He pointed to the second picture. The girl was wearing a leather jacket and jeans. Half her face was obscured by a baseball cap. "This is Jocelyn. Graduated top of her class. She wrote a thesis on software programming and—"

"Not that one," Gio said, discarding the picture. He needed a wife who loved to spend her days shopping and visiting a salon. One that wouldn't ask any questions and would leave him the fuck alone.

"Why not?" Jax smirked. "Don't want a wife with brains?"

“What would she need a brain for?” Vince said with a wink.

“Damn, you two are misogynists. I already pity your brides.”

Vince snorted. “Don’t think I don’t know what that fancy word means, Harvard boy. I happen to love women, not hate them, so that word doesn’t apply to me.”

“We already have an annoying brainiac in the family, Jax. You’re more than enough.”

“Smart women are the worst,” Vince chimed in. “Also, the other two look prettier.”

Jackson gave them a disgusted look and pointed at the last picture. “Which brings us to the youngest, Mary. Twenty-year-old art major and, according to what intel I’ve been able to gather so far, as sweet and innocent as her name.”

The girl was pretty, Gio had to admit, but looked like she might break after one good fuck. Also, he didn’t do sweet; though, he knew looks could be deceiving. His current mistress looked like an angel too, but was a devil in bed. Just the way he liked it.

“What about the fourth granddaughter?” He had studied everyone with ties to their parents. For the past years, that had been his sole focus. That, and making sure his family stayed safe.

“Carmen is married, so I didn’t include a picture of her.”

“Married to whom?” Antonio Rossi wasn’t the kind of man to hand his granddaughters over to just any man. From what he remembered, he had practically raised his granddaughters on his own. Which meant that, as their semi-father, Antonio got a say in which son-in-law was an asset to his family. That explained why he’d come with this deal to Gio. He was lucky Gio had been eyeballing his company for a while; though, for different purposes than Rossi suspected.

Jackson made a derisive sound. “The poor girl is married to Franco ‘The Bull’ Caruso.”

“Fuck.” Vince shook his head. “If she’s married to that asshole, there’s probably not much left of her anyway.”

Gio knew there was some bad blood between Vince and the Caruso heir. His brother might not be a saint, far from it, but he didn’t abuse women. Franco Caruso was known for his more sadistic tastes. Ever since half his family had gotten locked up, it was said he took it out on his women. Some men just didn’t want to face the reality that the glory days of the Italian mob were over. As with any business model, you had to stay flexible, adjust your plans to what the future might bring. Nowadays, that was going legit; at least, on the outside. With Franco’s father and brother murdered in jail, every day it became more apparent that he didn’t have what it took to lead what was left of the family business.

“Guess I can rule her out.”

“Which makes your choice easy,” Vince claimed.

If only it were that simple. Every decision he made had a purpose. Every chess piece on the board served one as well. He wanted the one the old man was closest to, which he would discover tonight, during dinner. Every man had a tell, and so would Antonio Rossi.

“Which one is Antonio’s favorite?”

“I don’t think he has one,” Jackson said, scrutinizing the pictures. “Antonio is pretty old-school, which probably means he prefers boys to girls as his heir. He has two sons, Petro and Marco, and one daughter, Gabriella. Petro, the oldest, is dead. He’s also Carmen and Jocelyn’s father. The other son, Marco, left for Europe after a hunting accident that blinded him in one eye. He’s a playboy, living the good life somewhere in Monaco. His daughter, the mother of Mary and Gina, lives in Southern France with her third husband. Antonio is desperate for a strong male heir, someone with the brains and brawn to handle his vast business that has taken a hit since the crisis. He could have just agreed to the amount you offered him, but I guess he wanted to leave Rossi Enterprises to his flesh and blood.”

Antonio Rossi had been the one to introduce their mother to their father. Obviously, his matchmaking days weren't over.

As the oldest of four, Gio remembered their parents the best. Giacomo Detta, enforcer to a crime syndicate, had been a beast when it came to his job, but a traditional family man that had worshiped his wife. The second he stepped over the threshold of their house, the cold expression on his face disappeared and he became a doting husband. He'd told Gio once that agreeing to marry his mother was the best decision he'd ever made. According to him, when he'd first laid eyes on his future wife, he just knew. He was also convinced that every man worth his salt needed a strong woman. "Take care of your woman and she will take care of you," had been his father's credo. Protect and provide. Two words his father had lived by.

Sadly, however, he was dead now. No longer able to give him any life's advice. Their beautiful mother would never dance with her sons on their wedding day. She would never hold a grandchild in her arms. No one had ever claimed the hit on Giacomo Detta, which was odd. Killing the enforcer of a crime boss was like cutting off his right arm. It was something to boast about, a rite of passage in those circles. Which was the reason they had never believed that their father had become a casualty in a family war. Especially not, since the same night, their mother was murdered as well.

Finding their parents' murderer had always been their endgame. It had taken them over a decade to find the one responsible, and years to gather the means to make Oscar "The Knife" Bianchi pay. A year ago, Bianchi had been untouchable. But no more. They had slowly been chipping away at the bastard's assets until he was close to hitting rock bottom.

Marrying a Rossi girl and taking control of Rossi Enterprises was the final step.

CHAPTER 2

JAZZY

Jazzy looked at the screen of her phone and dread filled her stomach. Her sister had canceled their dinner plans. Again. She had an idea why Carmen suddenly had a “migraine.” Last time she’d made a surprise visit to Carmen, she hadn’t been able to cover up her bruises in time. She sure “fell” down the stairs a lot. Damn it. They were going to have a serious conversation about her fucked-up marriage, and soon. Right after Jazzy wrapped up her current business, which was attending a mandatory brunch back home.

Being the granddaughter of Antonio Rossi—banker to the underworld—came with certain obligations. Such as, when you were summoned by him, you had to show up.

Her cousins, Mary and Gina, were already sitting in the dining room. Her grandfather sat at the head of the table, giving her an impatient look.

“You are late.”

“Sorry, *Nonno*. I had some business to attend to.”

“It’s always business with you,” he scolded her. “Business and your computer. You should find a man and get married.”

Her grandfather’s views on a woman’s purpose in life were really old; as in, practically ancient. She rolled her eyes, gave him a peck on the cheek, and sat down next to him.

After their brunch had been served, her grandfather cleared his throat.

“Twenty years ago, I lost a very dear friend of mine, Giacomo Detta, enforcer to the Scolini family, in a turf war. Yesterday I met with his sons. Strong, capable men, especially the oldest, Giovanni Detta; or Gio, as his father used to call him. Gio has shown interest in Rossi Enterprises for the past year, and I have finally decided to hand over the reins of the company I built up to the next generation. I never let you girls in on the details of business, but the past few years have been hard. We need his money, or we will go bankrupt.”

A silence descended upon the room, until her oldest cousin broke it.

“What? How did this happen?” Gina looked pale.

Money was kind of Gina’s best friend. Jazzy couldn’t imagine Gina buying something that wasn’t design or couture.

Mary only looked worried. Probably thinking of the possible effect of the bankruptcy on their grandfather’s health. She always put others before herself.

The two sisters looked a lot alike on the surface, except for the way they dressed—Mary’s style was more Free People meets chic, favoring A-line dresses, with little braids in her curly hair.

“I have, however, found a simple solution for our problem,” their grandfather continued. “I offered to hand over my shares in Rossi Enterprises to Giovanni, in exchange for him marrying one of my granddaughters. He agreed. He gave

me his word that the marriage will last for at least two years. That should be enough time to produce him an heir, solidifying your place in the Detta household. Gio will be joining us for dinner, to meet you girls. I expect to see all of you at this table tonight.”

And just like that, Jazzy lost her appetite. “I’m feeling nauseous all of a sudden. Please excuse me, so I don’t puke all over this table.” Refusing to listen to another word, she got up and went to change into her track clothes. She desperately needed to clear her mind.

When Jazzy returned from her afternoon run, she found Gina in the hallway.

“Don’t forget to sprinkle on some Chanel on your fancy dress,” Jazzy said, earning a dirty look from Gina who, as usual, was prettying herself up in front of a mirror.

Unlike Mary and Gina, Jazzy hadn’t stayed long enough to listen to the specifics of the bombshell their grandfather had dropped on them. It wasn’t hard to figure out why Gina had remained sitting at the table. Her oldest cousin was born to be arm candy to some rich, powerful man. And Mary, well, she was too polite to tell someone off, let alone their grandfather.

Jazzy, however, wasn’t afraid to flip anyone the bird, even if it was her *nonno*. That is, she wasn’t afraid to do it mentally. Though the ornery man sometimes drove her crazy, she did love him and would never disrespect him that way. Didn’t mean she would keep sitting at the table listening to some archaic bullshit about an arranged marriage, though. She wouldn’t ever entertain the possibility of willingly chaining herself to this Detta guy. Her goal was to extract herself from this life, not to further get pulled into it. She had plans for her future; plans that didn’t involve some overbearing asshole, like this Detta no doubt was.

A simple Google search had proven that the billionaire mogul fit the profile. Tall, dark, and handsome. Add in his wealth, and it painted a picture of a spoiled, entitled man, who was used to getting what he wanted. A man who took, but never gave anything in return. Her sister's marriage was proof of what a man like Detta was capable of. How he could snuff the life and light out of someone.

"That's what you are wearing tonight?" Gina's look of disdain couldn't be missed.

Jazzy looked down on her pink sport shorts and gray top. She was all sweaty, having just returned from a run and, after a shower, she was obviously going to change. Then again, the outfit she had chosen to wear for dinner—skinny jeans and a simple silk top—wouldn't have met Gina's approval either. Her cousin did love to make her feel as if wearing anything but a designer dress during their weekly family dinner equaled a capital offense.

Well, she wasn't going to dress up, just so Detta could check her out as if he were buying a horse.

"I sure am," Jazzy lied, as she sent a message to Tommie. Her former college mate and business partner had send her some files she needed to take a look at. Their business plan was coming nicely together, but there were still some things they had to decide on.

"Guess you're not making a play for him then?" Gina asked, a sneer in her voice.

"Of course not. And neither should you." She might not always see eye-to-eye with Gina, but she wouldn't wish her sister's fate on any woman.

"That's easy for you to say. You have always been the favorite. The old man can't refuse you a thing, always granting you more freedom than any of us." This time, there was a bitterness in Gina's tone no one could have missed. It even made Mary look up from the couch.

"That's not true," Jazzy protested.

“Isn’t it? Which one of us was allowed to live in a dorm room? Which one of us was allowed to go on a road trip to Canada?”

Jazzy was speechless for a moment. She’d never considered these things before. In hindsight, perhaps her grandfather had granted her more freedom, or so it may seem from the outside. Gina had no idea of what Jazzy had been through; how she had gone on a path of self-destruction during her teens. Picking a fight with any kid who even looked at her funny, ready to hit them before they could attack her. Her so-called “road trip” had been to a personal boot camp. In a desperate attempt to keep her from getting hurt, her grandfather had locked her up with a martial arts teacher for a whole month. Right until the moment Jazzy had been beaten down as many times as she was able to get up. Until she had finally gained some control over her body, her life. Until she no longer woke up every night from a nightmare, screaming her lungs out. Until her grandfather could come to grips with what had happened under his own roof. Something he carried a guilt over to this day.

“I had no idea you felt this way.”

Gina snorted. “Of course you didn’t. All you care about is your precious laptop. We are going to lose *everything* if one of us doesn’t marry this man. Maybe you can, but I won’t be this selfish. I will never be granted total freedom anyway, so I have a simple choice to make. If I’m going to live in a golden cage for the rest of my life, I would like it to be a nice one, the *best* one. Gina Rossi doesn’t do poverty.”

And of course, it was no hardship to marry the man. Giovanni Detta was hot after all. He seemed to have cold eyes, but from Gina’s point of view, his net worth would more than make up for that. Gina would consider him an upgrade from her latest ex, a stock market millionaire.

She supposed Gina did have a point, from a practical standpoint. With their background, no ordinary man would survive their family and all that came with it. Their grandfather reminded them, all too often, about how they could be used as leverage against him. How they could end up

getting hurt if a deal went wrong. Hence the “you need to marry into a strong family” mantra. Something she would have called him on, if her uncle hadn’t been killed in a hit and run years ago.

“Gina, please,” Mary chimed in from across the hall. “I’d think you would be glad. After all, this way, there’s less competition for you.” She winked at Jazzy, in a clear attempt to lighten the mood.

“Right.” Gina’s look said she didn’t consider Jazzy competition whatsoever. With a confident smile on her face, she turned and went upstairs.

Gina was right, of course. After all, Gina looked like an Italian goddess: tall, with blond, glossy, curly hair, and packaged in a designer dress. Jazzy, on the other hand, curvy, with her ragged skinny jeans, and biker boots, didn’t exactly fit the profile of a high-society wife.

“How are you holding up?” Mary asked as she came up to her. “I haven’t seen much of you after Mike’s funeral.”

“I’m fine.” She didn’t want to discuss the aftermath of her friend’s death. There wasn’t anything to discuss. He’d lived, got caught by the cruel monster called cancer, and had died. The world had lost a light; the universe, a star. Yet scum like Carmen’s husband got to live a full and healthy life. There was no justice in the world sometimes.

Mary gave her a pensive look. “You always say you are.”

“So, what about you? Do you want me to get you out of here?” Jazzy asked jokingly, in a desperate attempt to change the subject. She knew Mary would never shirk her duty—and that was the way she saw it—and leave. But if she did, Jazzy would find a way to get her out of the mansion before dinner. She had seen the cars arriving from a distance. Right now, the men were discussing business in the library. They still had about an hour. It wouldn’t be too hard to sneak past them, without ever even having to come face to face with Detta.

“Actually, I want to stay.” Mary’s cheeks turned pink. “See where this goes.”

“You do?” Jazzy asked, unable to hide her surprise.

“I’m not like you,” Mary said softly. “I just want to be a mom, have a family. And maybe he *is* the one. Maybe not. But I would like the chance to find out.”

“But think of the life you’d have as the wife of a man like Giovanni Detta,” Jazzy warned. “Surely he has enemies. No one becomes a billionaire at his age without some skeletons in his closet. You would have a security detail everywhere you went, for the rest of your life.” Also, she had a feeling that a man like that would have a tight leash on his wife.

Mary cocked a brow. “Don’t we already have one?”

“Yeah, but that’s because of *Nonno*. If you would marry someone outside of this world, you wouldn’t need bodyguards anymore. You would be free.” At least, that’s the way she envisioned her life.

“I like the security they give me,” Mary confessed, her eyes going to the scar on Jazzy’s wrist. The scar that had nearly cost her the use of her arm. “I need to feel safe. Ever since that night... if it hadn’t been for you, Jazzy—”

“Please don’t mention that night,” she cut her off.

“Sorry.” Mary immediately looked contrite.

“Don’t be sorry. I’m sorry I snapped at you. I just don’t want to talk about it.” *Ever*.

“You never do.” Mary sighed.

“So, um, how’s the counseling going?” Jazzy felt obligated to ask about it, though a part of her really didn’t want to.

Mary immediately perked up. “Quite well, actually. I mean, what happened was over a decade ago, and I still have a lot to process, but I’m getting there. I wish you would go see Dr. Stein as well, instead of bottling everything up. In fact, he asked about you and how you were handling it. I mean, I know I wasn’t to blame for—”

“Of course you weren’t. You were just a kid.”

“So were you, Jazzy. So were you. I think sometimes you forget that.”

It wasn't that she forgot, per se. She just hadn't really been a kid since her parents had died the day before her tenth birthday. And the irony of it was, that it hadn't been by a hit by one of the other Families. In fact, it had nothing to do with her father or grandfather's business. There was nothing to blame but bad weather conditions for the car crash that had killed them. That, however, had made Jazzy all the more determined to keep whatever family she had left.

Speaking of remaining family, her grandfather just turned around the corner. She peeked over his shoulder, curious if Detta trailed after him, but that was not the case. When her *nonno*'s gaze roamed over her sweaty workout gear, she expected him to scold her. He surprised her though, by gesturing her to him, and not saying a word.

“I was going to change before dinner,” she muttered. She didn't want him to think she would disrespect him like that, showing up in front of his guests all sweaty.

“I need something from the safe. Please get me my pocket watch.”

“Really? Right now?”

Him sending her to his almost prehistoric safe had started when she'd hurt her arm. The blade that had cut through her wrist had done some nerve damage, almost causing her to lose strength in her arm. A long and gruesome healing process had followed. Her grandfather, being the ornery man he was, had played a big part in her regaining that strength. Any normal grandfather would have given her a ball to pinch. Hers had taught her how to open a safe, over and over again, until she had rebuilt the muscle power she had lost. Every now and then, he still sent her to open the safe with the heavy bolt on it. It had become their thing.

“Yes, Jocelyn. Now.”

She knew that tone. It meant she wasn't going to win this argument.

CHAPTER 3

JAZZY

Dinner would be served in less than an hour and Jazzy still had to take a shower, but apparently that wasn't important. Maybe him sending her doing their thing was his way of telling her that the upcoming dinner would be okay.

"Fine." She left her grandfather in the hallway and climbed up the stairs, making a right until she reached the library in the upper right wing.

She didn't bother to turn on the lights as she walked in the darkened room. Nowadays, she could open the safe blind, in less than a minute.

Thirty seconds later, a personal record for her, she got the pocket watch out and shut the vault.

"Yes!" She did a fist pump.

“Put it back.”

Jazzy jumped up and slowly turned around, looking to where the voice had come from. There, in the corner, in a chair overlooking the yard, sat a man. She couldn't make out much of his face since the light came from behind him, obscuring half his face.

“Excuse me?”

He got up from the chair, standing into the light, and she stifled a gasp when she recognized him.

Giovanni Detta was a tall man. Much taller than she would have expected from the picture she'd seen on the screen of her phone. The picture didn't do him justice. Then again, maybe no photo could grasp his magnetic look, with shocking blue eyes. She instantly suffered from a case of lust at first sight.

“Whatever it is you stole from that safe, put it back. Now. Or I will make you.”

And just like most hot, gorgeous men, he was an arrogant prick. It was the ordering tone in his voice that had her hackles rising. The way he just *expected* her obedience. It was the way Franco spoke to her sister. Cold and commanding.

Who the hell did he think he was, giving her orders in her own home? She could, of course, easily diffuse the situation by telling him who she was, but...she didn't want to. Fuck him, and men like him, thinking they were king of the world.

“You can't make me do a damn thing, pretty boy.”

His eyes narrowed as he stalked toward her. Oh, he so didn't like to be called pretty.

She shoved the watch inside her sports bra and stepped away from the safe. It could never hurt to create some space, just in case she needed to kick his ass.

“I don't like to repeat myself.” His tongue spewed more icicles her way.

“Good to know,” she scoffed, and put her hands on her hips.

“You are going to regret this.” He pointedly took position in front of the door.

“Doubtful.”

With her sister’s battered body fresh in her mind, she lunged at him, colliding with his hard body.

Unfortunately, Giovanni Detta didn’t go down the way she had expected. Instead, he made some weird ass street fighter move, and she ended up on her ass.

He towered over her in his expensive Italian suit.

“Stay down.”

It wasn’t so much as what he said, but the chill in his voice that had her taken aback.

“I can’t stand thieves, especially when stealing from their boss, but maybe Antonio will take pity on you.”

“Yeah well, I can’t stand arrogant assholes,” she replied, jumping back on her feet. “Also, I don’t need anyone’s pity.” She’d had enough of that during the year she feared losing the use of her arm. Everyone around her treating her like an invalid. That is, everyone but her grandfather. Antonio Rossi didn’t do pity. According to him, either you conquered your fear, or your fear conquered you.

The second time she attempted to get past him, she tried a different tactic. She saw the surprise in his eyes, when she slowly walked up to him and put a hand on his chest.

“How about you let me go and I don’t hurt you?” She gently tapped his shoulder.

Other than his nostrils flaring, he didn’t show any outward emotion. His arctic blues were just as frosty as before.

“Never make a threat you can’t deliver, *bella*.”

There was a rasp to his voice that had her skin tingling. Oh, his voice; it was dark, sensual, and smooth as silk. The kind that would have her splayed at his feet if she were as

shallow as to only care about his beautiful exterior. Because that, he was. He had the whole tall, dark, and handsome look going for him. The only imperfection on him was the scar on his left brow which, to her, made him all the more perfect. However, beauty on the outside meant nothing if your insides were rotten.

Jazzy gave him a sweet smile and raised her knee. He blocked her kick that should have landed in his nuts, and spun her around. Her back pressed against his chest, his arm around her neck. She was trapped, or so he thought.

She dropped her legs, making herself heavy, and felt him keel over. Using his moment of surprise, she pulled back his thumb, almost breaking it, and he let her go with a curse. She stepped back, and planted a kick to his stomach, making him slam against the door. The same door she wanted to get through. It was time for Giovanni Detta to go down.

The second time she tried to knee him in the balls, he ducked, grabbed her leg and twisted it, making her lose her balance.

She ended up on her back with him on top of her, the breath pressed from her lungs. He was effectively using his bulk to keep her pinned to the floor.

“Get off of me!” Jazzy tried to kick him off her, but he felt like he weighed a ton.

He pressed his hand on her throat, effectively cutting off any further protest from her lips. Her heart beat like a drum, freezing her limbs, and a buzz started in her ears.

Breathe in...

Breathe out...

Images of another time, in another room flashed before her eyes. She closed her eyes and counted to ten to regain her composure.

“I don’t take orders, *bella*, I give them.”

When Jazzy reopened her eyes—after counting to at least sixty—she found Detta watching her, a curious expression on

his face. He had placed both his hands next to her head, holding her down with pure muscle. Oddly, her fear dissipated the second she looked into his eyes. He was watching her mouth, the same way she was looking at his sensual lips. Could a man even be described as having sensual lips? She had no idea. Her breath hitched, and she felt her body relax, as if deep down—in her core—she knew he wasn't going to hurt her. She felt a slight disappointment that he had bested her, but more than that, she felt heat. Overwhelming, confusing heat, covering her from her head to her dainty toes. And judging by the growing bulge against her stomach, she wasn't the only one affected.

Whatever he saw in her eyes made him curse. “Don't move. Unless you want me to give you what your body is asking for.”

The arrogant prick!

He slid his hand inside her bra—his finger accidentally on purpose brushing over a stiff nipple—and pulled out the pocket watch.

Right. The watch he believed she had stolen. She'd almost forgotten about the reason she had ended up in this position in the first place.

She was just about to bite him in the chin—'cause really, what other option had she left—when the door opened, and Mary walked in. Her cousin gasped when she found Jazzy on the floor, Gio on top of her, holding her down.

“Oh my God, what—”

“Mary, finally. Could you tell this asshole I'm Mr. Rossi's personal assistant and that I'm allowed to open his safe? In fact, that I do it all the time?”

His hot gaze raked over her barely-covered chest and a smirk curled his lips. “His PA?”

Her cousin cleared her throat. “Um, yes, she's allowed to take things from the safe all the time.”

Mary couldn't lie to save her life.

“That’s right.” Jazzy tried to wriggle from underneath him, but he was unmovable, like a rock. “I’m his right hand.”

“Oh, I’m sure you’re *just* like his right hand.”

It took her a second to understand what he was insinuating. *Gross.*

He cocked a brow at the disgusted look she gave him, but then finally rolled off her.

The second he stepped away from her, Jazzy crawled back to her feet and fled the room, not caring about the watch anymore. She all but ran to her bedroom, getting her backpack from her closet.

Passport. Check.

Phone. Check.

Pile of cash. Check.

There was no way she was getting through a dinner with Giovanni Detta. She had a really bad feeling about him, and the way he had looked at her. The man might choose her *just* to spite her. Which just wouldn’t do. In the infamous words of Gaga; *I’m a free bitch, baby.*

She had places to go, promises to fulfill. Come hell or high water, she was going to finish Mike’s bucket list. And there was no time like the present.

CHAPTER 4

GIO

Gio sat across the dining table from Antonio Rossi. Vince was chatting up Gina, though she clearly saw him more as a nuisance. He had to hand it to her, she was keeping her eyes on the prize; unlike most women, who made a giggling fool of themselves when they got Vince's full attention.

The other granddaughter, Mary, sat across from him, barely meeting his eyes. She was a shy little thing; preferred to listen instead of talk. Still, something was missing. It wasn't hard to figure out what was wrong with this picture.

"Where's your other granddaughter? Jocelyn." The smart one.

The conversations at the table came to a halt.

Even though Gio didn't consider Jocelyn a serious candidate, it was still an insult that she'd stayed away. He

waited for Antonio to make up an excuse for her absence. A migraine, having the flu, anything.

Antonio put down his wine. “I was told that Jocelyn left the premises about an hour ago. Something about discovering the world before she got snatched up by an arrogant billionaire.”

Gio had a feeling the old man was quoting the last part. “So, she suddenly decided to take a trip around the world, did she now?”

It almost seemed as if Antonio was baiting him, which didn’t make any sense. The old man had more to lose, if this deal fell through, than Gio did.

“Girls, leave us.”

He felt Gina stiffen next to him while Mary turned a chalky white. However, they left the room without a protest.

Gio made a mental note about that. They were perfect on the outside. Willing, obedient, pretty. Still... His thoughts trailed back to the mouthy PA in the library. Mary’s cheeks had turned pink when she’d called her Antonio’s PA, and Gio had a feeling she knew exactly what kind of personal assistant the hellcat was to her grandfather. Apparently, Antonio’s much younger mistress was living right under their noses. Damn, he envied the sly fox. Which brought him back to the case at hand, and more particularly, to the reason why he wasn’t enthused by the thought of marrying either of the present Rossi girls. He didn’t want to fuck them. Which made him reconsider looking at what was behind door number three: Jocelyn. He never made a choice in business without having considered all his options, and he wouldn’t start now.

“She ran,” Gio spat. “Your granddaughter ran and broke our deal.”

“Did she now?” Antonio said, a smile curling his lips. “Oh, youth. See, she knew who was coming and why, but apparently didn’t consider you a catch. She even managed to lose her bodyguard. Jocelyn can be really inventive when she has set her mind on something. The way I see it, you didn’t

manage to keep her here. Forget about her. I have two other granddaughters who are more...docile.”

Gio barely contained a snarl. The old man had to know he was throwing down a gauntlet, making this Jocelyn a challenge to him. He could, of course, ignore it. No one outside the family knew about what happened, so there was no face to be saved. Still, the predator in him couldn't just let go. He was going to give the girl a chance. No one could renege out of a deal with him without paying a price.

“Call her, and give me your phone.” Antonio did as he requested and stepped out of the room, a faint smile on his face.

The phone's screen lit up, showing that “Jazzy” was being called. The old man had registered her number under her nickname. Yet another clue that she was probably his favorite.

“*Nonno*, I know what you're going to say,” a sweet voice in his ear sounded. A voice he fucking recognized. “But the guy's a dominant asshole. I could tell by just one look at his face. Gina eats that shit up, not having a backbone and all. Also, Gio and Gina sounds adorable, don't you think? He wouldn't have chosen me anyway, so why bother parading in front of him and waste my time? I'll send you a postcard from Rome or Paris, whichever place the plane leaves to first.” He could hear flights being announced in the background. “*Nonno*, are you still there? Are you mad at me?”

She actually sounded sad at the thought. He'd been right: she *was* the closest to the old man. “I don't get mad. I get even, in spades.”

A silence fell, before she regrouped. “If you've hurt a single hair on his—”

“He's not the one I'm going to hurt. Listen to me carefully, because I don't repeat myself. Ever. Get your ass back here before midnight, or I'm coming for you.”

What followed was a string of curses that would have had a sailor blushing. The woman had a foul mouth on her. Which wasn't the best use for her mouth.

“Fuck you. You’re not the boss of me.”

“Don’t ever tell a man to fuck him. He might take you up on your offer,” he bit out.

“Yeah well, to do that, you’d have to find me first. If you can find me, you can fuck me,” she taunted him.

Click.

She hung up on him. He couldn’t remember anybody ever hanging up on him. A deep rumble started from his chest, and he saw Vince looking at him, concern shining in his eyes.

“Ah shit.” His brother shook his head. “You laughing is never a good sign.”

He was right, of course. Gauntlet thrown, challenge accepted. Jocelyn Rossi had just sealed her fate.

CHAPTER 5

JAZZY

Jazzy showed the flight attendant her ticket as she boarded the plane to Paris.

So, okay, she ran like a thief in the night. Big deal. Didn't mean she was afraid of Giovanni Detta. Except, after their unfortunate encounter in the library, she'd somehow known she couldn't be around him again. Giovanni Detta was hot. The combination of those baby blues and his rock-hard body; even the scar on his upper left eyebrow was panty-melting hot. She'd wanted to run her fingers through his jet-black hair, pictured herself pulling it while kissing him. Most of all, she wanted to banish the coldness from his voice, the chill from his eyes. However, falling for a tortured soul in the disillusioned hope of healing him could only end in disappointment. Life was not a romance novel, with the big, bad, dominant asshole turning into a decent human being in

the end. He was going to marry one of her poor cousins. It would not do to lust over him during their annual Christmas dinner.

So, fleeing it was. She wasn't as pretty as Gina or as sweet and angelic as Mary, but she was smart; enough to be able to disappear without leaving a trace. She had also been smart enough to call in a favor with her friend Tess, just in case.

The flight attendant showed her to her seat in first class. It would be the last time for a while she could indulge in the luxury of a first-class anything since; come tomorrow, she wouldn't be using her credit cards anymore. She couldn't take the risk—small as it may be—that Detta would actually follow through on his threat to come after her. It was far too easy to track her down if she left a paper trail. So, no more fancy hotel suites during her Euro trip. According to the arrangement between her grandfather and Detta, he had to marry a Rossi girl within a month. All she had to do was disappear from the face of the earth during that time, or until she discovered he had married one of her cousins.

Once again, her thoughts trailed back to Detta. The heat she'd felt when going toe-to-toe with him had been crazy, utter madness. This was what had been missing between her and Mike: the only man she had ever been comfortable enough with to let her guard down around. The only one she had ever told about...

Don't go there. Not. Going. There.

Mike had been more than just her childhood friend. He had been her first crush, first kiss, and first and only lover. Their friendship had evolved in something more, until they had gradually discovered they were better off as friends than lovers.

But still, it had never been like the raw need, that magnetic pull, she had felt when she'd been pinned down by Giovanni Detta. It had both excited and terrified her at the same time. She somehow knew that Detta was the kind of man

to be rough and dominate her in bed. The only place where she liked to submit.

Something Mike had never really understood because he wasn't wired like that. It had been one of the reasons they broke up. Sex with Mike had been enjoyable, but never really satisfying because he worried about hurting her, roughing her up. Jazzy liked a strong man in bed. At least, that's what she always fantasized about. And a fantasy it had stayed since, after breaking up with Mike, she hadn't found another man she had felt comfortable enough to expand her sexual experience with. Nor had she felt the desire to.

Up until the second when Gio Detta's body pressed against hers. That man had "dangerous" written all over him, and she'd do best to stay far away from him. She didn't need that kind of a complication in her life. If she'd learned anything from Mike passing away, it was that Death did not discriminate the young or elderly. Sooner or later, it came for everyone and when it did, there was only one question to ask yourself: did I live a full life? Mike had told her he had, though he did have one regret. He didn't get to finish his bucket list. Something she had promised him she'd do for him.

So, no matter how her body burned for Giovanni Detta, her heart and mind had other plans. She was going to fulfill her promise to Mike, if it was the last thing she did.

CHAPTER 6

GIO

After returning from his visit to the Rossis, Gio was all wound up. He couldn't get Jocelyn out of his head, which was annoying. He kept feeling her curvy body underneath him. The things he wanted to do to her...

Another thing was that he kept picturing her doing a fist pump for pulling one over on him by pretending to be Antonio's assistant. Yet another sign she was going to be trouble. The little charlatan had met her match though. Like any other problem he had faced so far, he would meet any challenge she decided to throw his way. After all, nothing worth anything ever came easy.

Half an hour after he'd arrived at his city penthouse, the doorbell rang.

When he let Vanessa in and looked into her pale blue eyes, he realized she wasn't the one he wanted. As usual, Vanessa looked flawless: perfect makeup, not a hair out of

place, and a tight dress, hugging the exquisite body of a lingerie model. She wouldn't be caught dead in sweaty workout clothes, her hair all mussed up.

She dropped her bag on the floor and took off her dress and bra, while she sauntered over to him.

"I missed you," she said with a purr.

He wasn't in the mood for any foreplay. He was about to tell her to bend over the arm of the couch, when Vanessa suddenly dropped to her knees. She quickly unzipped his pants, taking out his cock.

That was a new one. Like any man, he appreciated a good blowjob. He also knew there were two types of women: the ones that liked giving head, and the ones that didn't. Vanessa was the latter. It didn't mean she never took him inside her mouth, it just wasn't something she instigated on her own.

After she gave him a few licks, he fisted her hair and fucked her mouth, hard and rough, pouring out all his frustration in his thrusts. He closed his eyes and imagined it was Jocelyn Rossi on her knees, curling her tongue over his dick.

When he heard Vanessa gag, he pulled her off his dick, then grabbed a condom and put it on.

"You don't need to use one. I'm on birth control."

Right. He wasn't falling for that one.

He hauled her up and bent her over the couch, slamming into her, making her scream out his name until she came.

Oh yeah, those were the moans he'd been wanting to hear. There was no sound more beautiful than a woman giving into her passion. Showing a man that she loved her body, and enjoying the pleasure it could give her.

A few more pumps and he got off as well, dropping on the couch next to her.

Vanessa stretched her body out next to him, putting it on full display. She knew she was beautiful—though a bit skinny

for his taste—and she wasn't ashamed of showing herself off.

She stroked a nail over his pecs. "I was thinking maybe you could give me a key to the condo. After all, we've been dating for a while now."

They'd been fucking. He didn't do dating. And since when did two months constitute "a while"?

When she put a hand on his wrist, he had a feeling he knew where this was going. Some place he didn't plan to visit.

She stupidly ignored the chill in his eyes, so he asked, "Yeah, and?"

"I think it's time for the next step," she claimed. "I want to get married. To become Mrs. Detta."

So that was what the blowjob had been about. She wanted a ring on her finger. Unlike Jocelyn Rossi, who had literally fled the country to avoid said ring. The irony wasn't lost on him.

He extracted her perfectly-manicured fingers from his chest and came off the couch. It was obviously time to let Vanessa go. "That's not going to happen. Why don't you pick up your stuff and leave?"

"What?" She blinked as if he was speaking in a foreign language.

"We've had a good time, but I'm done now. Raoul will drive you to wherever you want to go."

After she opened and closed her mouth a few times, her cheeks turned red with anger. "You can't just kick me aside like this! I spoke to a lawyer and I know I have certain rights ___"

He spun around, and she hastily scooted back, her eyes filled with fear. He couldn't help but compare her reaction to Jazzy's. There was no way that hellcat would have backed down.

"Don't ever threaten me. I was clear about what I wanted from you upfront. So don't pretend as if I promised you a white picket fence."

“But I love you.”

She loved his money. She loved the gifts he had his assistant buy her, the clubs and fancy restaurants she got into by using his name. “No, you don’t.” She’d overplayed her hand by pretending to want to settle down. Even more stupid, she had gone to a fucking lawyer.

“You coldhearted bastard! It *is* true what they say about you. You have nothing but a black chunk of ice surrounding your heart.”

After her little rant, she started to sob. Vanessa was one of those women who could muster up tears whenever it suited her.

He ignored the waterworks and went into his shower. When he returned to the living room a little later, Vanessa had left. He poured himself a glass of whiskey, and stared out at Union Square, which was buzzing with activity, when Jackson called.

“I have an update on your fugitive.” There was a smile in his brother’s voice.

“Fucking hilarious, Jax.”

“I like this girl already.”

Gio had slightly mixed feelings. “Where is she?”

“On her way to Paris. As soon as we found out her destination, we called our contacts over there. They will notify us the second they spot her at Charles de Gaulle airport.”

“Did she board the plane alone?” If she’d fled to France to be with a lover, that might change things. Though, he hadn’t missed the way her body had responded to him. She might not have liked it, hence the fleeing, but it was undeniable. It also was a testament that whoever she was sleeping with currently, was clearly doing a piss-poor job of it.

“She did. Of course, this doesn’t mean she won’t meet someone over there, but according to her credit card records, she bought the plane ticket after you spoke to her on the

phone. Also, she didn't check in any luggage, so we can rule out that it was a planned trip.”

“I'll be at the airport within an hour.”

“Yeah, about that...don't. See, I thought you might say that, so I notified your pilot to get the jet ready. He just called me back and it seems that there is a problem with your passport. As in, you're on the no-fly list.”

“Excuse me?”

“You can't get on a plane right now. Even with the contacts we have, it's gonna take a while before I have you removed from that list.” Another laugh followed. “Guess we can add hacking to her skills.”

Gio closed his eyes and counted to three. “You don't have to sound so fucking amused by this. But fine, I'll send Vince after her.” He didn't like that he had to hand this over to his brother—surprisingly not liking the idea of him charming Jazzy—but he didn't have much choice.

“Actually, you can't do that either,” Jackson said. “She put him on the list as well.”

“Come again?”

His brother chuckled. Actually *chuckled*, like this clusterfuck was something amusing.

“We're all on the list, brother. Any Detta name she could probably dig up. You know what this means.”

Yes, he did. His wayward bride had fucked up, though. She forgot to put the honorary Detta in their midst on the list. Hector “The Wolf” Diaz. His blood brother and head of security. His firm supplied him with the best bodyguards, made up of former military and contract workers. Hector might not be a Detta in name or his brother by blood, but he sure was by heart.

The former Marine scared the shit out of anyone, and Jazzy Rossi was past due some fear in her life.

CHAPTER 7

JAZZY

Three weeks later...

Rome was like a big open-air museum. Jazzy could spot remaining pieces of architecture or ruins from the Roman Empire on practically every corner of the city. It was truly amazing and after seeing a few art galleries, she totally understood why the city—and the Vatican Museums, specifically—had made it to Mike’s bucket list. It was the third city she visited in as many weeks. The great thing about Europe was that there were no borders. At least not in the parts she visited. No border control meant no paper trail for Detta to follow. She was as free as a bird. Which was funny, considering the good man himself was grounded for the

foreseeable future. Her friend Tess—one of the top hackers in the world—had seen to that.

As she trailed along the cobblestone streets of Vatican City, she mused about her next move. Now that she had fulfilled her promise to Mike by looking up the masters in the Louvre, the Rijksmuseum, and the Vatican Museums, it felt as if a chapter of her life was closed for good. So now what? In the past weeks, she'd had a lot of time to think about her future. She had made a commitment to Tommie and the company they were building. It was important to both of them, and she had felt really bad sending him an e-mail explaining that she needed some time because of a "personal matter." She had come to a few conclusions over the past few days, and one of them was that she could no longer live under her grandfather's umbrella. It was time to spread her wings. It wouldn't be easy to convince him that she wanted to stand on her own two feet, but she'd done it before, during college.

When Jazzy passed a gelateria, she suddenly felt the skin on the back of her neck prickle. She spun around but didn't see anything out of the ordinary. Just the usual group of tourists in a row, following an umbrella and a backpacker holding out a map. Still, she didn't feel at ease and took up her pace. It was probably just the jitters and paranoia she lived with, expecting Detta's men at every turn.

The first week in Paris, it had been worse. Especially when she'd spotted a welcoming committee at the airport, which she had narrowly managed to escape. After visiting the Louvre and the Musée d'Orsay, she had quickly left Paris, taking a train to Lille. From there, she had left for her second destination, Amsterdam. As long as she didn't use her credit card or phone, she was impossible to trace. That is, right up to the point when she would return to the States. But by then, the month would have passed, so Giovanni Detta would have no more reason to go after her. At least, that was what she'd told herself. When she'd texted her *nonno* to tell him she had landed safely, right before she had taken out her old SIM card, he had replied with an ominous "Good luck."

The chatter of a group of Asian tourists brought her back into the here and now. She couldn't shake off the feeling that she was being followed. She hurried off into one of the many small alleys of Rome, hoping to get lost in them. When she didn't hear any footsteps following her, she gave a sigh of relief.

You are being paranoid, Jaz. No one is following you. It's been three weeks. Detta must have given up by now. Gina is probably choosing their wedding rings and redecorating his house by now.

An unexpected pang of regret went through her when she pictured him with another woman, which was crazy. She attributed it to the insta-lust he had awoken inside her. Which had been one of the reasons she had run away in the first place. Lusting after another woman's soon-to-be-man was not her thing.

When she saw the famous Old Bridge Gelateria in the distance, she came to a halt. Looking forward to some cooling down, she went up to the place. Before she could take another step, she was yanked into an open door. A large hand clasped around her mouth and everything went black.

She woke up in a dark room, with a dry mouth. The bed she was put on cracked when she pulled herself up on her arms. Green drapes shut out the faint sun. It was still light outside; probably close to dawn, though. She hurried off the bed and looked around for her bag. To her surprise, it was placed on a dingy table next to a closet. She grabbed it while peering out the window. It looked out over an abandoned courtyard. Judging by the yellowish houses and rows with terracotta plants, she assumed she was still in Italy. Even in Rome, perhaps. It didn't take a genius to figure out what had happened.

She slowly tried the doorknob. It wasn't locked. Even more surprising was that both the corridor and stairway were abandoned. After taking the steps two at a time, she opened a

door that led to an empty courtyard. When she turned the corner, she came face-to-face with a burly man in a black suit.

Not so empty after all.

When he tried to grab her, she didn't hesitate. She did a backward spin kick and knocked his legs from under him, sending him crashing to the ground.

She spun around and headed off into the other direction, when she crashed into another body. The big blond grabbed her a little tighter than was necessary, which also presented an opportunity. She gave him a sweet smile, internally laughing as his gaze dropped to her lips and his hold loosened for a fraction.

Then she kneed him in the balls.

He let go of her, while cursing and yelling. Jazzy didn't think; she just ran. Less than ten feet away, there was an iron gate.

When a bullet hit the wall next to her, she froze. She slowly turned around, hands in the air. The blond buffoon, who stood slightly bent over, gave her a deadly stare.

"That's not very sportive of you. I'm sure you really feel like a man now, holding that gun."

In hindsight, mouthing off at a man after just having stomped all over his pride, might not have been the best thing to do. He came at her and slapped her so hard her head hit the wall. She saw stars, and then nothing but darkness.

The second time Jazzy woke up, she found herself zip-tied to a chair in the middle of a kitchen. A hulking figure leaned against the fridge opposite her, looking utterly bored. He had a certain military stance. His massive arms, tattooed with tribal art, looked like they could easily snap her in two. He had the greenest eyes she had ever seen.

Next to him stood Dickhead, the one who had smacked her in the face. Was she seeing things or was Dickhead

sweating a little? He didn't seem at ease standing beside the behemoth of a man that was practically twice his size.

"You shouldn't have done that," the military guy said, his eyes on her throbbing cheek.

"The bitch kicked me in the nuts. Mr. Detta will thank me for teaching her a lesson."

Jazzy wanted to tell him to fuck off, but changed her mind. That would only lead to him slapping her again. Also, she was suddenly more transfixed by the subtle change that took place in the big guy's expression. His eyes had turned rock-hard, though Dickhead seemed oblivious to it.

"You'll see him soon enough. We'll see how grateful he is then. Now get the fuck out."

Shit. This was actually happening. She hadn't even considered the scenario of Detta following through on his threat to come after her. Clearly, she had underestimated his ego.

When Dickhead left, the big guy turned his attention back to her. His combat boots echoed ominously on the tile floor as he headed over to her.

"I'm Hector. Gio's head of security."

Gio, not Mr. Detta. A friend of his, perhaps? Though, he looked more like a mercenary, and a dangerous one at that, with the scars on his cheek and bulging biceps.

"Nice to meet you, Hector." She gave him a fake smile. "Obviously I forgot to put you on the no-fly list. Could you please give me your last name? You know, so the next time, I won't forget to add yours as well."

He almost cracked a smile. Somehow, she knew this wasn't a man who laughed a lot, if at all.

He walked over to the sink and held a cloth under the running water. Then he walked back over to her. As he wiped the blood from the corner of her mouth, she realized he was surprisingly gentle for a man of his posture.

"It's Diaz."

“Well then, Hector Diaz, could you please untie my hands?” she asked, not expecting him to actually comply. Much to her surprise, he did as she asked, and then handed her the cloth. She put it on her burning cheek without thanking him.

“So, I guess we can add hacking skills to your resume?”

“Just one of my many talents,” she lied. The truth would only put Tess on their radar, and she couldn’t risk that. Tess would go nuclear on their asses if she felt threatened. If something had an internet access, Tess was able to get inside. Still, in the end, she was a peaceful hacktivist, who got sick at the sight of blood. She would be no match against Detta in the real world.

Hector gave her a stern look. “This can go down two ways. Either you cooperate and get on the jet with me willingly, or I’ll put you in a crate and carry you inside. What’s it gonna be?”

Neither.

“I will pay you,” she offered, getting desperate now. “I really don’t feel like going to Giovanni Detta’s lair. Just let me go or, at least, give me a fair chance to get away, a head start. He will never know. You can tell him I escaped.” One more week was all she needed before Detta would be forced to marry one of her cousins. She was so close. “Aren’t you a mercenary? I’m sure we can figure something out. I have a trust fund I will get into next year, and—”

“Stop right fucking there,” he said with a growl. Yes, the man actually growled. His eyes were cold now, a stark contrast to the hot red scars on his cheek. “First, I’m not a fucking mercenary. Technically, my firm is hired by the Dettas. Second, there isn’t much I care about in this world. In fact, I can’t really think of a single thing. But Gio is my brother. Not by blood, but by choice. No amount of money is gonna make me betray him.”

Shit. “Don’t pretend you’re doing something noble. You are holding me here against my will. Also, what kind of man stands by to watch a woman get beat up?”

“You gave as good as you got, *chica*. Had he not pulled a gun on you, you would have beat Jason, fair and square.” There was a hint of admiration in his voice. “Don’t diminish your achievement by complaining you got hit by a man and making it a ‘battle of the sexes’ thing. You’re not that kind of girl.”

Interesting take on the issue. “I’m not?”

He shook his head. “No, you’re not. Which is exactly the reason why you’re in this position in the first place.”

Before she could ask him what he meant by that bizarre remark, they were interrupted by a knock on the door. Dickhead, who was apparently named Jason, stuck his head through the door opening. He gave her a nasty smirk, and announced their plane was ready for takeoff.

With that, her mood plummeted, together with any dreams and hopes of freedom.

In the end, she stepped into the jet willingly. They barely spoke on their flight back to the States. The ten-hour flight did give her a lot of time to think, though. Before she knew it, the plane had landed, and she was ushered into the back seat of a limo. Two hours later, she was taken into a lavish Victorian mansion in Pacific Heights, with a great view of the ocean and the Golden Gate Bridge. Though nobody told her, she had a feeling this was Giovanni Detta’s place.

Hector guided her to a soulless, stark white living room. Both men stayed with her, obviously not willing to take their eyes off her for a second. Hector didn’t show any emotion at all. Jason, on the other hand, looked gleeful. As if he couldn’t wait for his boss to come and finish the beating that he’d started. Even though Jazzy tried hard to not show him that he got to her, she felt sick to her stomach. What if Jason was right? What if Detta was so pissed off that he would hurt her?

It wasn't until a half an hour later before Detta walked into the room. By that time, she had paced a hole into the carpet, considering her limited options.

She wasn't sure what she'd expected when she came face-to-face with Detta again. Ice cold eyes and a flash of rage crossing his handsome features wasn't it, though. Fear coursed through her body, almost paralyzing her. But then he turned his gaze to Jason.

"You hit her."

It was odd that he immediately assumed it had been him responsible for her swollen jaw, and not Hector. Of the two of them, with his hulking presence and eternal scowl etched on his face, Hector looked the more menacing.

"I sure did. The bitch kicked me in the nuts."

Gio's eyes narrowed at her, a muscle twitching in his jaw. "Did she now?"

"I sure did," Jazzy repeated after the asshole. There was no way she was going to apologize for trying to get free.

What happened next, she didn't see coming. Gio spun around and decked the prick, who bent over with a grunt. Another quick move and Jason's knees buckled. When Gio stepped away from him, she saw a knife sticking out of Jason's stomach. A red trail, that was rapidly spreading, had darkened his white shirt.

"Take him to the clinic. If he lives, fire him."

Hector didn't seem fazed in the least bit. He just dragged the bleeding man away.

When they were finally alone, a set of piercing blue eyes turned their attention back to her.

Oh, crap.

CHAPTER 8

GIO

As expected, she was waiting in his home, or as she apparently called it, “his lair.” He wondered if she would still be as defiant, or more subdued, now that she knew there was no escape from him.

He grabbed her chin, towering over her on purpose. He just butchered a man who touched her and was still pumped up with adrenaline.

“Remember your last words to me, *bella*?”

Her eyes flashed an unholy light. Oh yeah, she remembered alright.

“Fuck you.”

That you will. “In case you were still wondering; I choose you, Jocelyn Rossi, to be my wife.” No sense in not

telling her how it was going to be. He liked clarity.

For a second there, she looked surprised; then she gave him a look, as if she wasn't sure if he was joking.

“Are you kidding me?”

“I never kid, as you put it.”

“You do know that lacking a sense of humor isn't something to be proud of, right?” When she didn't get a rise out of him, she sighed. “Trust me, you don't want me. I'm not the good little Catholic virgin girl you might think I am.”

“Not looking for one.”

This seemed to have her taken aback. He knew that some Italian families in their circle still expected their women to stay virgin until they got married. He wasn't one of them. No, he had plans for her beautiful body, and actually liked a more experienced woman.

“You can't make me marry you, you know. It's not the Middle Ages anymore. Marriage by proxy is so passé.”

“You're right,” he admitted.

“My grandfather will never allow you to hurt me to force me into unholy matrimony. So tell me, Detta, how exactly did you think this was going to work out? Can't hurt me... can't threaten me...”

She clucked her tongue, a smirk around her lush lips. Had she known him, she wouldn't have taunted him. Whatever safeguards she thought she had in place against him, he would destroy them. He always got what he wanted. And right now, that was her.

“You sure have me there.” He grabbed her chin, and let his gaze linger on her beautiful lips. He heard her breath hitch, saw her pupils dilate. “This is how it's going to work out. You are going to marry me without me having to coerce you. See, the deal is that I get to choose whichever Rossi girl I want. Should that girl refuse, I'll still buy the company instead of allowing a hostile takeover, because I gave your grandfather my word. Thing is, your grandfather will get far less. Barely

enough to pay off his debts. Also, his legacy, the company he has built from the ground, will not be inherited by his own flesh and blood. So, you're going to marry me because you love your grandfather and you won't want him to end up on the street. But most of all, Jazzy, most of all, you will marry me because you want me. Just as I choose you because I want you." He dared her to deny it, kissing her neck. She squirmed underneath him, no doubt thinking of a way to deny the attraction between them, but failed when her gasp ended in a moan.

"I don't want to." Her whisper was barely audible.

He appreciated her honesty. Especially since he had to admit that he hadn't considered one of the other Rossi girls, the second he'd discovered she was the one he'd had underneath him in the library. If he was going to have to marry one of them, why not the one he wanted to fuck? Vince would have a blast, if he'd ever admit that. He would claim Gio was following his dick, which wasn't entirely true. Not entirely wrong either.

"Open your mouth."

He had his tongue inside her sweet mouth in a beat. She moaned but didn't pull back. Not even when he lost control and crushed her lips, bruising them until they were a lovely shade of red.

They were both panting by the time he pulled away.

"Next time I kiss you, it will be when you have my ring on your finger. The kiss after that will be when you're underneath me. Again."

Thing was, he didn't take marriage vows lightly. If his father had taught him one thing, it was to respect your name. She didn't know it yet, but once he gave her his name, he was going to own her.

CHAPTER 9

JAZZY

Much to Jazzy's surprise, Gio sent her home. Somehow, she'd half-expected him to stash her in his basement. His parting words had sent hot tingles down her spine, but she refused to show him what he did to her. She had wanted to make a sarcastic remark about his confidence, but there had been something in his look, as if it were a done deal, that made her reconsider.

When she finally arrived back at the Rossi mansion, she had come to a few conclusions. She walked up to the front door and took the steps up to the library. It was time to confront the man who had set her up.

Her grandfather sat in his favorite chair, near the fireplace.

"It wasn't a coincidence, was it? You, sending me to retrieve something from your vault, the same night Detta was

sitting there, alone in the dark.”

He took another sip of his wine and then looked at her. “I suppose it’s too late to say that I don’t know what you’re talking about?”

Jazzy scoffed. “Why? You had to know you were placing me on his radar, making me a challenge to him.” Antonio Rossi never did anything without a reason. The old man was the most manipulative person she’d ever met. Had he lived a few centuries ago, he would have ruled in a Medieval court.

“Because I won’t be around forever.”

“What?” Panic grabbed her by the throat at the thought of something happening to him. “Are you sick? Why haven’t you told me? Or are we at war again?” She wasn’t sure what would be worse. She remembered a time, over a decade ago, when a war between families broke out, and she, Carmen, and their cousins had been in lockdown for months.

“No war,” he reassured her. “But I am getting older, and I will be having a few minor surgeries in a week. Nothing big, but you never know.” He stared outside into the garden for a moment before he looked straight at her. “We both know who will come after you should anything happen to me.”

Marco.

The ever-present dark panic inside her started to rise again, sending a chill over her spine, but she pushed it back. She couldn’t afford to be petrified by fear.

“And I will be ready if he does. This is what I have trained for over the years.” She knew of a dozen ways to incapacitate a man.

“There’s no ‘if,’ Jazzy. There’s only ‘when.’ He’s too much of a coward to come after you alone. That will not be the way he will operate. He has the means to come at you with sheer numbers you could never match on your own. I wish...” He cleared his throat. “Had he been any other man, I would have made him suffer and had him killed for what he did to you and Mary.”

It was true. Marco had the manpower and the means to come after her. In fact, it had been his parting words to her: *I will make you pay, slut. I will fucking make you bleed.*

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“No, you never did,” he said with a sigh.

“So, what, you think Giovanni Detta is going to protect me from Marco?” Like she would ever tell him of her shame. She hadn’t told anyone. Ever. Not even her grandfather knew the full extent of what had really happened that night all those years ago. “I won’t tell him about it. You promised me, gave me your word, you wouldn’t tell anyone either.” She was going to hold him to that.

“This marriage might be good for you in other ways too. You seem adrift lately, Jocelyn. Marriage could ground you.”

She rolled her eyes at his archaic views of how a woman was not complete without a man.

“Even barbed wire has no purpose in life without a wall or gate to defend,” he continued.

She scowled. “You calling me stingy?”

“Would you rather have me compare you to a thorny rose?”

Yuck. “Barbed wire is fine.” An analogy that would make Detta a wall. How fitting.

“Giovanni Detta is extremely protective when it comes to the safety of his family,” he suddenly said. “Detta might not lead the life of a gangster on the outside, but that boy was raised, in every way, to the image of his father. Meaning that, if you should tell him about a threat to you, he will take care of it. Don’t... don’t ask Detta to take Marco out. Not during my lifetime. That is all I ask of you.”

Jazzy immediately walked over to her grandfather, wrapping her arms around his frame. They would never do that in public; he wouldn’t let her, believing it would make him look weak in front of the world. But here, inside, she could hug him all she wanted.

“I would never do that,” she assured him. “Still, even if I married Detta, it’s no guarantee that Marco won’t come after me should anything happen to you. Technically, I would no longer fall under your protection. Marco hasn’t set foot on American soil for over a decade. He might not even know who Detta is.”

“Oh, he will learn. And only a crazy man would go after the wife of a Detta.”

But who was to say Detta would give a crap about her well-being after he’d gained control over Rossi Enterprises? After all, he would no longer need her.

“Especially when it’s the wife of Giovanni Detta, their leader,” her grandfather continued. “There’s a reason they call him Black Ice. They claim he has a black heart and there runs ice through his veins. He never shows any emotion during a negotiation. Just puts down his demands, and it’s either take it or leave it.”

Wonderful. She was going to become Mrs. Black Ice. Guess she had no choice but to become the global warming to his iceberg.

CHAPTER 10

JAZZY

The next morning, Jazzy found herself in front of a large mirror in Giovanni Detta's estate, wearing her mother's old wedding gown. It was a simple champagne-colored one without sleeves. She had insisted on wearing the vintage dress instead of choosing one from the selection of wedding apparel that were shown to her by some bridal expert, courtesy of her fiancé.

“How about this one?” Samantha tried once again. She'd been patiently trying to convince Jazzy to try on another dress. She could easily star in *Say Yes To The Dress*. “It's a gorgeous handmade Dolce and Gabbana from silk. It has—”

“No, really. I'm going to wear my mother's old dress. You can take your *Dolce* somewhere else.”

Gina groaned and looked as if Jazzy had committed a crime against humanity. Then her cousin downed what was left of her champagne flute and left. Carmen only gave a faint smile from over her chair at the window.

“You know, not every woman dreams of a designer wedding dress,” Jazzy argued. “Or even of getting married at all. It’s because of fairy tales, and Disney, that girls are wired from a young age to want to become a princess wearing a tiara and puffy, pink dress.”

Samantha looked as if she’d spoken in an alien language. The poor woman looked crushed when she learned she was going to lose the commission for an expensive wedding gown. Feeling sorry for her, Jazzy picked silk underwear, heaps and heaps of underwear—so, she had a weakness for expensive lingerie—and a pair of white satin pumps, putting a smile on the woman’s face. After that, Samantha finally left.

Giovanni Detta hadn’t wasted any time in putting together the wedding, insisting it would be held at his place. Her grandfather had agreed, as he seemed to agree to anything concerning Detta. The family business must be in an even worse state than he’d told them.

She was told the few guests had already arrived, including her husband-to-be.

“You look beautiful.” There was a wistful tone in Carmen’s voice.

“Are you okay, sis? You look a little pale.” As always, Carmen looked beautiful, regal as a queen, in her light blue dress that made her raven hair stand out.

“I’m fine. I just wish... I wish you would have married out of love instead of duty.”

Jazzy couldn’t stand the pain in her sister’s eyes. “Don’t worry. I will be fine.”

“The concealer I just used to cover up the faint bruise on your cheek says otherwise.”

Jazzy shrugged. “It wasn’t Gio who gave me the bruise, if it’s any consolation. Also, he took care of the guy who *did*

give it to me.” She didn’t really want to think about what had happened to Jason. It had been an eye-opener; seeing the cool and collected Giovanni Detta change into a killer in a split second. She would never underestimate him again.

Carmen seemed to contemplate that for a minute. “You know, I’m proud of you. Nothing ever gets you under.”

There were plenty of things that got her down. Most recently, a certain dominant man in their library. “Well, you know what they say. As long as I breathe, there is hope. Or something like that.”

“Spira, spera,” Carmen said softly. “Who knew you could quote Victor Hugo.”

“Hey. I might not have majored in classical literature like you, but I do read, you know. Just not as much as you.”

This finally made her sister smile. “There is a fire inside you, Jaz. Don’t let anyone snuff that out.”

She didn’t know how to respond to that, and as it was, she didn’t have the time for it, because a knock sounded on the door. Her grandfather took her arm, leading her down the stairs.

The following hour—exchanging their vows, Gio putting a ring on her finger, signing the marriage certificate—went by in a blur.

When the ceremony master announced that the groom could kiss the bride, Jazzy expected Gio to show his dominance over her. What followed though, was a slight peck on her lips. She looked up, unable to hide her disappointment, right into eyes that were burning like a blue fire.

His hand caressed the small of her back, sending hot tingles up her spine. When she shivered, he pulled her close, his lips to her ear.

“Later,” he whispered, his voice filled with promises. “No more running. You’re all mine now.”

Her grandfather raised a glass. “To the new couple. Salute!”

A cheer went through the guests.

Gio took a sip, his eyes never leaving her. "To my bride."

When the notes to the first dance began, he held out his hand. She took it and let him guide her to the dance floor set up in front of the fireplace.

Jazzy wasn't sure what to say. Everything had happened so fast. One minute, she was traveling in Europe, finishing Mike's bucket list, contemplating her next move; the next, she was kidnapped and dancing at her wedding. Maybe honesty was the key here.

"I don't know what to expect of this marriage," she confessed.

He didn't say anything. His blue eyes were like an impenetrable wall of silence, not showing any emotion.

"Obviously I won't fight it," she continued. "After all, it's only for two years. I can live with that."

Still, no hint as to what he thought. His hand around her waist was drawing circles, keeping her on her toes for some reason. Okay, so the reason wasn't that inexplicable. She was drawn to him like to no other man before. Still, that wasn't enough for a basis for a marriage. She had no idea what he was thinking, feeling. No idea at all. And that made her uncomfortable. She worked with numbers, algorithms, stuff that by its definition was computer-based, without any emotion to it, but still logical. Sadly, Giovanni Detta wasn't a piece of software she could tweak when needed, or upgrade once a month.

From the corner of her eye, she spotted Gina's sour expression. Her red dress made her cousin stand out in any crowd, but especially a small one of perhaps fifty guests. There was an accusation in her eyes, as if Jazzy had stolen her place in Gio's arms. Jazzy felt no sense of guilt. She hadn't wanted to be here, but now that she was, she liked it. Of course, that could change come tomorrow; but right now, defying all logic, considering how things had went down, it felt right.

Standing next to Gina was Mary. Her smile lit up the room as she was speaking in an animated matter to Gina, who was barely listening. It always amazed her how someone like Mary, who had seen the worst parts of human nature, could still be a positive source of light. It amazed and humbled her at the same time. Unlike Jazzy, Mary didn't seem to hold any rage or hate toward the man that had nearly raped her as a child. There was this peace inside her, a willingness to forgiveness, a determination to see the good in anyone. On all accounts, she would have made a much better bride to a man like Giovanni Detta.

“Why me?” she had to ask. “And don't tell me it was because you wanted me and I wanted you. A man like you doesn't make life-altering decisions based on a whim.”

“What would or could have been doesn't matter anymore. It is done. You're a Detta now. That's all that matters.”

“I'm afraid I'm going to need more than that. Also, I'm not just a Detta. I'm still a Rossi too.”

His eyes narrowed. “You *will* use my name.”

Ah, there it was. Not even married for an hour, and he was already laying down the law. “See, this is exactly what I mean. You knew me for all of five minutes when you decided to pursue me. Did you ever consider for a minute that I might be the wrong Rossi girl for you? I'm not going to agree with everything you say just because you think you're my lord and master.”

“Lord and master?” He pulled her close to his chest, his warm breath on her ear. “I like the sound of that.”

“I bet you do,” she murmured.

“Are you telling me you don't prefer me to master you in the bedroom?”

Her eyes darted around, afraid someone might overhear. “Could we please not talk about this here,” she hissed. Thankfully, most of the guests were either eating or dancing.

Even her sister Carmen was taking a spin with Gio's youngest brother.

Instead of pulling back, which she had expected him to do, he nibbled on her earlobe. Heat washed over her when she imagined what else he could do with those lips.

"I'd like to talk about it now. So there will be no misunderstanding between us."

She snorted. "Shouldn't you have discussed our compatibility in the bedroom before we signed the papers? It's kind of late now, don't you think?"

This earned her a nip at her ear. Oh God, why did this make her almost melt?

"You will let me take you however I want, *bella*. And not only in the bedroom. It could be anywhere, at any time, in any position I like. This feeling you have right now"—she shivered when he stuck his tongue in her ear—"that's only the beginning. As for your question, no, I never doubted that you were the right Rossi bride."

She had no idea how to react to that or get back to their original conversation. Before she came up with a way, his brother Vincent "please call me Vince" cut in, taking Gio's place.

"Finally. A chance to dance with my pretty sister-in-law," Vince said, giving her a wink.

Jazzy didn't know much about the Dettas, other than what info a quick internet search had provided her with. She did know that Vince was the second eldest of four brothers. There were two others; Jackson, the lawyer, and Luca, who was currently doing time for tax fraud. Nobody had mentioned Luca yet, but there was an empty chair next to the brothers' seats with a black ribbon on it. Which basically answered the question of whether the Dettas still stood beside their brother, despite of him being a convicted felon.

Vince had 'player' written all over his face. It made her think of her sister's husband, Franco. Her eyes searched the room for her sister. Carmen was now dancing with a family

friend. She still looked a bit pale, but Jazzy knew she loved to dance, so she wouldn't be sitting anytime soon.

“You don't like me much, do you, Jocelyn?”

She was surprised he'd picked up on that. At the same time, she felt a hint of shame for judging him while she didn't know him. “I'm sorry. I didn't mean to give you that idea. I just... my mind is somewhere else.”

His gaze followed hers and landed on her sister. A hint of understanding crept into his trademark piercing blue Detta eyes. “On your sister, Carmen.”

“Yes.”

“I haven't seen her husband Franco yet.”

“You know Franco?”

A chill crept into his eyes. “Yes.”

“I'm sure he's around here somewhere,” she said, swallowing down a hateful remark over the possible whereabouts of Franco. Which was probably in some broom closet. The Detta mansion was huge, two stories high. The rat bastard could be anywhere.

“I have never seen my brother raise a hand to a woman.”

His words startled her, and also made her a bit flustered. For some inexplicable reason, she felt as if she was caught in a wrongful accusation to Gio's character and that felt wrong. She shook her head. “I didn't think... I wasn't...”

She thought about how she'd witnessed Gio stab a man, showing not even a hint of remorse afterwards. Who knew what a man capable of that could do to her the second she angered him? Truth be told, she *was* afraid to end up like her sister. She *was* afraid of having to suffer in silence, especially since she wasn't any good in the being silent part of said suffering.

She also knew that the second she signed the marriage certificate, she was on her own now. As much as her grandfather loved her, he would never entertain the thought of meddling in her marriage. No matter how dire her

circumstances. In his world, to his generation, a woman was the one making the house, keeping her husband in check. If things went awry, then surely the wife was doing something wrong. Going to the police and bringing shame upon your family was just not done. Not to mention the fact that Giovanni Detta had extremely deep pockets and, no doubt, wielded a lot of power. And he had already demonstrated that, no matter where she fled to, he would find her.

Vince's gaze softened. "Our father was no angel. In fact, that might be the understatement of the century. But if he has taught us one thing, it was to never raise a hand to your woman. Gio can be... tough to deal with sometimes. He certainly always believes he's right, fueled by the aggravating fact that he usually is."

She laughed when Vince gave her a sour look. "There's no way I'm going to repeat that to him."

"You shouldn't, sis. It would only inflate his ego, and he would become unbearable to live with." Then his gaze turned more serious. "Whatever flaws my brother might have, being overbearing, overprotective, it comes from a good place. He does it out of a feel of responsibility, as head of this family. Never forget that. Once you're a Detta—especially his wife—it means you have a permanent spot on his mind. To protect and to provide for."

That last part sounded as if he was quoting someone. He must know that this was a marriage of convenience, but didn't throw that in her face. Instead, he tried to make her feel welcome. Oddly, their conversation did make her feel better.

There suddenly was some commotion near them. She gasped when she saw her sister passed out on the dance floor. The music stopped playing as Jazzy rushed over to her. Vince kneeled by her side in a beat. She looked around for Franco, but he wasn't anywhere in sight. Vince then picked Carmen up, taking her upstairs, with Jazzy and Mary hot on his trail.

Jazzy hastily walked before them and opened the first door she saw on the left.

"Not that one," Vince said.

“Why not?” She quickly peeked inside the room. It was masculine, dominated by a huge king-sized bed against the wall.

He gave her a crooked grin. “I don’t think my brother would appreciate finding his sister-in-law in his bed, instead of his bride.”

Apparently, this was Gio’s room, which meant that as of now, it was also her bedroom. “Right.”

Carmen stirred in Vince’s arms and opened her eyes. “What happened?”

Relieved that her sister came to, Jazzy released a breath. “You fainted.”

Carmen tried to get out of Vince’s arms. “Oh. I’m fine. Please put me down.”

“You’re not fine,” he snapped. “You look as pale as a ghost.”

Jazzy followed Vince into the room across from Gio’s—no, their—bedroom. Vince carefully put her sister on the bed, and then left.

Mary immediately put some pillows behind Carmen’s back and rushed to the sink to get her some water.

“Please promise you’ll stay the night,” Jazzy urged her sister.

“I can’t. Franco will be looking for me, and...”

“I’m sure he’ll be on his way. When he does, I’ll send him to you.” *Even though the prick doesn’t deserve you.*

Although Jazzy couldn’t care less about her wedding, she knew she couldn’t stay away any longer. She wasn’t sure how long it would take before her absence would be noted, and how Gio would take it. She didn’t want to anger him on their first day as a couple, setting the tone for the rest of the marriage, however long or short that may be.

Mary seemed to be of the same mind. “You should go back to your guests. I’ll stay with Carmen until she feels

better.”

When her cousin was adamant about Jazzy returning to the reception, she was left with no choice but to leave.

On her way down, she finally managed to locate Franco. By accident, that is. He was just sneaking out of a room adjoining in the hallway, followed by a blonde with mussed up hair, wiping her lips.

Jazzy didn't remember the woman's name, but earlier, she had seen her on the arm of another man. She grabbed the hem of her gown and stepped up to Franco. “Very classy. Getting a blowjob while your wife just passed out on the dance floor.”

Franco looked caught when he saw her. “It's none of your fucking business whom I fuck,” he snarled.

“And I couldn't care less, if you weren't married to my sister. Sadly, you are.”

The blonde had frozen, an unsure look passing on her face as to whether she should stay or go.

Franco made a step toward her, trying to get in her face, but suddenly his demeanor changed. In fact, it changed so fast, Jazzy almost got a whiplash. She followed his gaze to the point over her shoulder.

Gio stood behind her. When he put a hand on the small of her back, for some reason, she relaxed.

“Problem, Caruso?”

Franco cleared his throat. “No problem. I was just wishing my sister-in-law a long and happy marriage. Gave her some pointers, you know. About how to keep her husband happy.”

After a wink, which infuriated her, he straightened his dress jacket and went back into the living room.

“Um, I should probably—” the blonde stammered, trying to follow back inside as well.

“Hold it right there.” She might not be able to do something about the lowlife that married her sister, but this bimbo, who apparently had no problem fucking a married man at a wedding, was another thing. “Judging by the lack of surprise on your face when I mentioned Franco is married, I’m guessing you knew you were screwing with a married man.”

The blonde turned crimson and gripped her clutch, as if she needed something to hold onto for support.

“If I ever see you anywhere around him again, I will kick your ass. Now, get the hell out of my house.” Jazzy didn’t look back to see Gio’s reaction at her kicking his guest out. There was a chance of him picking the blonde’s side. After all, this was his house; Jazzy hadn’t even had a proper tour yet. He might call her on the fact that she didn’t have the right to throw out anyone.

When the blonde looked at Gio with a hint of ill-concealed longing in her eyes, Jazzy’s anxiety level reached a spike.

“You’ve heard my wife, Lisa. Get out.”

When Lisa slithered away to the coat room, Jazzy turned to Gio. She was about to thank him, when he swept her off her feet and carried her back up the stairs.

“Threshold,” he said, as he took her inside their bedroom.

CHAPTER 11

JAZZY

Jazzy hadn't expected Gio to go all traditional on her, carrying her over the threshold and softly placing her before their bed. It was only now that she noticed the sparsely-lit candles and rose petals on the bed. Someone had gone through the trouble to spruce the place up, make it look like a honeymoon suite, complete with a bottle of champagne on the nightstand.

“This bedroom is fucking Switzerland,” he said out of the blue. No need to explain; she wasn’t supposed to drag their shit in here.

Now that she was alone with him, she wasn’t sure how to act. Obviously, she knew what was coming, since it was their wedding night, and really, she would be the worst kind of hypocrite if she denied wanting to have sex with him. Still, part of her was unsure what was going to happen. Would he be gentle, passionate, or an absolute beast, out of revenge for her fleeing him. She just didn’t know, because she didn’t know *him*. This, and a million other thoughts, sped through her mind as she sat on the edge of the bed. She was kind of left at his mercy, and she didn’t like that feeling one bit.

Jazzy looked up when she realized she was staring at his feet. Gio lifted her up from the bed and turned her around, sweeping her long curls over one shoulder. Slowly, he started to unbutton her dress.

Suddenly, she felt ecstatic that the vintage dress had a million tiny buttons in the back. After the first two, she heard him

curse and she couldn't keep her smile in. With that, a part of her nerves calmed.

“Find that funny, do you, *bella*?”

There was no anger in his voice. “I do,” she admitted.

He let go of fiddling with the buttons and grabbed her hips, pulling her back against his chest. Even through all the layers of her dress, she could feel his heat. Giovanni Detta was hot, both in a figurative way of speech, as well as in the literal sense.

He started dotting her shoulder with kisses, making her melt against his much larger frame. Her head ended up in the crook of his neck. He put one arm around her middle, holding her steady, while the other went to the top of her bodice. With one pull, he ripped open the top, making her breasts spill out of her dress. A beat later, she stepped out of her wedding gown, leaving her in nothing but thigh high silk stockings and a tiny slip. He turned her to face him.

His eyes were dark and simmering with lust.

“Oh, how long I have waited for this moment.”

As had she, though she would never admit it. Also, all she managed to get out was another moan because his hand found her nipple. His finger was circling the bud, pulling it, to make it longer and hard.

When he pinched her nipple, she couldn't stop a hiss.

This time, it was him chuckling. “You like that, don't you? A bite of pain.”

It wasn't a question, so she didn't bother to lie to him by denying it.

All it took was one look into his eyes to see the promise of a long and rough night in bed with him.

He took both her breasts in his hands, lavishing them with attention; kissing them, nuzzling them, and making her hiss when he bit the tops, and then licked them to ease the pain. By the end of his exploration, she was panting like crazy. This slow burn was going to kill her.

“There it is,” he said.

“Where is what?” She had difficulty speaking in a coherent sentence, her mind scattered all over the place by a lust overdose.

“The same look you had when you were underneath me in the library. That look that says you want me to fuck you.”

She wanted to protest, ‘cause really, he was already too full of himself, when he pushed his tongue inside her mouth, effectively cutting her off.

When he pulled back, his breath was hot on her ear. “I ever see you looking at another man like that, I’ll take him out. Now, undress me.”

Her hands were shaking when she reached for his belt, unhooking it. With one pull, she tugged his dress pants down, kneeling at his feet to take them off. Her eyes darted to the impressive bulge that came into her view. Her mouth watered at the thought of taking him inside her. Into her wet mouth, her throbbing pussy.

He grabbed her by her hair and slowly pulled her up.

“There will be time for that later. First, it’s my turn to play.” He placed a hand on her chest and pushed her backward until her calves hit the bed. “Lie on your back and put your hands above your head, against the headboard.”

She did as he asked. For now. She could give him that. Obedience. Something she wasn’t familiar with, but a bet was a bet. He’d found her. She’d lost.

“Don’t get used to this,” she hissed, as he loomed over her and roughly pulled her nipple.

“Used to what? Fucking you? Oh, but I plan to.”

He put a pillow under her ass, spreading her legs, wide. Then he draped himself over her, his eyes on her slip. He ripped it off her, as if it offended him. With the way Jazzy was going through new panties, Samantha might get a new call soon.

All thoughts of buying lingerie left her brain when Gio pushed a thick finger inside her, deep, without any warning. He pumped inside her, one, two, three times, and then added two more fingers, filling her up. She

could feel her moisture dripping lower, to her crack.

When she arched her back, unintentionally closing her legs, he smacked her ass.

“Keep them wide. I won’t tell you again.”

“Or what?” She couldn’t help but meet the challenge in his eyes. Also, she genuinely wondered what he would do.

A wolfish grin appeared on his handsome face. “Or I will restrain your body so you can’t move. I will then fill your pussy, make you burn, and then refuse to let you come.”

Jazzy groaned. Why did that sound horrible and amazing at the same time?

“You like that idea,” he whispered.

“No, I don’t.”

“I knew you would be like this.” His voice was still soft, as if he was more talking to himself than having a conversation with her.

“Like what?”

“Adventurous.”

That's all she got? One word? It could mean anything.

She was distracted by that thought when he got up and removed his boxer briefs. His thick cock jumped up from its confinement, pointing up. He slid next to her on the bed and pulled her on top of him until she straddled his body.

Without giving her a second to regroup, he grabbed her hips and impaled her right on his shaft. She cried out from joy and a sweet tinge of pain.

“Ride my cock. Hard.”

He didn't give her any choice. She felt so full, so gloriously full, that her hips started to move, as if on their own. She put her hands on his shoulders, going back and forth, giving him her all, and taking her own pleasure.

He groaned and started fucking her from below with hard thrusts, while she kept riding him. Hard. Apparently, he liked that because another groan followed.

She felt his finger between them, trailing down to her pussy. A jolt of electricity went through her when he found

her clit, rubbing it, circling the little bud. She let out a whimper when he pulled his finger back. The pressure inside her was building up and up, making her almost scream. Any sound that could have left her lips was smothered when he pushed up and ravaged her mouth. Taking her hard, in the same rhythm as he was fucking her, grabbing her by the hips, pushing into her from below.

She grinded her hips into him, wanting, demanding to come. When he bit her nipple one more time, she cried out. Her climax shattered her, the edges of the world going dark.

With a sigh, she fell on top of him, totally spent. Unlike, apparently, Gio, who came to lay beside her, looking totally unfazed. It took her a second to realize that, unlike her, he hadn't come.

She frowned, reaching out to his jutting erection.

“There's no need for that,” he said, a finger caressing the V between her eyes.

She started to get up, but he held her down. “I, um...do you want me to take care

of that?” Which was a stupid question. Of course he did. What man would want to sleep with a boner like that.

“Yes, Jazzy, I would.” There was a smile to his voice. In a tone she wasn’t used to from him. Until now, he had been demanding, arrogant, and sometimes insufferable, but not...playful like this. It made her wonder who the real Giovanni Detta was.

She expected him to demand a blowjob, which she was actually looking forward to, but he surprised her again by flipping her onto her stomach.

He lifted her hips up and slammed his cock back inside her.

“Just relax and enjoy the ride, *bella*.”

And what a ride it was.

CHAPTER 12

JAZZY

When Jazzy woke up the next morning, it was to an empty bed. She grabbed her phone from the nightstand, ready to check on her sister, when she discovered that Carmen had returned home. She had left her a message that she was doing fine—which Jazzy found hard to believe—and telling her to enjoy her honeymoon.

So much for a honeymoon when your husband left you to fend for yourself on the morning after your wedding. Not that she had really expected for them to act like newlyweds. After all, they were forced together by circumstances, but it still hurt that Gio hadn't even bothered to stay in bed with her.

After a quick shower, she went searching for some clothes and discovered that her clothes had already been brought over. Someone had even cleared out space in the

closet and dresser for her. She put on some jeans and a T-shirt and headed downstairs.

There were people in the hallway, removing decorations that still lingered from the wedding the night before. There was no trace of Gio. In the living room, she was greeted by a burly woman in a gray dress and an even grayer bun.

“Good morning, Mrs. Detta.”

Right, that's me now. “Morning.”

The woman gave her a tentative smile. “I am Thea, your housekeeper. Your breakfast is ready. Please follow me.”

Jazzy's stomach made a growling sound when she smelled fresh baked bread. She took a seat at the lavishly set kitchen table while Thea poured her fresh orange juice.

“Nice to meet you, Thea. And thank you, but you don't have to tend to me like that. Really, I'm perfectly capable of pouring my own juice.” She ended with a smile as to soften her words.

Judging by Thea's smile, she wasn't insulted in the least. “I will return after your breakfast and show you your new home, Mrs. Detta.”

Jazzy winced. She wasn't used to this “Mrs.” stuff. The housekeeper at home had been there since she was a little kid, and none of them were ever formal. It just felt weird. “Could you please call me by my name, Thea? Jocelyn; or Jazzy, for short.”

Another smile and then a nod followed.

“So, um, did you see my husband this morning?”

“Yes. After breakfast, he retreated to the library for a meeting with his brothers.”

In a meeting, huh? Well, if he didn't want to join her for breakfast, she sure wasn't going to ask him.

She looked up when Thea slid her an envelope. Before she could ask her about it, the woman had left.

Jazzy opened the envelope, not sure what to expect. When she saw the black American Express card, she was speechless for a second. Then her muteness changed into rage, which eventually turned into a plan. She had to keep in mind that Gio was rich. Obscenely rich. A man like him expected his wife to spend his money, and lots of it too, apparently. Gina, for example, would all but expect a Centurion card from her husband. So maybe she shouldn't be surprised that Gio had put her in the same class as her cousin. She decided to give him the benefit of the doubt.

After she had some delicious blueberry pancakes, Jazzy decided not to wait for Thea, but take a tour around her new home herself. It was bigger than the Rossi mansion, with more bedrooms than she could count, a dining room, a parlor, classic wood paneling, and a vast private garden in the back.

When she encountered Thea again—this time, while she was dusting the cabinets in the living room—she learned that Gio had moved over here just a month ago. Another thing she discovered was that the house hadn't been turned into a winter wonderland just for the wedding: it was the default décor. The interior designer obviously loved the colors white and creme, since she had basically turned the house into a barren winter landscape. The only color and imagination Jazzy had come across so far, was the colorful abstract artwork in the bedrooms. The place lacked any kind of character, which was a shame because the Victorian had the potential to be a real, cozy home, complete with brick walls and a fireplace and all.

The only personal touch was a family picture above the chimney. The resemblance between Gio and his brothers was unmistakable. They all had the same piercing blue eyes. Save for Hector, of course, who was included in the frame as well. His eyes were a moss green.

Having explored enough for the day, Jazzy went into the hallway to get her coat when the doorbell rang.

Thea was there in an instant, opening the door. "Hello, can I help you, Miss?" she asked, stepping back to let the visitor in.

A tall blonde with a Louis Vuitton suitcase sailed past the housekeeper. “Somebody needs to pay the cab,” she announced, without a how-do-you-do. After giving Jazzy a curt onceover, her cat-eyed sunglasses pinned Thea down. “You. I want an espresso. Make it a double.”

“I...” Thea gave Jazzy a helpless look.

The blonde dropped her bag and put her glasses on her head. She looked around curiously, which made Jazzy suspect she hadn’t been here before.

“Where’s Gio? Oh, never mind. I want to surprise him. Take my bag to his room.”

“Please.” Jazzy slowly pronounced the word, introducing the woman to it.

A perfectly trimmed, cocked brow was her answer. “Excuse me?”

“Excuse me could work as well, but I was going for ‘please.’ You know, the word you use when asking someone to do something for you.”

“Cute. Obviously, you don’t know who I am.”

Sadly, Jazzy had a feeling she did. She just wasn’t sure how to act on it yet. No woman expected to have to deal with her husband’s lover in her home the day after her wedding, if ever.

Still, she said, “Not only don’t I know who you are, but I don’t care.” Which was true. “And Thea over there—yes, she has a name—isn’t your maid, so you’ll have to make your own damn espresso.”

The blonde put her hands on her slim hips. “I am Vanessa Montgomery. Giovanni’s girlfriend.”

“Nice to meet you, Vanessa. I’m Jocelyn Detta.” She hadn’t decided on whether to use his last name yet. Guess this was as good a time as any to make that decision.

“Ah. His sister?” Vanessa’s demeanor changed in a flash when a smile lit up her face as she put on her “meet the family” mask.

Copying Vanessa's fake smile, Jazzy looked her right in the eye. "No. His wife."

CHAPTER 13

GIO

Gio studied some documents Jackson had handed over to him, but his mind kept drifting off. It had been a strange experience waking up next to a woman. A new, though not unpleasant, one. Jazzy had been plastered all over his chest, one knee draped over him, her head tucked under his chin. It hadn't been easy to pry her off of him without waking her up. Not wanting to leave his bed at sunrise was another new experience. His body hadn't wanted to leave her, but he forced himself to get out, nonetheless. He had already woken her up twice during the night, enjoying her cries when he took her. She was loud in bed and so responsive. So damn responsive.

He couldn't let himself get distracted by her. He was head of this family and had certain obligations. Destroying the fucker's life who'd murdered their parents, for starters. Jocelyn would become a distraction if he spent time with her.

He couldn't allow anyone or anything to come between avenging his parents. He had already lost control with her last night, his need for her seemingly insatiable. It couldn't happen again. Not during the day when he had to fucking concentrate on the decline and fall of Oscar Bianchi.

“Should you even be here?” Jackson asked.

“What?”

His brother sighed. “As I asked you this morning, should you be here instead of with your new bride? It *is* technically your honeymoon, after all. Also, you're kind of here but not really here.”

Gio grabbed the documents stating that they now owned Rossi Enterprises; the last domino piece they had to take away to ensure Bianchi's fall. It was time to effectively cut off all and every money supply to Bianchi. No money meant no power. And no power, to a man like Bianchi, was the beginning of the end.

“Let's not forget why he got married in the first place,” Vince said. “We have what we needed. It's time to flush out that snake.”

Judging by Jackson's frown, he didn't agree. Then again, Gio knew he had taken a liking to Jazzy. Also, of the four of them, Jax was the least damaged. He had only been a baby when their parents were murdered, and they were put in a home. His little brother didn't have any memories, let alone nightmares, from those three months in the group home. Unlike the rest of them, he had left that place unscathed. Being so young also had its disadvantages, though. Jackson had no recollection of his parents. He didn't remember his mother's warm smile, nor her soft voice singing lullabies to him. Gio didn't know what was worse: remembering or not.

“Jazzy will be fine.” He had given Thea instructions. “What about Luca? Any news on his case?”

“Nothing to get him out,” Jax said with a deep sigh. He'd taken it the hardest when their brother had gone to jail a year

ago. As a lawyer, he'd lost faith in the legal system for a while.

It was almost comical how they had fought their way from the slums of Tenderloin to the top, making casualties when they had to, and Luca—casino owner and entrepreneur—ended up behind bars for tax fraud. Something he didn't even commit.

“But we have some leads,” Jax continued. “Whoever framed Luca must have been someone close to him. I put the same firm on his case as the ones that found out who killed Mom and Dad.”

“Vince is right,” Gio agreed. “It's time for Phase Two. Where are we on Bianchi's collectors?”

“As of today, every last one of them has transferred his debts to us. Since Rossi Enterprises will no longer be funding Bianchi, which was a stupid deal to begin with, he will have to go look for other ways to pay for his debts. Rumor has it that he went ballistic yesterday when he learned that he's lost another government contract.”

Bianchi had been losing a lot of contracts over the past year. They had been chipping away at Bianchi's lifestyle bit by bit, making him a nobody in the eyes of his peers. Making him no longer untouchable when they would exact their revenge. Killing the man in cold blood would be a far too clean and easy death. They wanted to take away everything he had. Throwing him out on the street cold, alone, and miserable.

Every man had a weak spot. And for Bianchi, it was his reputation as a reputable businessman. The bastard had started off as a made man, like Gio's father, but over the past decade, he had made the transition to becoming legit. He liked shaking hands with the mayor, and playing golf with San Francisco's creme de la creme. A world in which you were someone's best friend one day and could become a pariah the next.

As of today, Oscar “The Knife” Bianchi would become a desperate rabbit, ready to start running for his life in the woods. And Gio was just getting ready to send out the hounds.

They continued to work up until lunch, when they were suddenly disturbed by raised voices. No sooner than that, the door opened, and Hector entered. As usual, there was a scowl on his face.

“You need to get downstairs. We have a situation.”

There was no time for questions as Gio followed behind him. Since his friend looked merely annoyed, it couldn't be that bad.

Gio was confronted with the situation the second he walked down the stairs.

“Vanessa. What are you doing here?” It was a justified question, as he'd ended things with her weeks ago.

The second she heard his voice, she spun around, staring daggers at him. He couldn't care less though. His attention was focused on his wife. Jazzy had folded her arms in front of her chest and gave him a smile. Somehow, he doubted it was meant to be a pleasant one.

“Our condo had a For Sale sign, so I came here to surprise you. Instead, I was the one getting the surprise, learning that you got *married!*” Vanessa shrieked.

Had her voice always been this aggravating? “*My* condo,” he corrected her.

She ignored that and continued her rant. “I leave a few weeks for a photo shoot, and you get married behind my back?”

Jazzy grabbed her jacket from the hook. “I'll let you two *ex-lovers* hash this out.”

Ironically, the one woman who did have the right to ask him for an explanation, didn't. Jazzy was already at the door.

“Where do you think you're going?” Vanessa snarled, raising her hand and stepping toward Jazzy's back.

“Touch her and I will end you.” Gio tried to rein in his rage at his ex-lover's unjustified display of jealousy.

“I...you don't mean that,” Vanessa started to stutter.

Jazzy spun around, coming face-to-face with Vanessa's claw. She looked surprised, then scowled and took a defensive stand. Judging by her annoyed look, she was waiting for what he would do. Part of him admired her for leaving this for him to handle instead of giving him shit. Another part was oddly disappointed, which made no sense.

"I ended things between us weeks ago. I put my condo up for sale. Take a fucking hint. You ever show up here again, disrupting my household, disrespecting my wife, and I will end your career. All it takes is a phone call. Don't test me."

Vanessa gasped, staring at him for a moment with her mouth hanging open, before she grabbed her suitcase and left, slamming the door behind her.

His wife glared at him, then swiped something—which looked like the credit card he gave her—from the counter and left as well. Her silence was louder than any door shut violently.

Gio didn't go after her. Obviously Jazzy needed some time to cool off. He didn't have to ask Hector to follow her. Because no matter what, he would never let her go unprotected. She was a Detta now.

CHAPTER 14

JAZZY

Jazzy drove into a parking lot near Pier 39 for her meeting with Tommie. As she walked up to the Eagle Cafe, she thought about the phrase that hell hath no fury like a woman scorned. Even though technically *she* wasn't the one scorned this afternoon, she still felt like unleashing hell on someone. The reasons were simple. First and foremost, the confrontation with Vanessa and Gio, which had been like a scene straight from a bad drama. She didn't care that apparently her husband had finished things with the blonde weeks ago. No, she didn't care one bit. What she *did* care about was the way the blonde—obviously a model, judging by her perfect figure and reference to a photo shoot—looked. She was gorgeous. Perfect body, perfect hair. How did Gio go from that perfection to Jazzy? Not that she was some insecure twit, but still. She was curvy; short even, compared to leggy Vanessa, and a brunette.

Their wedding night had been packed with passion, their chemistry off the charts. But would that be enough to keep him while he had women like this Vanessa chasing after him. And why did she even care? That chafed her the most: that she gave a damn. In the end, their marriage was one of convenience. She was nothing more than a business deal to him and she would do good to remind herself of that. The second aggravating thing this morning was that she still hadn't been able to reach her sister.

A million things went through her head as she walked into her favorite cafe on the wharf.

"There's my girl," Tommie greeted her. He had secured them a place in the back, overlooking the ocean.

"Hi, little smurf." She gave him a kiss on the cheek as she dropped on the chair across him.

"Admit it. You love my new hairdo."

Jazzy rolled her eyes. "Fine. It suits you."

Which it really did. The ice blue hair suited him, just as his eyebrow piercings did. Never judge a book by a cover should be Tommie's motto, because under that blue Mohawk, ratty jeans, and all over bad boy look, there lay a commercial shark. Of the two of them, she was doing most of the coding for their program, and he was taking on the creative side such as marketing, but also the finances.

Sadly, neither of them had the money to bring their software to life. Not yet. She couldn't ask her grandfather to finance their business, because he would find the thought of a female Rossi working utterly ridiculous. And Tommie barely made enough rent working in a computer shop. If it hadn't been for his scholarship, he would have never gotten into college, but instead, had become a super villain, ruling the world.

"So, you know how I've been looking for a place for us that isn't too expensive or in a too shady neighborhood?"

"Uh-huh." She waved at the waitress in the back, mouthing that she wanted coffee. "How's the search going?"

He made a face. “Not too great.”

“That’s what our business plan is for, right? To convince the bank to give us a start-up loan.”

“Hmm.” He clicked on his laptop and showed her some charts.

All the while, as she was discussing their business plan, her mind kept drifting back to Gio. And Vanessa. It ate her up from the inside not knowing whether she could expect something like that happening again. Or, even worse, him going behind her back to pick things up with Vanessa, or another woman. It was obviously time to set some ground rules between them. As she pondered the happenings of that afternoon, she realized she had made a mistake. Her mindset that this marriage was only temporary wasn’t helping her at all. In fact, it may even give Gio the idea that it was okay to sleep around on her.

“I have to go.”

Tommie stopped mid-sentence. “What?”

Jazzy put some bills on the table and grabbed her bag. “Sorry, I forgot that I have to do something. Can we finish this next week? At my place?”

Without waiting for a response, she gave his puzzled face a kiss and left.

“Welcome home, Mrs. D—” Thea cleared her throat. “I mean, Jocelyn.”

“Hi, Thea.” Jazzy hung her coat on the rack and glanced around. Apart from a cleaning maid in the corridor, the house seemed empty. “Is my husband around?”

“No, he left not long after you.”

Guess their talk had to wait. “Okay, I’ll be working in the living room.” She situated herself on the leather couch near

the fireplace.

Half an hour later, her butt started to hurt from the unyielding leather and she got up. She did some stretching and relocated to the plush carpet in front of the fireplace. Still, she put a cushion under her butt before she started typing away.

She tried to reach her sister again, but Carmen didn't pick up the phone. Maybe she really was in San Diego, or maybe she had had a fight with Franco. It was really awful to hope for someone's marriage to fall apart, but it was exactly what Jazzy did. It was killing her to be this helpless, all the while knowing her sister was in pain. Unfortunately, all she could do was text Carmen that she was there for her if she needed help.

She was another two hours into coding, and ready to take a break, when a shadow fell over her.

"Why are you sitting on the floor?"

She looked up to see Gio towering over her. He looked amazing in his dark suit and black tie.

"Because your couch is like a rock," she answered, as she crawled on her feet. "We need to talk."

"Words no man ever likes to hear from a woman," he said, loosening his tie.

"That's unfortunate for you, but I've done some thinking, and I believe we may have started off on the wrong foot."

"And what foot might that be?"

"The way our marriage came to be, and the expectations you might have. I don't care if this was an arranged marriage and that it has an expiration date." She ignored his furrowed brow as she mentioned the last part. "I won't stand for my husband cheating on me."

He dropped his tie and rounded on her until her back almost hit the wall. "Are you accusing me of being unfaithful?"

"No, I'm not," she hastened to reassure him. But she did want to make sure that he would know where she stood on the

matter. “But I do want to make something clear. I am not my sister. For example, if my husband would cheat on me, I wouldn’t turn a blind eye to it. I would make him regret it.”
Please take the hint.

His hand ended up in the nape of her neck, playing with a few strands of hair. “Would you now. And what is it that you would do?”

She gave him a sweet smile. “I would return the favor.”

The amusement fled his eyes, being replaced with a chill. For a second, his grasp on her skull tightened, but then he relaxed. “No, you wouldn’t.”

“Are you sure about that?” she challenged him, not backing down. She wasn’t going to put up with a string of Gio’s mistresses. If he couldn’t keep it in his pants for two years, that would be on him. She would leave his sorry ass, consequences be damned.

“Yes, I am.” The hand around her waist pulled her closer to him. “See, if you should return the favor, as you put it, you would only have the death of another man on your hands. Because I will fucking take apart any man who touches you. With my own bare hands.”

“Really? Yet, you let that douchebag who touched me live.” Huh, guess she still was upset about that.

“You weren’t a Detta then. You are now. Touching you means touching me.”

“Can we get back to the subject at hand?” His hand drifting up to her breast was really distracting. And this was not the time to be distracted. She was trying to take a stand, damn it.

“Sure. You don’t want me fucking other women.” He lifted her off her feet and walked over to the couch, putting her on his lap. “Speaking of fucking others. Who is he?”

She gave him a puzzled look. “Who is whom?”

“That fucker you’ve been with all morning at the wharf.”

“You had me followed?”

“Of course I had you followed. You’re my wife. It’s my job to protect you. And don’t deflect my question. Who is he? Did you go see him to return the favor, as you just threatened me with?”

It took her a sec to follow his train of thought. Then she felt like slapping him. How dare he accuse her? “No, you ass. I did not go see Tommie to sleep with him. Tommie is my former college mate and business partner and—”

“Business partner?”

He didn’t seem to like the sound of that. Well, tough.

“Yes, business partner. Associate, or whatever fancy word you would like to use. Not that it matters. See, this isn’t about Tommie, who is gay, by the way.” She wasn’t sure why she mentioned that last part. It might be because of the arctic look on Gio’s face, and the fact that he had threatened to murder any man who touched her. There was no way she was going to put Tommie in harm’s way.

“Don’t give a fuck. He still has a dick.”

“Really?” When his scowl didn’t disappear, she shook her head.

“I don’t want my wife to work. There’s no need for you to.”

How did they go from arguing about his ex-mistress to her working? “Yeah well, I don’t want to wake up alone, like some cheap trick for the night, but what can you do?” she countered. She hadn’t meant to lash out like that—it was totally off topic—but she just couldn’t hold it in any longer. First, the Centurion card, and now this. It was becoming more and more apparent that he really did see her place in his life as a trophy wife, and nothing more.

When she saw the contemplative look on his face, she sighed. “Look, let’s just forget it, okay? Obviously, we have a different view on what a marriage looks like. But just so we’re clear: I am not my sister.” It hadn’t escaped her notice that he hadn’t promised to actually be faithful. “You choose to have someone like Vanessa in your house? That’s fine with me. Just

don't expect me to stay and watch." She looked around for her bag. "In fact, I think I'm going to leave." It must be a record; married for hardly a day, and already leaving her husband.

Then he started laughing.

It was maddening, really! She managed to get in a few thumps to his chest before he grabbed her hands, making it impossible for her to hit him again. All she could do was give him a glare.

Then his face turned serious. "I haven't touched another woman since we've been married."

"I should hope not. We've been married for all of a day."

He clasped his hands on her face, pulling her close to him. "You're the only woman I've brought to this house. Just my wife, no one else. But if you want to hear the words, I'll say them. I'm not going to fuck around on you. Now that that's been established, it's time for your punishment."

"Punishment?"

He nodded. "You slapped me. I cannot let that go unanswered. There is no place for violence in a marriage."

Her jaw dropped, until she caught the gleam in his eyes. So, he liked to play, did he? She cast her eyes down, looking properly chastised. "You are right, *my lord*. I should be punished." When she looked up, there was a smoldering fire in his eyes.

"Take your shirt and bra off."

Her fingers trembled as she did what he requested.

"Clasp your hands behind your back and don't let go. I want you to take whatever I give you." He moved her legs until she was straddling him, his muscled leg between hers.

He grabbed the globes of her ass and pulled her closer. Right up until he could latch onto her nipple.

She let out a squeak when he bit her left nipple.

As he treated her right nipple to the same painful experience—biting, licking, nibbling, until the bud was

throbbing from a mixture of pain, heat, cold, and pleasure— she couldn't stop herself from riding his legs. She needed friction, damn it.

She expected him to ask her to strip, but he didn't. His hand simply slid inside her panties, going straight for her core. When she let out a gasp, he swatted both her breasts this time, pulling her tortured nipple inside his mouth until it hurt.

“Please...” She knew she was begging, but she didn't care.

His answer was to pump two fingers inside her wet core. Her back arched and she almost pulled back her arms, to put them on his broad shoulders so she could ride him, but somehow she managed to hold back.

Clearly, Gio wasn't finished with his punishment, because suddenly, he slipped the slick tip of a finger in her ass. She jumped up at the sensation, her eyes going wide from fear for a second.

“I don't do anal, asshole.”

“You shouldn't use anal and asshole in the same sentence. It gives me ideas.”

Still, he pulled his finger back, circling back to her clit, pumping his fingers in and out of her vagina.

“Soon,” he said. “Your ass belongs to me. Every piece of your body belongs to me.”

Right that second, she couldn't agree more. She would agree to anything, as long as he kept moving his fingers in and out of her pussy and allowed her to grind against him.

Yeah, right there. That's the spot.

Almost there...

Almost...

She practically whined when he pulled his fingers out, right when she was about to come.

“Get on your knees.”

She was on her knees, with a hand on his fly, in an instant. He didn't have to guide her, she knew what he wanted. What she had been looking forward to since the moment they met.

He was already hard, his cock straining against his briefs. She sucked the angry head for a few seconds, before she felt his hand fisting her hair.

"No teasing," he warned her. "Suck me. Suck me real good, and I'll let you come before the night is over."

She went to work eagerly, sucking him from the root to the tip. She could feel herself getting more and more wet. A throbbing pain and pleasure coursed through her body, asking for release. She moved her hand that wasn't latched on Gio's dick to her panties.

"Don't." His voice was like a whip. "Don't you fucking dare make yourself come. The only one filling your pussy tonight is me, got that?"

When she didn't answer fast enough, he gripped her hair, and pulled her mouth off his cock. She nodded, and licked her lips. Her heart fluttered when his eyes dropped to her mouth, making her bite her bottom lip.

"Fuck," he hissed. "Put your other hand on your breast. I want to see you working your nipple. Pinch and pull it until it hurts. Do it until you make me come."

What was it about him that made her want to obey him? But she couldn't deny it. She loved the way he handled her.

By the time he came in her throat, her tortured nipple was screaming out in delicious pain. With a sigh, she let go of his dick and her breast, leaning her head on his thigh. She wouldn't admit it, but she liked it when he petted her, complimenting her.

"You did good, *bella*. Really good. Now, get dressed. I'm taking you out for dinner. No shower for you." His thumb wiped over her bottom lip. "I like knowing you still smell like me, and are all wet, while you sit next to me."

CHAPTER 15

JAZZY

Apparently, getting head had worked up her husband's appetite.

“Do I need to put on a dress?” She wasn't really up to dining at some high-end restaurant in Union Square, but if he did, she couldn't show up there in jeans either.

“No.” His gaze raked over her, lingering a bit longer on her breasts. “I'll be right back.”

Jazzy took a brush through her hair, then put on some makeup, a black denim skirt, and a silver silk top.

When Gio emerged from the dressing room, she almost did a double take. Gio in a custom-made suit was hot, but casual-looking Gio in black jeans and a gray V-neck Henley was something else. It made him look younger, more carefree. She was suddenly happy with her choice of outfit. Hopefully it

would send out a message that they were a couple, because she really didn't want to deal with any other women drooling over him.

"I didn't know you owned anything other than suits," she joked.

He cocked a brow. "You believed you were the only one owning jeans?"

"I did in this house."

He took something from his pocket. "Turn around."

Jazzy gave him her back and felt a necklace slide on her chest. It was a simple silver one with a key for a pendant.

He pushed aside her hair and kissed her earlobe. "When my father married my mother, he was a made man, working for Scolini. He started at the bottom of that family, until he made it to the top. He wanted to make sure that one day, when he would have his own family, he would be able to provide for them and protect them. Every anniversary, he had the same necklace made for her, starting with a silver one at the beginning of their life together. He told me that a man should only buy jewelry for his wife. To this day, I've lived by that rule."

Jazzy's hand went to the pendant. Unlike Gina, she didn't have an eye for jewelry, but somehow, she doubted it was silver. Maybe white gold. Either way, it was exquisite. "It's beautiful."

He took her to a classic, Italian family restaurant in Hayes Valley named Maria's, complete with white and red checkered tablecloths, bottles of wine, and old-looking ceramics on the wall. The second they stepped inside, and the elderly hostess saw Gio, she beamed.

"Giovanni!" She left her place behind the counter and rushed up to him to give him a hug. Her gleeful eyes then went to Jazzy. "And who is this?"

"Maria." He pulled Jazzy next to him. "This is Jocelyn. My wife."

The woman clasped her hands together, looking surprised and happy at the same time. “Oh, you have found the one! I knew you would. Now you can make little bambinos and ask me to be godmother.”

They exchanged a few more pleasantries before they were seated in a cozy corner in the back.

It didn't take long for Jazzy to order a large funghi pizza, with a salad on the side.

Gio went for the pasta. “I like a woman with a healthy appetite.”

“Yet you dated women who don't eat.” After Vanessa, she had googled him to see what other women would pop up on his arm. Aside from being blondes, they were all models.

“Obviously my taste has improved since then.”

Not sure if he meant that, she decided to change the subject. “I like this place. How did you find it?”

“I used to work here as a busboy.”

She had to check her jaw from dropping. “You? Working as a busboy?”

“I wasn't born a real estate mogul.”

“Not? I mean, I'm surprised to hear that. I just figured you had inherited.”

“Oh, I did inherit from my father, just not any money. The Detta name, however, is still famous in certain circles.”

She knew she was treading into dangerous territory, but she had to ask. “Mobster circles, you mean?”

“Amongst others. He was a known man in his world, of course, but just as famous with any government agency that was after him and the Scolinis. At the time, there was a huge task force set up, just to prevent the different Families from starting a war in San Francisco. In the end, that war happened anyway, and it was probably what got my parents killed.”

“Probably?” She'd read about his father's death. How he ended up a casualty in an underworld war. The same way a lot

of people in his line of work ended. Part of her wanted to ask if Gio intended to follow in his path. It hurt to think of him shot. Then she chided herself for even thinking that far ahead in the future. She had no business going there.

“Probably.” This time his tone was curt.

Okay, definitely a touchy subject, not that she could blame him. She herself still wasn’t able to talk about her parents without tears springing in her eyes.

“So, what happened after your parents’ death? Who raised you?”

“With Scolini and his associates out of the picture, we were left to fend for ourselves. Our only luck was that the ones who took out Scolini were practically decimated themselves. They were either dead or in jail.” She knew what he meant; that it had been the only reason why no one had ended his father’s line by murdering him and his brothers. Picturing him and his brothers as orphans, almost made her reach out to him over the table.

“We were sent to a group home. Not a pleasant place.” The pulse working in his jaw spoke volumes. “No one wants to adopt four boys, let alone mobster progenies. Not that I would have let them. I wasn’t going to allow anyone to change my name. We stayed there for three months, until Caitlin O’Brian.”

She frowned, not having heard that name before.

“Our grandmother from my mother’s side,” he explained. “She’d broken off any contact with our mother, when she married my father. We had only ever seen her from pictures. It had taken her months before she got through all the red tape, but in the end, she managed to become guardian to five boys; my brothers, and Hector. As a single, seventy-year-old widow, she wasn’t an eligible candidate, but our grandmother was nothing if not determined. She died a few years ago.” He looked her straight in the eyes. “She made me promise, on her deathbed, to create more little O’Brians. She never acknowledged our father’s name, and I didn’t have the heart to tell her that my kids would be a Detta.”

Children. She hadn't even thought of that. Things between them had developed so fast. She was on birth control, and didn't plan on stopping with that anytime soon. If she did... A picture of a beautiful little boy with black hair and baby blue eyes popped inside her head. To her surprise, the idea didn't scare her. Someday, yes, she wanted that someday. With the man she chose to be with in the forever kind of relationship. It was hard to imagine that child in her mind not to look like a mini Gio.

She cleared her throat. "She sounds wonderful."

"That she was."

When their dinner arrived, they ate in a comfortable silence. When the waiter came to ask if they wanted dessert, Gio declined.

"I'll have my dessert later."

This made the waiter smile knowingly, and Jazzy glowered at her husband for making her blush. Well, he wasn't the only one able to dole out a punishment. Although she wanted to go home as well, to actually become his dessert, she decided to place an order.

"I'll have the panna cotta, please. I just love that delicious creaminess in my mouth. There's nothing like it."

The waiter left with a grin on his face.

"Playing with fire, *bella*?"

"Whatever do you mean?" She could make innuendos and have him wait as well.

To her shock, he got up and slid in the seat next to her, effectively boxing her in. His fingers started to play with her strands of hair. From the outside, it probably looked innocent; just a man so eager for his woman that he couldn't stand the distance between them.

He placed a finger on her chin, parting her lips. His tongue delved inside, conquering her mouth. She was a slave to his touch, the taste of him, the way he nibbled her lips, bit them, before he took away the sting and turned all gentle and

loving. By the time dessert was served, Jazzy was sure all her bones had melted.

Gio pulled away, allowing the waiter to place her treat and the tiny spoon that accompanied it before her.

Sadly, Jazzy's appetite had changed into wanting something much more carnal. She wanted to get out of this place, now. The only thing stopping her was her pride, and the smirk on Gio's lips. The bastard knew exactly what she was thinking.

"Ah, finally, the treat I've been waiting for all night," she said, taking a spoonful.

She tried to ignore Gio's hand that went underneath her skirt, hidden out of sight. His nose nuzzled her throat.

"How does the panna cotta taste, *bella*? The cream you love so much." The question was followed by a finger slowly flicking over her panties, making her squirm in her seat.

"Delicious." She tried to close her knees, but his hand between her thighs didn't allow that. When he dipped a finger inside her, she could barely hold in her moan.

"I'm glad you like it." His narrowed eyes bespoke his words. The frustration was written all over his face, and for some reason, it made her bolder.

"Oh, I like. I could eat it all night long."

A crooked grin appeared on his handsome face. "All night long, you say?"

For some reason, his words felt like a threat; even a promise, perhaps. But she wouldn't be who she was if she didn't answer the fire in his eyes with fire.

"Oh yeah, baby. I could go all night long. What about you?"

Whatever patience he'd had so far, it ended right that second. He pulled the spoon out of her hand. Before she knew it, she was hauled up, and being ushered out of the restaurant.

“Wait!” She tried to stop him when they stood outside, and he signaled for his chauffeur. “We forgot to pay the check.”

“Maria knows how to charge me.” His words were clipped, his tone harsh.

She gasped at the feral lust she saw in his blue orbits. For a moment, Jazzy feared that she had pushed him too far.

The car pulled over before them and Gio opened the back door. The second they stepped inside, he hauled her over his lap with her back against his chest. There was no foreplay. No more kissing, preparing her. Not that he needed to, her panties were drenched.

His hand disappeared under her skirt again, ripping away her panties.

“Put your hands against the board.”

The moment she braced herself against the privacy divider, he impaled her on his cock and started to pound into her.

He let out a brittle laugh, his fingers gripping her shoulders, a hand planting on her ass with a smack. “All fucking night, *bella*. You will fuck me all night until you are allowed to come.”

Maybe poking the bear hadn’t been the smartest thing to do. She pushed her ass up against him, her globes connecting with his toned stomach.

He added one, two, three fingers to her greedy hole, stretching her even wider.

She bounced up and down on Gio until she could feel he was almost coming.

“That’s it, *bella*. Push your ass against me.”

By the time the car pulled over, she was trembling from unfulfilled desire. Despite him casually tucking his dick into his pants, she could see the fire burning in Gio’s eyes. He was just as affected by this explosion of desire between them as she was. And for some reason, this made her feel powerful, as

never before. For the first time, she believed she could handle this man.

True to his promise, Gio kept her up all night. It was close to dawn when he finally let her come. By then, she was a sweaty, withering mess, panting like crazy. When she finally dropped on top of him, her head on his chest, she closed her eyes.

“Jocelyn?”

She looked up, surprised by his sudden serious tone.
“Yes?”

“Don’t ever threaten to leave me again.”

Not sure how to respond to that, all she did was nod.

CHAPTER 16

GIO

Gio was halfway into a meeting with Jackson and his account manager when his secretary interrupted them.

“I’m sorry to disturb you, Mr. Detta, but I just received a call from the bank about an unusual transaction with one of your credit cards. I wanted to inform you first before I canceled the card and called the police.”

He had a suspicion which one of his credit cards was in question. He couldn’t suppress a grin when he thought about the equally unusual person using it.

“I’ll take care of it, Gale. There’s no need to cancel it. It must be the new card I gave to my wife a few weeks ago.”

She blinked when she heard he was married and her eyes slid to his left hand where he was sporting a ring, but she was too professional to ask any questions.

When she closed the door behind him, he called Hector.

He was greeted with a curt, “Yeah?”

“I heard my wife went on a shopping spree today,” he said, to confirm she’d been the one using the card.

“She sure did. Your woman is determined to feed every shelter in San Francisco.”

Now, that was surprising. When he’d expected her to go on a shopping spree, he’d expected it to be of the retail kind.

Hector cursed under his breath. “Damn it, woman, put that box down. It’s too heavy for you.”

“You better not be yelling at my woman,” Gio warned him, because friend or not, no one yelled at his wife but him.

“I was yelling at Mary. Fuck.” A few more expletives followed. Hector loved to curse. “Give me a battle zone any day over this shit.”

Gio wondered what had a former Marine cursing. He’d asked his friend to take on Jazzy’s security detail personally instead of assigning it to one of his employees. That is, until Hector’s best bodyguard had returned from a mission. He wouldn’t trust Jazzy’s safety to anyone else. Hector had always had his back and would take a bullet for his wife.

“What’s going on, Hector?” When he heard a man yelling in the background, Gio rose from his feet. “You can finish this,” he told Jackson, and went for his car.

Hector seemed to be running. “Some asshole came inside with a knife, looking for his wife and kids. Had I mentioned that your wife is at a women’s shelter in the bad part of town?”

“No, you haven’t. Text me the address,” Gio clipped. “I’m on my way.”

He arrived at the shelter, only to find Hector toe-to-toe with a not-so-timid-after-all Mary.

“Please stand back,” she said, pointing her finger at him. “You are scaring these women.”

Gio looked past her shoulder, seeing the group of said women sitting in a waiting room area, watching with concern in their eyes. Their gaze went from Hector to a man huddled against the wall, holding his arm and groaning in pain.

“Why? Because of my scars?” Hector snarled.

Mary looked confused. “What? I don’t see what a few paltry scars have to do with anything. They are scared because you broke that man’s arm and, had I not stopped you, would have kicked him within an inch of his life. In case you haven’t noticed: this is a women’s shelter. A lot of these women have fled a life filled with violence. Please back off and let the police handle the rest.”

Hector folded his arms in front of his chest, the heat instantly leaving his eyes. He stepped back when a police cruiser stopped in front of the building.

Gio was less quickly placated. He searched the room for his wife. Just then, Jazzy turned the corner. She was accompanied by a teenager she was discussing the best game console with.

He had to remind himself that she looked fine. Perfectly fine, even. It was difficult to admit to himself that she had given him a scare. When he heard that there had been a man with a knife anywhere near her vicinity, he had panicked. Although he knew Hector wouldn’t let anything happen to her, he still had to see her with his own eyes.

“What are you doing here?” He hadn’t meant for his words to come out that harsh, but he couldn’t stop himself.

Unlike the women behind Mary, his own woman didn’t look afraid at all. Her scowl told him she didn’t appreciate his tone.

“I came to fix the problem with the internet router.”

Gio tried to keep his temper in check. He really did. But didn’t she understand the danger she had been in? “There was a man in here with a knife.”

She glanced at the prick who was being hauled away by cops.

“Yes, well. It’s a women’s shelter. Sadly, stuff like that happens here sometimes.”

It didn’t sound like this was an incident. “Why doesn’t this place have security?”

“Not enough funds,” she explained, while coming over to him. “The usual cutbacks have put a strain on the place. Most of the money goes into providing beds, clothing, and food. The basics. There simply isn’t any money left to have a round-a-clock security guard.”

He pulled her into a corner near the front desk. “You can’t be here without any security.”

Her eyes flashed, ready to spit fire. “Listen, Italian stallion.”

“I’m half-Irish.”

A snort. “Yeah well, I’m half-angel, but no one has ever called me that. I come here every week. Don’t you even think that you can keep me from this place.”

“Hector.” He called over his shoulder. “Take care of it.” He knew that was all he had to say. It had always been like that between them; a few words, or even a glance, was enough.

The fire in Jazzy’s eyes died, turning into surprise and then into joy. She jumped into his arms, hugging him. “Thank you. Thank you so much.” Her smile lit up the whole room.

He wasn’t sure why, but he liked seeing her happy. He also liked her playing with the buttons of his shirt idly, although he doubted that she was even aware of what she was doing.

She seemed more relaxed around him, speaking animatedly of this shelter she was obviously passionate about. He wouldn’t be who he was if he didn’t try to capitalize on that.

“Hector, why don’t you let Mary choose the security guard? I’m sure she can choose who would be a good match.”

Judging by the tightening of Hector's lips, he didn't like his suggestion one bit. But, as Gio would be paying for it, he wouldn't protest.

When Jazzy's smile turned even bigger, he knew he'd made the right call.

"Oh, you are getting so lucky tonight," she whispered.

He so was. They both were.

CHAPTER 17

JAZZY

Jazzy woke up in the middle of the night, feeling disorientated. She'd spent a good deal of the evening giving Gio head and had loved every minute of it. She'd fallen asleep absolutely satiated, so she wasn't sure what was wrong, until she heard a yell.

Gio was tossing and turning, the sheets only covering him up to his hips. Beads of sweat covered his body. A body that was writhing, as if in agony.

“Get the fuck off me.”

Startled by his snarl, she sat up, unsure as what to do. From previous experiences with Mary, she knew to not wake someone up during a nightmare.

“No! Get the fuck away from me!”

When he let out a cry, she couldn't stand it any longer. She gently started rubbing his shoulder in the hope to wake him up. He started shivering and she slid down next to him, putting an arm around his waist. That seemed to do the trick because his body suddenly stilled.

It happened in the blink of an eye. Gio rolled, pinning her to the mattress and pressing his full weight down on her. A hand went to her throat as he bared his teeth. His eyes were like molten ice, shimmering with rage.

She froze, and her heart skyrocketed when she realized Gio wasn't awake yet. She waited for him to recognize her.

And waited.

Please, please, snap out of it.

“Gio?”

He was staring into her eyes, but she wasn't sure if he was seeing her.

“It's okay. It's just a bad dream.”

His chest heaved and then he blinked. Still, he didn't utter a word. It took a full minute before she dared to speak again.

“Gio?” she whispered. “You're kind of crushing me.”

It was as if she had spoken magical words. He let go of her throat immediately. His legs moved over her thighs and he braced his arms next to her head. Slowly he started kissing her neck, his nose nuzzling the spot where his hand had been just seconds before.

There was a silent question in his eyes. Almost as if he was asking for permission to continue. She didn't like seeing him vulnerable, unsure as to how she'd feel if he kept caressing her. There might be things unresolved or left unspoken between them, but one thing she was sure of; since the moment she had laid eyes on Giovanni Detta, there hadn't been a moment she hadn't wanted him. So, she did the only thing she could do, what her body urged her to do.

Her hand found his hardness, stroking it, while her other hand pulled him closer.

“Make love to me, Gio. Please, take me.”

A part of her expected him to take the remnants of his rage out on her body. To manhandle her, take her roughly. That wasn't what happened though. He placed the gentlest of kisses on her lips and then spread her thighs. With one thrust, he relentlessly pounded inside her, all the while, kissing her slowly.

She took it all. His pain, his rage, the deep thrusts, as if he was marking her. When he finally came, he took her with him, his tongue deep in her mouth, muffling her moan.

With a swift move, he pulled off of her, his harsh panting sounding loud in the night.

Jazzy draped herself over his body, relieved when he didn't pull away. “It's okay,” she said softly, placing a kiss on his chest. “It's okay.”

She knew what it was like to not be able to speak about some things. Things that were so dirty, evil, that even putting them into words felt like a dent on your soul. Some things were better left unsaid. Buried deep within you. In a place so deep, hidden, and dark, no one would ever be able to shed a light on it, exposing it out in the open.

“If you ever need to talk about it, I'm here.”

He didn't say anything. Instead, he kept stroking her hair, and that was enough.

When she woke up the next morning, it was to an empty bed. The side of his bed was cold; his nightmare must have really rattled him. The man she thought she had married, the man she had believed she had all figured out, had more layers than an onion. Every day, more and more, she realized that he wasn't just the man he showed the world; the real estate mogul

dubbed as Black Ice. Because deep inside of Giovanni Detta, the fiery pits of hell were burning.

After a shower, she put on some baggy jeans and a black tank top. Today she was meeting up with Tommie again to go over their business plan they were going to present to the bank.

She sent Tommie a message with her address as she went into the kitchen to have breakfast. As usual, Thea had outdone herself. Her blueberry pancakes were to die for. Which meant Jazzy would definitely have to go for a run in the afternoon.

When she took her laptop and a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice into the living room, the first thing she noticed was the new couch. A surge of warmth flooded through her when she saw that it was a big, brown, plush one and a delight to sit on. It surprised her that Gio had even remembered her complaining about it, let alone had it changed. She couldn't help but smile at his gesture.

It wasn't for another hour, when she was deep into coding, that the doorbell rang, and Tommie was led inside by Thea.

Tommie looked his usual self; ragged jeans, black t-shirt, and a postman bag which held his prized possession, his laptop.

"So, who did you have to sleep with to get in here?" he joked.

"I, um, actually live here."

"You live here? Are you kidding me?" he asked, looking around with his mouth hanging open.

"If you don't close your mouth, you're going to catch flies," she teased. So, she might not have told him about her personal life much. Such as her grandfather being a former bank for the mob. Or that she was married to a semi-legit mobster progeny going white-collar. Or, okay, she hadn't told him anything.

Tommie glowered at her. "You let me pay for lunch, you shit."

“Yeah, thanks about that. Those pumpkin bagels were delish.”

“You’ve slept on my ratty couch,” he argued, his eyes still roaming around the living room that looked like a page from a magazine.

“You may not want to say that out loud,” she warned him.

“Why not? Someone here in the *Scarface* mansion going to make me sleep with the fishes?” he scoffed.

“Touch her and I’ll take you apart myself. There won’t be anything left for the fishes.”

Tommie spun around to where the voice had come from.

She scowled at Gio, who’d just walked in. “That’s not funny.”

“Since it’s not a joke, I should think not.” His cold gaze raked over her startled friend.

When Hector joined them from the balcony, Tommie gulped—actually gulped. Then again, as head of security, looking menacing was Hector’s job. His large frame, muscle on top of muscle, and perpetual scowl would intimidate anyone. Well, anyone but her since she had fought the devil himself and prevailed. Hector might look menacing on the outside, but he had nothing on Marco, who was beautiful on the outside, but rotten inside.

Don’t go there, Jazzy. Keep that memory locked inside your mental box.

“Don’t like *Scarface*, huh?” Hector growled.

Tommie started to stammer. “Um, I actually loved that movie. Just...I just didn’t think...I mean...”

Jazzy took pity on him. “Will you guys stop it? He’s here with me.”

Gio stood next to her in two short steps, his arm around her waist, pulling her into him. “And why exactly is that?”

It was impossible to miss the edge in his voice. He clearly didn't like Tommie around her. Well, too bad. For the time being, this was her house too. She could bring around anyone she liked.

"Gio, meet my business partner, Tommie Green. We will be using this place as our headquarters, until we find office space."

"There's office space in the Detta Tower. Just take your pick."

Be around him all day so he could watch her from a distance, distracting her? No, thank you very much.

Tommie cleared his throat. "We can't afford an office in that tower, Mr., um, Detta, I presume?"

Gio kissed her slowly, clearly showing his ownership, and she barely controlled an eye roll. "You presume correctly. And obviously I wouldn't charge my own wife."

Her friend's head snapped right back to her. "Wife?"

She sighed. "Tommie, meet Giovanni Detta. My husband." It still felt weird saying that out loud. Also, a part of her felt like a fraud, since their marriage was one of convenience. "Thanks for the offer, by the way, but we're going to decline," she said, getting back to their original topic. "All we need for now is a computer and a flowchart, really. There's enough space in this big house. Space that won't cost us a mint."

"Hector, why don't you show Mr. Green to the living room? I need a minute with my *wife*."

Before Jazzy could protest, Hector led Tommie away. She'd expected her friend to protest, but he was already trailing after the bodyguard. Did he just check out Hector's ass?

When Gio took her by the elbow and guided her up to their bedroom, she knew it was going to take more than a minute.

As soon as he closed the bedroom door behind her, he rounded on her. “Why didn’t you tell him you’re married?”

“I didn’t get around to it.” When he cocked an eyebrow, she added, “Because it’s weird, okay? Tommie knows I’m not an impulsive person. I wouldn’t just jump into the fray like that, marrying a stranger. I guess I just didn’t want him to think less of me.”

He was silent for a moment. “Do you regret it?”

She looked up into his eyes that, as usual, didn’t betray what he was thinking. “No, I don’t.”

“You sound surprised.”

“Maybe I am,” she admitted. “I mean, we kind of had a rocky start, even before we tied the knot. To say the least. I guess I had expected the worst, for some reason.”

His hand cupped her cheek, his thumb stroking it, when she mentioned the rocky start. She didn’t know what made her do it, but she grabbed his hand and placed a kiss on it, silently telling him that she didn’t blame him for that slap weeks ago.

“I don’t like you keeping our marriage from people, like it’s some dirty secret.”

“It wasn’t like that—”

“I don’t like you working with him.”

“Don’t like me working with him, or don’t like me working, period? I’m not a stay-at-home wife, Gio. If that was how you had pictured your perfect little suburban life, you should’ve married Gina or Mary.”

“Yet, here you are, at our home,” he said pointedly. “Staying.”

“That was a really bad joke.”

“You don’t need to work.” He frowned, as if the possibility of a woman working was a foreign concept to him.

“But I like to work.”

“But you don’t *have* to. You’re my wife.” He gestured around, as if pointing out the world to her. “If you need something, just let me know.”

It was like talking to a mule. His thoughts regarding her role as his wife were pretty archaic. It didn’t really surprise her, though. Women were considered an asset—a pretty, shiny object—by most men in their world, existing only to enhance their husband’s status. Her sister’s marriage was a testament to that.

“So what, you thought that my life would just stop during our marriage? Come to a halt, and would only restart when you want it to?” She snorted. “Think again. I do have a brain, you know, and I am planning to use it.”

“On what?”

“Excuse me?” Was he really saying he didn’t think she could think for herself? Would he really be that—?

“What is it that you are using your brain for? What are you working on?” he clarified.

“You really want to know?”

“I wouldn’t have asked if I didn’t.”

She gave him a suspicious look, trying to figure out if he was making fun of her. He seemed to be genuinely interested in her answer, though. Fine. She would give him a chance. Just one.

“We are developing a software program to track down people. It’s a facial recognition software, designed specifically for kids. We intend to use it to find kidnapped and runaway children.” She went on a few moments longer until she realized she was basically presenting him with their business plan. “I’m boring you.”

“No, you’re not. You sound passionate about it. Don’t let anyone ever kill your passion for anything you desire to do.” He pulled her close. “I want you to reconsider my offer for office space.”

“I don’t think—”

He put a finger on her lips, effectively shushing her.
“Just think about it, okay?”

When she nodded, he pulled his finger away.

“Turn around,” he ordered.

“What?”

“Turn around and place your hands on the wall. I want to play.”

Why did his voice want to make her comply? She did as he asked and waited. And waited some more. Anticipation made her body hum and it was difficult to stop herself from turning her head.

The sound of his zipper sliding down somehow seemed obscene in the otherwise quiet room.

“You are my wife.” He grabbed her hair, pulling her head back against him. He bit her shoulder, soothing the pain with wet kisses that trailed to her neck, chin, and mouth.

“Who do you belong to, *bella*?”

She yelped when the palm of his hand landed on her butt.
“To you. I belong to you.”

“Never forget or deny that.”

It wasn't until half an hour later that he finally let her go. Damn him for making her all hot and bothered, and refusing to make her come. No matter how much she'd begged him. He'd said something about “anticipation” and “later” but honestly, she had been too far gone by then to pay any attention to his words.

When she returned to the living room, Tommie gave her a knowing smirk.

“Don't even,” she warned him.

He held up his hands in defense. “Sure, these lips are sealed. Speaking of lips, yours are a bit, um...red and puffy. Maybe you should put some ice on them.”

She threw a magic marker at his head, making him laugh. She plopped down on the couch next to him and grabbed her phone from the coffee table.

“So, you got married, huh? And didn’t even invite me. I’m hurt.” There were a thousand questions in his eyes and she couldn’t blame him.

“It was a kind of a spur-of-the-moment thing,” she said, not ready to tell him yet about the conditions of her marriage. “I promise to tell you all about it. Later.”

He cocked a pierced eyebrow. “Kind of like you still have to explain disappearing to Europe all of a sudden?”

“You don’t know the half of it,” she grumbled, while making another attempt to reach her sister.

“Everything okay?” Tommie looked concerned, probably mimicking her own face.

“It’s Carmen. I haven’t seen her in weeks and can’t get a hold of her. Other than a few texts now and then, that is. I know something’s up with her. In fact, I think”—it wasn’t easy to say this—“that she’s being abused by her husband. A husband who I caught with another woman on my wedding day.”

Tommie winced. “Sounds like a classy guy.”

“I just don’t understand why she stays with him. Why any woman would stay with a man that abuses her.”

“Sometimes people don’t really have a choice.”

“There’s always a choice,” she argued.

He shrugged, not meeting her eyes. “Maybe she doesn’t feel like she deserves anything better.”

She looked up at the strange tone of his voice. He was staring at his computer screen.

“Um, it seems as if you’re speaking from experience,” she said carefully.

Another shrug. “It was a long time ago.” When she gave him a look, he huffed. “Okay, not that long ago. Five years, to be exact. I had just come out of the closet and my family basically ostracized me. All I had was my boyfriend. My ex had loose hands after he had a few drinks. Abuse doesn’t start on the first day, you know. It’s like a disease, a parasite, that takes more of a hold of you every day. First, you tell yourself that it was an incident, that it will never happen again. Then, the second time, when he begs you for forgiveness, you convince yourself that forgiveness is a part of love. Aren’t we taught that love conquers all?

“By the time things escalated, I had no one to fall back on. I actually believed him when he told me that he was the only one who would ever want me. When your own parents don’t speak to you anymore, the two people in the world who are supposed to love you unconditionally, it makes you think about if you even deserve to be loved. Either way”—he took a deep breath—“it took me two broken ribs and a visit to the emergency room before I dumped his ass. Took me a long time to recover from that.”

Jazzy was speechless. She’d had no idea. Five years ago, they hadn’t even met, and she liked to think that if they had, she would have been there for him. Now, she felt like shit for judging her sister for staying with her husband. “I’m truly sorry to hear that.” She kissed his cheek and put her head on his shoulder. “I wish I could have been there for you.”

He sighed and hugged her back. “You are now.”

After Tommie left, Jazzy started feeling restless. She was still horny, and no Gio to be found. Determined to take care of her little problem herself, she went to their bedroom, in search of her favorite toy.

“Looking for this?”

Startled, she jumped up. Her eyes narrowed as she saw Gio wave her bullet vibrator at her.

“What did I say, *bella*? You can have my cock after dinner. Seems someone is in for more punishment. Or perhaps”—he eyed her vibrator—“for a different lesson.”

Now what did that mean? And why did it get her all hot and bothered?

He sat on the edge of the bed and patted his thigh. “Get over my lap.”

“I’m kind of sore already,” she complained.

“I’m not going to pinken your ass any further. I have something else in mind.”

Apparently, he did have a heart after all. She skipped over to him and bent over his lap.

“Are you going to make me come this time?” She jumped up when something cold drizzled over her buttocks. Her breath hitched when his finger slid over her crack a few times, teasing the rim. She never had anal sex before and though she was curious about it, now that the moment seemed to be there, she was a bit nervous. Okay, she was a lot nervous.

“No.”

What? Right, he was answering her question. “That’s not nice,” was all she managed to say when another finger slid inside her pussy. Finally. “Please, Gio, fill me up. Fill me everywhere.” She knew he liked it when she was vocal, voicing her desires.

“Tell me what else you like.”

“This. This right here.” She tried to push her ass back, to gain some leverage and fuck herself on his finger, but he drew his finger away. How was this fair?

“I can’t fill all your holes at the same time, baby. No one man can.”

Why did it have to be one man? When he stiffened underneath her, she realized she had spoken out loud. Oh no.

“I didn’t mean...”

“I think you did.”

Tension grabbed her by the throat and slowly killed her desire. Never before had she voiced her fantasy of being dominated by more than one man. It seemed silly; something she only read about in books. Suddenly, she felt the atmosphere in the room change and she tried to get up, but he kept her down over his lap.

“I’m sorry.” She hated the thought of him thinking that he wasn’t enough. When she had that fantasy, she saw Gio in it. Any other man was just a faceless blur.

“Don’t be. It’s normal to have sexual fantasies.” Judging by his voice and his gentle strokes over her ass, he wasn’t just saying that to save the mood.

“So, do you have them too?” It made her a huge hypocrite, but she hated the thought of him with another woman. In fact, it made her want to murder someone. Starting with him.

His lips burned on her ear when he bent over closer to her. “I’ve already had a threesome *and* foursome,” he whispered.

“I hate you.” The words just popped out of her mouth.

“No, you don’t. But to answer your question, yes, I have fantasies too. They’re just different from yours, as I have more experience.”

Meaning that he’d had a lot of time to already explore his fantasies. She wasn’t sure if she wanted to know the scoop on them. What she did know was how to get a rise out of him.

“Since you have so much more experience, you mind answering a few questions to ease my curiosity?”

He kept stroking her hair as he said, “Ask whatever you want.”

“Did you ever have sex with a man?”

“No.”

“With a goat?”

This earned her a swat on her thighs.

“Hey, that hurt!”

“You don’t know what pain is yet, but continue like that, and you will.”

Um okay. No more bestiality jokes then. “Do you ever think about having sex with multiple women again?” Even though the idea killed her, she had to ask.

“No, I don’t. But I do have other fantasies I will introduce you to soon.”

She couldn’t stop a sigh of relief. She wiggled her butt to get his attention back at the task in hand. “I’m all ears.”

“Good. Take a deep breath.”

“Why do I—”

Oh...No sooner had she voiced that, when he started pushing something hard and unyielding inside her ass.

“Remember when you called me an asshole, and I told you not to use the words anal and asshole in the same sentence with me?”

“Yes,” she bit out.

“This is when I collect on those words, *bella*. Your ass is mine, just like your pussy. Every morning, for the next few weeks, you will give me a morning blowjob, followed by me filling your beautiful ass with a plug.”

“Will I now?” she asked with clenched hands. It was starting to burn now.

“Yes, you will.” He sounded his ever-confident self. How aggravating. “Because at the end, I will reward you.”

Reward her? That, she could live with.

CHAPTER 18

GIO

Gio found out that married life wasn't all that much different from being single, with the exception of having Jazzy's body in his bed every night. A month into his marriage, and he still hadn't sated his lust toward her. In fact, it had gotten worse. Fueled by the fact that she enjoyed sex—a lot—and could actually keep up with him, it had gotten to a point that he wanted to try new things. He wondered if she would like his surprise for her.

“So, do you want me to continue keeping a tab on Green, or is the file enough?”

“Gio?”

He looked up at his brothers and Hector staring at him. They gave him a knowing smirk; well, Jackson and Vince did—Hector rarely smiled.

“Jazzy’s starting a business.” Right from their mansion. Guess he should be thankful he didn’t find her starting out from the garage or basement, like some of her tech idols.

“So, how do you feel about that?” As always, Jackson got straight to the core.

Gio had been surprised to discover his wife actually wanted to work. The women he used to sleep with had been mostly in the business of finding a rich husband. He’d always figured that after he’d taken down the man who murdered his parents, he’d eventually take a wife. When he was in his forties. He would provide for her, never have her want for a thing in her life. That’s the way a man should be. Taking care of his family. Her wanting to work, earning money, did that mean she didn’t trust him to take care of her? To always provide for her?

“I find it...surprising.”

“You know, it *is* a new millennium,” Jackson said, while obviously trying to keep his face straight. “Women have jobs now.”

“Asshole.”

His thoughts trailed back to Jazzy. Which was an oddity in itself. He’d never given his mistresses another thought outside of the bedroom. So why was it that the little hellcat occupied his mind in the middle of a meeting? It must be because she was his wife. That made her different, he supposed. And that she waited up for him. He liked coming home to a sleepy-eyed Jazzy waiting up for him, no matter how late it was.

Gio looked over the file on Tom Green. The kid with the blue hair and set of piercings in one eyebrow. He reminded him of Vince back in the day. His brother had always been the most rebellious of them, going through various teenage stages. Vince would probably like the kid. Gio wasn’t sure yet.

“He’s harmless,” Hector continued, further briefing him about Green. “Graduated cum laude, having his pick of companies who’d want to hire him. Yet the kid works at a

computer store. He doesn't seem to have any contact with any relatives, other than with a grandmother in a nursing home. His bank account is practically empty, most of his earnings going to the nursing home. The grandmother is probably the reason he hasn't taken any jobs out of San Francisco. He has no priors. There is, however, a case of him filing a report against his ex-boyfriend for assault."

"How did that end?" If the abusive ex was still in the picture, he could be a risk. And a risk to Tommie, was a potential risk to Jazzy.

"The idiot attacked the cops when they wanted to question him, so the charges went up. He's serving a six-year sentence right now."

He closed the file on Green and put it next to the ones for the employees of the women's shelter, and that of her brother-in-law, Franco Caruso. All potential dangers to his wife. The biggest one, however, was Caruso. According to the report, his finances were even worse than he'd believed, which would make a man of his disposition all the more dangerous. What especially concerned him was that, according to Vince, Caruso was responsible for the disappearance of one of his mistresses. He didn't want Jazzy anywhere near the man.

He took out his phone when he felt it vibrate. He downloaded the photo Jazzy had sent him, and instantly his dick turned into solid steel. The woman was insane. He couldn't look away from a close-up of her lovely ass, the tip of a pink butt plug poking out from between her rosy cheeks.

"Fuck."

He realized he'd been wrong. The real reason why he couldn't get her out of his mind was because the damn woman was always up to something.

He pressed the intercom and asked to be connected to the tech guy. "Jones, my wife just sent me a picture on my work phone. Erase it. And make sure it stays erased."

A few ticks on a keyboard, then a whistle followed, making Gio grit his teeth. He'd never considered himself a

possessive man, yet here he was, feeling all caveman over his own wife.

“Jones?”

“Yes, Mr. Detta.”

“While I’m sure my wife would appreciate the compliment, don’t ever make that sound again while regarding my wife.”

The tech guy immediately fell over his tongue, apologizing profusely.

Gio hung up, once again looking into three pairs of eyes.

“So, she sent you a picture, huh?” Vince said, trying to sound innocent. “I knew she wasn’t boring the second I met her. You two exclusive?”

That he even had to ask was a testament to a lifestyle Gio didn’t want to know about.

When Gio didn’t answer his ridiculous question, Vince said, “I see. You should bring Jazzy to the club one night. We have a Mask and Mystery Night this Friday. I’m sure she’ll look gorgeous in fetwear. You can get her a beautiful corset, and—”

“Stop thinking about my wife in a corset,” Gio snapped.

Vince snickered. “So, should I put you two on the list?”

“Fuck you, Vince. Just, fuck you.”

Gio had one more stop before he could go home. He gave Raoul the address to the computer store where Tommie Green worked. It was a small shop in Soma between an art gallery and a Chinese takeout. The boy seemed surprised when Gio walked inside the store.

He waited until the only other customer in the store finished his business and the place was abandoned.

“Mr. Detta,” Tommie greeted him. “What can I do for you?”

“You are going to accept an office in the Detta Tower, Mr. Green.”

“I am?”

“Yes, you are, because I’m not going to let my wife work at one of those shitty offices you are looking at. She’s a Detta, which makes her a target in the eyes of certain people. I can’t have her exposed to any threats like that, especially not if she’d be perfectly safe in my building. So, you are going to swallow your pride and accept my offer. It’s the only way Jazzy will go along with it.”

Tommie’s eyes narrowed. He raked a hand through his blue hair, showing his nervousness. “Are you going to make me an offer I can’t refuse?”

If the matter hadn’t been so important to him, Gio would have smiled. The kid had guts. He was also right about the kind of offer Gio was going to make.

“Yes, Tommie, I’m going to make you an offer you can’t refuse.”

CHAPTER 19

JAZZY

Jazzy had been married for about a month now. A month spent in some sort of strange honeymoon bliss. Gio treated her well. Most evenings, he spent at home, having dinner with her like a normal couple. She'd been busy doing her own stuff, developing her business plan and software. They didn't see much of each other during the day but at night, oh, the nights were amazing. Gio was an enigma. The closed-off looking man was like a chameleon in between the sheets.

Though sometimes, he omitted the sheets altogether, taking her on the couch, in the shower, even once on his desk in the library. For an outsider, they would probably seem like a regular couple of newlyweds. Not once had he tried to write down the law to her, so far. The only thing he was adamant about was her security. He didn't budge on that. She didn't get to go anywhere without Hector. As head of security, and the owner of the security company, she believed the former Marine was a bit overqualified for the job, but he didn't seem to mind.

Still, she kept waiting for the other shoe to drop. Powerful men like Giovanni Detta had a certain way they dealt with people. He had shown that by practically butchering the asshole that had hit her. Justified? Perhaps. She didn't feel sorry for that prick. Still, sooner or later, Gio was going to find out he'd married the wrong Rossi girl and then all this bliss would disappear. But until that moment, she would make the most of it; bringing every fantasy she'd ever had to life; most recently, this morning.

She grinned when she thought about the picture she had sent him. It was the biggest

of the butt plugs so far. The elephant plug, and she was supposed to keep it in for a few hours. Which she did, right up until the moment she decided to visit her sister.

Her patience was over. It was time for another come to Jesus moment with Carmen. To her surprise, this time when Jazzy sent her a text, Carmen immediately responded by saying she wanted to meet up.

Jazzy took two taxis and a ferry to reach North Bay. The first thing she noticed when arriving at Casa Caruso, was the absence of guards around the perimeter. It had been a while since she'd visited this place, on the outskirts of Marin County. The place looked different somehow. More abandoned.

She rang the bell and it was opened by Carmen instead of the housekeeper. Her sister looked gaunt, her clothes big around her body.

“Finally,” Jazzy greeted her, as she gave her a hug. “Where have you been all these weeks?”

There was a tight smile on Carmen's face. “Please, come in. Let's go into the kitchen. I have freshly made tea.”

Jazzy scrunched her nose as she followed her inside. “Never understood your love for tea.”

“Don’t worry. There’s also coffee for you.”

When they sat at the kitchen table, overlooking an empty backyard, Jazzy noticed the eerie silence. “So, where is everyone?”

Carmen handed her a mug. “Franco has fired the staff and doesn’t allow anyone inside the house anymore. Ever since the rest of his family got locked up and killed, he’s been paranoid, thinking everyone’s after him. A few days ago, he had a meeting with his lawyer. I think he’s under investigation.”

Good. I hope they lock him up. Jazzy nodded while taking a sip from her coffee.

“He’s become more...unstable lately.”

“So, now what?” *Please let me help you.* What every woman needed was a man that lifted her up instead of tearing her down. She wished she could make Carmen see that.

“I’m...I’m going to leave him, Jaz.”

“You are? I mean, finally.”

“I—I’m pregnant,” Carmen said, with a catch in her voice.

Oh, crap. “That’s um...” Jazzy had no idea what that was. “Is that good or bad?” Either way, she would support her sister, but she obviously wasn’t going to congratulate her if she decided to not keep the baby.

Carmen smiled. “It’s good, Jazzy. It is really, really good.”

She gave her sister another hug. “Then I’m really, really happy for you. I can’t believe I’m going to be an aunt!”

Carmen’s smile widened. “And I can’t believe I’m going to be a mom.” She gave a deep sigh. “I guess all of this, everything, is going to be worth it after all.”

Jazzy hated herself for not noticing earlier how miserable her sister was. “Why haven’t you ever told me? I could have helped. *Nonno* would have never let Franco —”

“I couldn’t tell Grandfather. You know how he thinks of marriage. He’d say that it’s my duty to stand by my husband, no matter what. And you, you would have tried to

help, going in guns blazing. Franco...” Her breath hitched for a moment. “He would have hurt you. He threatened to kill you if I ever left. To him, his wife leaving him, it would be the ultimate humiliation. But the baby changes everything. I can’t have him raise my son in his image or hurt my little girl.” A sob escaped her throat. “I can’t have my daughter growing up with a coward for a mother, not able to protect her from her own father.”

“You are not a coward,” Jazzy said vehemently, holding her sister tight. “He’s the coward, for raising a hand at you. For thinking that just because he’s stronger, it’s okay to hurt you.” She grabbed her bag from the counter. “Let’s go.”

Carmen shook her head. “I’m not leaving everything behind for him to destroy when he discovers I’ve left him. Some of Mom’s old stuff is stored up in the attic. Franco won’t return from his trip until tomorrow morning. I still have time.”

She looked around, a bit flustered, and Jazzy could only imagine what her sister was going through. “I will arrange a moving truck,” she promised.

“I...I don’t know where to go from here, Jaz.”

Oh shit. “Are you having second thoughts?” As much as she wanted to drag her sister away from this place, she knew it had to be her own choice.

“No.” There was a determined look on Carmen’s face as she placed a hand on her abdomen. “I’m not sure where to go, but I’m not staying. Maybe it sounds silly, since I only found out I’m pregnant today, but I already love this baby. I will do everything I can to protect him or her.”

“We’ll figure this out, okay? You’ll be coming with me. We’ll see from there, one day at a time.”

“Are you sure your husband’s going to be okay with that? He might not want—”

“Don’t worry about that. Gio and I are good. He won’t mind.” That is, she hoped he wouldn’t. And if he would expect her to turn her back on her sister, well, tough.

They made a deal to meet in a few hours and Carmen went upstairs to start packing.

Jazzy sent Gio a message that she couldn't make it for dinner since she had to pick up her sister. He responded instantly by telling her that he didn't like her going to Caruso's house. She ignored his heated message.

She then sent Tommie a message and went by his place, happy to spot his old van parked across his apartment.

He opened the door, dressed in purple shorts and black tank top, keys jingling in his hand.

"Thank you so much." She reached for the keys, but he shook his head.

"I'll take you."

"You don't need to do that on your day off. Really. I'll just—"

"Not letting you and your sis go through this alone, Jaz. She'll need someone to talk to afterwards. Someone who can relate."

"Fine. Might need some muscle power to carry some of her stuff anyway."

He groaned. "Me and my big mouth."

With the late afternoon traffic, it took them almost an hour to drive over to

Carmen's.

“Sweet,” Tommie said, as he parked in Carmen's front lawn. He took in the grand yard and white marble columns sporting the place.

“Don't let the exterior fool you,” she warned him. “Trust me when I say, you'd be better off living in the Pussy Wagon.”

He snorted, but trailed after her; though, looking less impressed now.

They found the front door unlocked. When Jazzy gave it a gentle push, it opened wide. It immediately put her on edge.

“Guess she wants to leave as soon as possible, huh?” Tommie said.

“I hope that's it.”

The entry hall and living room were abandoned. No Carmen to be seen.

“Would you mind looking into the attic? She said there was some stuff from Mom in there she wants to take with her.”

Jazzy looked for Carmen in the parlor and dining room first, but they were empty. Then she heard voices coming from the kitchen.

She rounded the corner and acid filled her mouth. Franco stood over her sister, who lay in a pile of blood on the kitchen floor.

“There’s no more loyalty left in this world. You think you can just leave me? I’ve bought you, slut. Paid good money for your virgin body. You can’t leave me. You will never leave me!”

Franco poured himself a drink as he kept his monologue going. There was a gun next to his hand on the counter.

Jazzy realized she had to tread really careful here.

“I take an earlier flight and what greets me in my own fucking home? My slut of a wife, packing her bags.”

Carmen’s eyes were closed and Jazzy didn’t believe her sister was even conscious.

Franco kept on mumbling as he took another glass. “The cold, barren slut actually believed she could leave me.”

Not barren. The baby. Oh, God, the baby!

Jazzy almost blurted out her sister's condition, but decided against it. She was unsure what Franco would do if he found out that Carmen was pregnant. Maybe he would completely freak out and start shooting.

She jumped when he threw the whiskey glass against the wall, and it shattered into a thousand pieces.

She must have made a sound, because suddenly, Franco looked up. His eyes turned into slits when he saw her.

“Franco, please. Carmen's bleeding. Let me call an ambulance.”

He huffed. “Why? I didn't shoot her. I just broke her leg, so she can't fucking walk away.”

“There's a lot of blood, please.”

His brow furrowed. “Don't know why she's bleeding like that. She never did before.”

Jazzy felt like throwing up. She reminded herself that she needed to keep her cool, though everything inside her screamed to take his gun and kill the bastard.

“Please, let me help her,” she tried once again, looking around for a weapon. There was a kettle on the counter next to him. Some knives on the wall next to the fridge.

“Maybe *you* can satisfy me. Your sister sure couldn’t. Damn cold fish. What d’you say, Jocelyn?” He hiccupped, his eyes roaming over her body. “Wanna fuck? I can see it, you know. See it in your eyes that you want me. There’s a fire inside you. Passion.”

His crazy rant triggered a deep, hidden memory.

You want this, don’t you? You want me to fuck you.

She felt nauseated. Her hands turned into fists, and it was only by sheer will that she didn’t launch herself at him.

Then she spotted a movement behind Franco. Behind the kitchen door leading into the garden, stood Tommie. His face pale against his blue Mohawk.

She looked away from him, not wanting to alert Franco. “What’s with the gun on the counter, Franco?” she asked loudly.

Franco grabbed the weapon and chuckled. The bastard actually chuckled. “It’s my father’s. The once mighty Caruso don. Couldn’t leave it behind. Might need it where I’m going.”

The only place you’re going to is Hell.

“I’m going to check on my sister now.” She couldn’t just stand in the doorway anymore. Slowly, watching Franco from the corner of her eyes, she kneeled next to Carmen and pressed her fingers against her neck. Relief poured over her when she felt a pulse.

“She will be fine,” he said. “Get her up. We’ll be leaving in an hour.”

The man was deluded. “Hang on, sis. I’m getting you out of here.”

Apparently, her words were like holding a red flag in front of a bull, because Franco suddenly made his move. He grabbed her by the hair, lifting her up, waving his gun in her face.

“You’re not taking her anywhere,” he snarled. “She’s mine. She will always be mine.”

His eyes were those of a crazy man’s.

“Fuck you. She isn’t a piece of property you can just kick around. She’s a human being, you asshole.” And then, because she could, she spat in his face.

His fist connecting with her stomach made her double over. She dropped to her knees, trying to catch her breath. Her gaze landed on her sister, who—thank God—had opened her eyes.

When Jazzy looked back up, this time, Franco’s gun was pointing at her.

What they said about your life flashing before your eyes like a movie, turned out to be a lie. There was only one image she saw: Gio. Their passionate nights together, the lazy Sunday mornings. He was going to be so pissed when he found out that she’d gotten herself killed by being reckless.

Before she could make a sound, or plead for her life, Tommie made his move. He barreled against Franco, taking him to the ground.

As the men struggled on the floor, both reaching for the gun, Jazzy crawled back onto her feet, ignoring the pain in her stomach. She stilled when a shot went off.

Fear took her over when Franco got up, leaving a bleeding Tommie on the floor, a gunshot in his shoulder.

With a battle cry she didn't even know she possessed, she launched herself against Franco, kicking and hitting him wherever she could. In the back of her mind, she heard the gun drop onto the floor, but she couldn't take the time to look for it.

Franco stumbled backwards when she planted her knee in his stomach. His head hit the wall, making pots and pans drop onto the floor. It wasn't enough to take him down, though. He kept storming toward her.

Right before he could reach her again, he jerked to a halt, his eyes widening with shock.

Jazzy wasn't sure what made him stop, until he dropped to his knees, revealing her sister standing behind him.

Franco did a face plant and that was when Jazzy saw the butcher knife that stuck out of his back. Carmen was the next one to drop to her knees, holding a hand over her stomach.

She heard the sound of heavy boots running toward them.

“What the fuck!” Hector’s colorful rant of curses had never been more welcome.

She scooted over to Tommie, who was lying on his back, and grabbed his hand. “Hey, there, warrior smurf. Please hold on, okay?”

Hector grabbed some towels and pressed them onto Tommie’s wound. “Keep this here. I’m going to check on the *cabrón*.”

Tommie grunted. “Scars are sexy, right?”

Jazzy used both her hands to apply pressure to Tommie’s shoulder. She watched her sister, who was still on her knees, staring at Franco’s lifeless body.

“Carmen?”

No reaction.

“Carmen!”

Still no reaction.

Tommie tried to get up and look, but Jazzy held him down. “Don’t you move.

We're going to sit here and wait for the ambulance."

However, it wasn't just an ambulance that showed up. Gio accompanied them.

She got up and moved aside to make room for the EMT's.

Gio didn't say a word. His face was an unreadable mask, unlike his fists and locked jaw that told a story on their own.

Jazzy knew she was in trouble. She also knew that now that he was here, everything was going to be okay. It was silly, really, but it felt as if his presence alone was a guarantee that no one was going to die.

No longer able to stand the distance between them, she launched herself into his arms. It was as if a dam burst. When he held her tight, she couldn't keep in her tears anymore.

CHAPTER 20

GIO

His wife was trembling in his arms. If it weren't for the all-consuming rage inside him, he might have trembled too. Out of fear. Sheer fucking fear that something had happened to her. When he got the message from Hector, he'd been on the way over to Caruso's house. He hadn't liked her being there, and apparently his instincts about this place had been right.

Speaking of Caruso, he was lying in a pool of his own blood, his head to the side, panting. The fucker was still alive.

When the paramedics he'd brought with him went for Caruso, Gio stepped in. "Not him." He had other plans for the bastard.

The paramedics took a few quick vitals before placing Tommie on a stretcher. Carmen was the next one they wheeled away.

Caruso managed to put a hand underneath him and push himself up.

Hector kicked Caruso in the head, effectively putting him down again. Then he dragged him away.

Jazzy lifted her head from his shirt. She wiped away her tears and blinked when she saw the kitchen was all but empty, except for them.

“Wait. What hospital did they take them to? We have to follow—”

Gio cupped her cheek. Her beautiful hazel eyes looked at him pleadingly. He wished he could have spared her this. The distraught look in her gaze pulled at something inside him he thought was long dead.

“Do you trust me to take care of this?”

Silence for a beat. “I do.”

She sounded surprised, which pissed him off. But that was a conversation for another time. Right now, he had to take care of this mess of a situation.

“Good. They will receive the medical care they need. Tell me what happened.”

When she finished, he could see the defiance in her eyes. “It was self-defense. Carmen didn’t mean to do it. I’m not going to let her go to jail. It was self-defense.”

“She’s not going to jail,” he agreed. Jazzy sagged against him, the tension leaving her body. He was surprised she’d thought he would let that happen. She belonged to him now, with a murderous sister and all.

“She’s going to be okay,” Jazzy mumbled, as if trying to convince herself. “We’re all going to be okay.”

“I would never let anything happen to you, you know that, right? A threat against my wife, is a threat against me.”

And there it was. A flicker in her gaze, before she looked down, hiding the story in her eyes.

“Spill.”

“What?” She looked confused.

“Anything you need to share with me? Any deep, hidden secrets? Skeletons in the closet?”

Her eyes flamed up. Damn, he wanted to put her over his lap when that happened. He needed to be in control, though. There were boundaries he would discuss, and she would accept. If she didn't, there would be consequences. She needed to understand that.

“If I told you what they were, they wouldn't be deep and hidden anymore, now would they?”

He was on her in a heartbeat. She gasped when he pushed her up against the wall, his knee between her legs, up to her core. Her pupils dilated, and he had to rein in the urge to strip her right here, right now.

“No more secrets. I can't protect you if I don't know whatever it is you're hiding from.” There it was, the faceless expression she donned when he said she was running from something. “Or whomever,” he added.

“Please.” A soft whisper.

He pulled her back against him. This wasn't over yet. Whatever it was she was afraid of, he would get to the bottom of it. Later. When she wasn't shaking against him.

She cleared her throat. “Franco. Is he—”

“He was still breathing when Hector moved him.”

A sigh of relief. “Good. The bastard deserves to suffer before he dies in prison. I suppose I'll have to give a statement to the police.”

“No, you don't. We didn't exactly call an ambulance for him, Jaz. The medical personal you just saw don't work at a regular hospital, and they didn't come here in a regular ambulance. There won't be any police involved.”

“But—”

“Franco's been taken care of. We won't speak of this anymore.” Like he would ever let a bastard that had taken a

shot at her live. The mere thought was ludicrous.

“Wait a minute. What about Tommie? He’s been shot. Gunshot wounds are always reported to the police.”

“Tommie’s been taken to a private clinic, just like your sister. There will be no report of a gunshot wound.”

“I want to see them.”

“You will.”

His chauffeur didn’t need any directions to the clinic. It wasn’t the first time they visited the place.

When they walked into the lobby and asked for Tom Green, a nurse informed them that he was in surgery. Gio had to rethink his initial assessment of the kid, which was one of annoyance. He hadn’t liked the time the man, or any other man, spent with his wife. He wasn’t prepared yet to acknowledge why that was exactly, though he had to admit it seemed fueled by jealousy. A new feeling to him, though not entirely unfamiliar. His father had never tolerated another man around his wife either. Maybe it was just in his genes. However, Tommie Green had taken a bullet for his wife, which meant Gio owed him now.

The nurse took them to Carmen’s room. Her small frame seemed even smaller in the big room, almost disappearing in the bed. Her eyes were closed and according to the nurse, she was sedated. Apparently, she’d broken down after she had learned that she lost the baby.

Gio had seen a lot of shit in his life, could understand all too well what could make a man kill, steal, lie, or cheat to get by in life. But he would never understand a man that would take a hand to his own wife, let alone kill his own blood.

Jazzy was absolutely devastated. She sobbed into his shirt, as he held her in Carmen’s room.

“He killed her baby, Gio. I had just learned this afternoon that I was going to become an aunt. Carmen was so excited.”

Gio realized something that night. Women didn’t have to love their husbands, but this one did. He wanted the fierce

passion she defended her sister and friend with. He already had her body, but he wanted her heart, mind, and soul as well. Anything else was unacceptable.

Gio left the clinic—leaving Raoul behind to take Jazzy home whenever she was ready—and took a cab to Vince’s club. He entered the building from the back entrance.

Hector was already there waiting for him, his usual scowl accompanied by fury blazing in his eyes. His friend had a protective streak when it came to women and children. Jazzy almost getting hurt on his watch, would only make the former Marine want a piece of Caruso even more.

“This way,” he practically growled, leading the way downstairs.

Unlike Vince, Gio wasn’t into the whole BDSM scene, so he hadn’t visited the place before. Despite the fucked-up evening he had so far, he couldn’t stop a smile when he found out where Hector had stashed Caruso.

“The dungeon?”

The big man shrugged. “Seemed fitting.”

Caruso’s body was tied to a St. Andrew’s cross. He wasn’t moving.

“He still alive?”

“I stitched his wound up. Didn’t want the *cabrón* to die on you before you had a chance to...talk to him.”

The door to the dungeon opened and Vince walked in.

“Figure you’d want to be here,” Gio said to welcome him.

His brother had been wanting a piece of Caruso, ever since a sub that had once frequented his club had gone missing and all fingers had pointed at Caruso. Of course, the asshole

knew how to cover up his tracks, so he got away with it. That is, until now.

“Wouldn’t miss it.” There was a coldness in his brother’s eyes, directed at the figure chained against the wall. “He still alive?”

Gio nodded. “For now.”

Hector left the room and came back with a bucket of water that he splashed into Caruso’s face. Caruso came to himself, sputtering and cursing.

It took all Gio had to not shove a knife through his throat. That would be merciful, though. And merciful was one thing he was not when it came to someone threatening his family.

“This is the end of the line for you, Caruso. No one hurts my wife and gets to live. If there’s a God you believe in, that you want to make peace with, now would be the time.” He walked up to the cabinet on the right and picked up a nice-looking cane.

“Fuck you, Detta.” Caruso eyed the wooden cane, while trying to hide his fear. “You have any idea who you’re dealing with? You’re a dead man. A dead man!”

Gio had found there were two types of men. The ones that begged for their lives, promising him anything he wanted. And the ones threatening him with everything under the sun. Caruso belonged to the last group, only he had nothing to back up his threat with.

“You are done, Caruso. Your family is done. Your legacy, whatever that might have once been, is done too. No one is going to miss you.”

He saw it happen right before his eyes. That moment when a man knows he’s not going to make it to another sunrise. That moment he loses all hope, and lashes out.

“What’s he doing here?” Franco chin-jerked at Vince. “Came to see me dead so you can console my wife? What? You think I didn’t see how you looked at her at the wedding? All men do. She’s a siren. Looking innocent and fuckable from

the outside, but once you start fucking her, she's as cold as a fish." He let out a harsh laugh. "I tried everything with her. Even took her to a club once, but her pussy remained cold."

That's when Vince lashed out with his whip, marking Caruso in the face. "You sick fuck. Bad-mouthing your own wife. The woman who has just miscarried your child, thanks to the beating you gave her."

Caruso's eyes went unsure for a split second, but then that heinous smirk appeared again. "Who's to say it was mine?"

Gio planted his fist in Caruso's stomach, making the man grunt in pain. His mood improved immediately.

Vince pushed his whip underneath Caruso's chin. "Remember Kimberley?"

A hint of recognition flashed in Caruso's eyes before he looked away. "Don't know what you're talking about."

"You butchered her, asshole. I know it was you. Let's see how well you take to all the toys you put your subs through."

Before the fucker could get another word out, Gio smashed the cane to his right knee, splintering the bone.

Then the screaming started. Over and over again.

CHAPTER 21

JAZZY

A week after the shooting, things were back to normal. That is, as much as Jazzy could call her sister checking herself out of the clinic and leaving the country normal.

Carmen was on the run. From herself, from the pain of losing her baby, and God only knew what other demons haunted her. Jazzy had visited her in the clinic every day, but Carmen refused to say a word. She just turned her back and kept staring at the wall, a void in her gaze that scared Jazzy. This morning, she had received a message from Carmen that she needed some time. So that was all Jazzy could do; give her time and space.

Tommie, luckily, was easier to deal with. Gio had stated that he would stay with them until he had recuperated from his gunshot wound. Boxed in by Gio and Hector, Tommie's

protest had died on his lips. She was glad that, for a change, his pride had taken a back seat to his common sense.

He lay sprawled on her couch, ending a phone call. He grunted when he reached for his mug on the coffee table. “The most interesting thing just happened. I just got rehired.”

“That’s great. You shouldn’t have been fired in the first place. I’m sure there’s some law against firing an employee who can show proof of being admitted to a clinic.” When she saw his pensive look, she said, “It *is* great, isn’t it?”

“Sure. It’s also interesting and weird that I got rehired within a day; with a raise, no less.”

“Not weird. I’m sure the place fell apart after you left.”

He snorted. “You know, having Giovanni Detta call my asshole boss is like bringing a bazooka to a knife fight.”

“Are you saying it’s overkill?”

“Of the epic kind.”

“I disagree. And I didn’t ask Gio to call your boss. But I might have ranted a bit to him about you getting fired,” she admitted.

“Well, he obviously decided to do something about it. Probably just to shut you up.”

She pinched his leg, making him wince. “You deserved that.”

“I think we should do it.”

“Do what?”

“Accept the San Francisco’s real estate king’s offer for office space.”

She let out a groan. “He got to you, didn’t he?”

A blush spread over Tommie’s cheeks. “He did,” he grumbled. “Your husband has this...”

“Overpowering personality?” she provided, when he seemed lost for words.

“Yeah, that was the phrase I was looking for. Also”—he was silent for a beat—“he also took care of my Grams.”

“Is she okay?” She knew his grandmother had Alzheimer’s and lived in a nursing home. It was the reason why Tommie had worked two jobs during college, even though that didn’t stop him finishing top of his class.

He shrugged, as if the topic of his grandmother was no big deal, while she knew it was what kept him going. “I got a call from the nursing home. Something about government cutbacks and her health insurance no longer covering everything. They were going to put her on the street, Jaz, and, shit, the place I could barely afford wasn’t a great place to begin with. Your husband offered to transfer her to a top-notch facility if I agreed to the office space, which he hopes will sway you too, and I couldn’t say no.”

“Nor should you have. I would have done the same thing.”

“You would?” He sounded hesitant. “I kind of feel like a jerk for accepting.”

“Of course I would have.” She put her laptop on the coffee table and cuddled up next to him. “I wished you would have told me sooner, so I could have offered to help. You’re just too damn proud.”

“Speaking of too proud...I really think we should accept the office space. It would look good with future customers. I really need this to work, Jaz.”

So did she, though perhaps, for slightly other reasons. She was determined to live in a world where children—the tiny voices that were ignored or lost all too often—were safe. With the software they were developing, she hoped to contribute a little to that cause.

She decided to surprise her husband that afternoon by paying him a visit in his tower. Also, this might be the perfect time to live out her office fantasy, featuring a certain real estate mogul. She had changed into a different outfit before coming over.

Walking into the Detta Tower, she watched herself in the window. She had decided on a black pencil skirt with a red silk top and killer heels. It was a good prep for their late afternoon meeting at the bank.

She gave her name at the reception and took a seat in the waiting area. Pulling the “I’m his wife card” seemed silly, and also would ruin her surprise, so she sat. Waiting.

And waiting.

Half an hour in, and she was still waiting. That was when Hector stepped inside and took a seat next to her.

“Why?”

She loved the way he just used one word and expected her to understand all and every meaning behind it.

“I want to surprise him.”

“Figures. Never seen you in something else but jeans before.” His lips almost pulled into a smile. Almost, but not quite.

Apparently, she was more transparent than she’d thought. “Shut up,” she mumbled.

Hector didn’t have her patience. He walked up to the front desk. After a few words and a chin jerk at her, the receptionist turned crimson. She alerted the guard near the elevators that Jazzy could pass through.

Finally.

She got up and, after a silent ‘thank you’ to the big man, stepped into the elevator.

There was only one girl with hot pink lips, who got in after her. She seemed a tad nervous, checking her hair and makeup in the elevator mirror several times.

“Hot lunch date?” Jazzy joked.

“Hope so. Going to see the boss,” the girl entrusted to her. “He’s hot. Like *GQ* hot but very manly, you know.”

Jazzy nodded. She knew all too well.

“Even his name is hot,” the girl said with a gush. “Giovanni Detta.”

It felt like someone just sucker-punched her. “I think I read somewhere that he’s married,” Jazzy casually said.

The girl re-applied her lipstick. “Oh, apparently he is, but I mean, we’ve never even seen his wife. She’s probably some prissy, boring, high-society cold fish. She must be, or else she would have visited him; staked her claim, right? What woman wouldn’t.”

Instead of smacking the lipstick from Hot Pink’s face, Jazzy smiled. “You’re right. A real woman would piss all over him to show her ownership.” When she got a blank look in return, she explained, “The way animals do.”

“Oh, right.” Hot Pink unbuttoned her top button, showing some cleavage. “Wish me luck.”

Wishing her luck wasn’t what Jazzy had in mind. More like, the plague.

When the elevator came to a halt at their floor, the girl lifted her shoulders, pushed her chest up, and started walking.

Jazzy trailed after Hot Pink, who was making a show of strutting in her high heels. The girl stopped at the coffee machine, clearly contemplating her next move.

That was when Jazzy spotted an unwelcome face she’d last seen at her wedding. What was the woman’s name again? Lisa. It suddenly occurred to her that there were apparently *two* sharks circling her husband.

That was when Jazzy strode past them.

Gio stood before the front desk, giving instructions to a woman in a suit, who was taking notes.

If he was surprised to see her walk into his place of business for the first time, it didn't show on his face. When she kissed him—tongue and all—in the middle of the corridor, she clearly did surprise him, however. God help him if he pushed her away.

She gave a sigh of relief when he pulled her closer. Of course, Gio wouldn't be Gio if he didn't try to one-up her by half-dragging her into his office.

“Reschedule my afternoon meetings, Gale. I'll be busy with my wife.”

From the corner of her eye, she saw Hot Pink's baffled look turn into one of horror as she realized who Jazzy was. And no, Jazzy couldn't contain the evil smile on her face. She even gave the girl a wave.

The second Gio shut the door behind them, he pulled her into his arms and planted her on his desk.

“I like your skirt.”

“Tommie told me what you did for his grandmother.”

“I didn't do it for your friend. I did it for me. I don't like my wife going to work in some shady neighborhood.”

“You managed just fine,” she protested, remembering how he had started his business. Unlike what she had assumed, Giovanni Detta didn't come from money. He'd had to work to get where he was today.

“I had start-up money. All of my brothers, including Hector, invested everything we had in the company. We also had a break because Luca made good money at a poker tournament. We started up in some shitty office in Tenderloin, but I had my brothers to protect my back.”

“You knew Tommie was going to talk to me about this office, didn't you?”

He didn't deny it. “I wanted something from him and gave him something in return.”

“Still...you could have tried a different approach.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “Such as?”

He was really going to have her say it. Very well then. “Like strong-holding him to do what you want.”

“I like to negotiate first, instead of pushing to get my way.”

She huffed and waved her ring finger at him. “This big diamond says otherwise.”

“Unlike what you seem to think, *bella*, I don’t eat kittens for breakfast, nor do I kill anyone who disagrees with me. I only do that when I want something really bad, or when I get pushed.”

Yeah, she had slightly mixed feelings about that, but she wasn’t going to get into that. Him letting her claim him in front of Hot Pink and Lisa gained him some leeway for at least a few days. “Um, I actually came to speak to you about something.”

He removed her top, hands on her breasts. “So speak.”

“I can’t concentrate when you do that.”

“I’m going to fuck you on my desk.”

“Yes, please.” Wait. What was it she came here for again? Oh, right. “First, I need some pointers from my husband, the mogul. Things I can use this afternoon during the talk with the bank.”

“I suppose me offering you that loan would be a no?”

“A definite no.”

“Kind of figured. Just be yourself, *bella*. Be your own, passionate self, and it will be fine. As long as you have that fire in your eyes, you will be good. No man can resist that. You got this.”

“I’m not as sure as you are, but I appreciate the vote of confidence,” Jazzy said. “Watch the skirt!”

He cocked an eyebrow and she understood why. There she was, draped over his desk, breasts popping out of her bra,

her lipstick probably smeared all over her face, and she was giving him grief over a piece of clothing.

“Wear another one.” With that, his hand slid into the split of her skirt and ripped it open.

He flipped her over, so her back was turned to him. Her hands gripped the edge of the desk, when he leaned over her.

“Have you prepped yourself this morning?”

No matter how many times he asked about the butt plug, her face flamed up.

“Yes.”

“Let me see for myself.” His hand went to her string and pulled it down. He caressed her ass, and played with her clit, while turning the plug a few times. Then he grabbed her by her hips and slammed inside her.

The power with which he took her nearly made her face-plant on his desk. As he continued to fuck her, her legs gave out, and her cheek hit the cold surface. She fell on her elbows and pushed back on his cock.

“That’s it, baby. Take what you want.”

Maybe working at the Delta Tower had its perks after all.

CHAPTER 22

GIO

After their office fuck, Gio's afternoon had been filled with regular meetings, and ended with a new report on Bianchi. He had sold more of his assets to cover his debts. Gone were his expensive cars, gone was his prized yacht at the marina. When his wife had learned that he'd started pawning off her jewelry, she left him. Bianchi was all alone now in his big house. According to their informant, he had locked himself up in his room, drinking, mumbling to himself, and shattering anything he could get his hands on.

It gave Gio great joy that Bianchi was going slightly mad as his world came down crumbling around him. What gave him even more joy though, was coming home to Jazzy.

He found his wife sitting on the new couch with her legs crossed, notebook on her lap, and a pencil in her hair. There

were stacks of books littered on the floor and on the coffee table.

She jumped up the second she saw him. Her eyes all excited and sporting a huge grin.

“We did it, Gio! We got the loan!”

“Congratulations, *bella*. I knew you would.”

She clasped her hands, seeming excited as a child. Then she suddenly came to a halt.

“Wait a minute...Did you have anything to do with this?”

“Of course not.” Though, it had been a close call. He’d been tempted to do exactly that. All he’d had to do was make a discreet phone call and drop that Jocelyn Detta—brand new software entrepreneur—happened to be his wife. Which would have been easy, since he knew the bank’s director on a first name basis. In the end, he decided not to meddle. It seemed important to her that she could make it on her own. Also, if she ever found out, she’d have his balls, and not in a good way.

“You sure?” she asked, hands perched on her hips.

“Absolutely.” He pulled her close. “I did not tell the bank that they had to give you a loan. We should celebrate.”

Her eyes sparkled again. “Yes, we should. I already had drinks with Tommie this afternoon. Now I’m taking you out for dinner. Don’t look like that. It’s my celebration, so it’s my treat.”

Jazzy’s treat was pizza in a little joint a few blocks from them. They had barely gotten in the door before she paused.

“You think I can write this off as a business expense?” she asked, almost making him laugh.

“I’ll hook you up with my tax guy.”

She didn’t even protest, still on the high of her happiness. “I can’t believe this is actually happening. I mean, of course this is what we worked for all this time, but now it

gets real. We can start developing more, making the program more stable. Hopefully, in the next year, we will have the beta ready. Just think of all the good we could do, finding lost and kidnapped children. This is why we didn't accept a job at some big corporation in Silicon Valley."

This seemed very important to her, as if it was personal, and he couldn't help but wonder why.

Before he could ask any further, they were interrupted by a waitress, who dropped the menu cards before them.

"Hi, I'm Mandy, and I'll be taking care of your table for the night. Wow, I love your hair. It's so thick and glossy, like sable. I wish mine was like this. Can I touch it?" she asked. She reached in and ran her fingers through Jazzy's curls without waiting for her permission.

Gio put down his menu with a snap. "Don't touch her hair."

The stupid woman rolled her eyes and giggled, as if he'd fucking cracked a joke.

"No need to worry, handsome. I don't think she's batting for my team." Wink.

She actually winked.

His jaw clenched. "You don't let go of her right now, I'm gonna break your fingers." He wasn't joking.

Her smile disappeared, and she stepped back.

That's right, bitch. Look me in the eye and tell me I won't hurt you.

"I...I'm sorry..." Mandy turned pale, spun around, and hurried off.

Jazzy gave him a disparaging look. "Really?"

"She was rude." Also, he didn't like it when other people touched what was his. He immediately recognized the lie. He didn't like it when another touched *Jazzy*, which was a strange feeling. He'd never cared before, when a woman he was with got attention from others. Quite the opposite, actually; he

reveled in it, considering it a reflection on him. The difference was that Jazzy carried his last name. She was his, whether she acknowledged it or not. His to protect, his to fuck, and his to touch. No one else, just him.

“You do know you scared her shitless, right?”

He would have lost his touch if he hadn't. “That was the point. She's lucky I haven't called her boss and got her fired. Yet.”

Wait for it, wait for it...

“Don't you dare! For all you know, she could be a single mom in desperate need of this job.”

“I don't care if she's providing for a fucking orphanage. But, since you're so worried about her, why don't we make a deal?”

“What kind of deal?” she asked suspiciously.

For all her outer bluster, Jazzy was soft-hearted. The world would chew her up and spit her out if she continued with that sentiment. He should point that out to her, toughen her up, but for some reason, he didn't.

“The second we enter our bedroom tonight, you give me whatever I want, and I'll make sure she doesn't get fired. And before you ask, yeah, I'm petty like that. I'll have her kicked to the curb without giving it a second thought.” He saw the defiance in her eyes, but he didn't care. He was mad at her too, for not stopping the woman touching her.

“I can't believe you,” she hissed.

“Yet you do.” He never bluffed. She should know that by now.

She grabbed the menu and gave him a glare. “What exactly do you mean by ‘whatever I want’? Just because I don't want to be semi-responsible for an innocent woman losing her job, doesn't mean I'm going to agree to whatever crazy thing you might ask. For all I know, you're into golden showers. In which case, I'd rather just let her take the fall.”

Good. They had reached the negotiating stage. She was testing the waters, while at the same time, telling him she had hard limits. He liked that she didn't immediately knuckle under. It was inevitable, though, but tonight wasn't that night. The night he would receive her full submission. For that to work, he first needed her loyalty. To earn her loyalty, she needed to trust him. What better way than to begin with her body?

Even though he wouldn't consider Jazzy insecure over her body—and why should she be, her every curve was fucking gorgeous—her earlier remarks about his model exes had gotten him thinking.

“I want you to wear a suit that I've had designed for you.”

He could see the immediate interest in her eyes, not holding back her desire. He'd never met a woman this attuned to him sexually before. This bold, interested, and responsive. She was fucking addictive, and he wasn't sure how he felt about that.

He took her home after finishing their dinner, even letting her pay. He couldn't remember the last time—if ever—a woman had paid for his dinner. Despite her glee of treating “the billionaire mogul” as she put it, he decided it would be the last time.

They didn't see Mandy again, but Jazzy did leave her a generous tip, after giving him an admonishing glare.

Raoul had them back home in no time. He could see the anticipation in her eyes, as they took the stairs up to their room. Though he wanted to rip her clothes off, he kept himself in check. This wasn't the plan. Tonight, he had another fantasy to fulfill.

She sauntered inside their bedroom, dropping off her clothes on the floor, a smile on her face. “So, what kind of outfit do you want me to wear? A nurse outfit? Or perhaps a nun's? Or...oh...” She came to a halt when she spotted the box on her dressing table.

“Put it on while I take a shower.”

He cut the shower short, anticipation making him impatient to see Jazzy in the black latex catsuit he had made for her.

When he walked naked into their bedroom, she lay sprawled on the bed. Covered in latex from her neck to her toes. Every gorgeous curve of her.

“Well, this was unexpected,” she drawled. “Didn’t know you had a latex fetish.”

“I don’t.” But he was beginning to think he had a Jazzy fetish.

“You like exploring new things then. I should have guessed.”

The catsuit had two holes in the front, displaying her large breasts. The rest of her was covered, for now. Until he got his hands on the invisible zipper that started below her navel and went down her pussy, all the way around to between her ass cheeks.

He grabbed a butt plug and a vibrator from his drawer, and threw them on the bed. Her eyes went wide when she saw the toys. He got hard just by seeing her bite her bottom lip in anticipation.

“Legs wide. Hands on the headboard. Don’t move them.”

As she did what he requested, he crawled on top of her, settling between her legs. His hands went to her breasts. He loved playing with them. They smelled and tasted delicious. Her sweet nipples begged for attention. He played with them for a while, all the while ignoring her moans.

“Please, Gio.”

Let it never be said that he let his wife beg. *For long.*

He pulled up a knee, pressing it against her core.

“Oh, yeah.” She started rubbing her pussy against his knee, looking for more friction. It wasn’t enough to get her off,

though, and they both knew it.

One by one, he sucked her nipples inside his mouth, giving them equal attention. Her breasts stood out like snow against the black latex that surrounded them.

He pulled back, lowering himself over her body, until his face was between her legs. With a swift move, he pulled down the front zipper of her suit, exposing her belly and going lower.

When she tried to suck in her stomach, he gave the soft spot a bite. “Don’t do that again. Your belly is mine too. Every part of your body is mine,” he said, licking and sucking the soft roundness of her belly.

He pulled the zipper further down until it exposed her beautiful pink flesh and the globes of her ass. She was already soaking wet. When he pushed a finger inside her hot cunt, her inner walls strangled his finger.

He dipped another digit inside her, while lapping up her sweet cream. “All mine.” Then he speared his tongue inside her. Her ass came off the bed, as she bucked upward.

“Oh yeah,” she breathed. “You are so good with your tongue. Deeper, please, just please.”

Gio didn’t stop fucking her in slow, sensual strokes, lapping up her liquid heat, until she screamed out his name, and collapsed in a heap underneath him.

Without giving her any time to recuperate, he grabbed the large vibrator from the bed. With slow, small circles, Gio pressed it into her pussy, giving it a light tap to ensure it got in as deep as possible. When she arched her back, he knew he’d done his job. Next was the moment he had been looking forward to for weeks.

He retrieved a bottle of lube from the bedside drawer and royally squirted the gel into his hand. His slick finger started to rim her puckered little hole as he applied the gel inside and out. When he applied an amount onto the butt plug as well, he was sure he wasn’t going to hurt her—too much—for her first anal experience.

He cupped her plump cheeks in his palms and spread them wide so he could see the hole he desperately wanted to get into. With slow, twisting motions, he pushed the plug to her puckered opening and then pressed in.

She moaned as he began to push inward, the tight ring of muscle stretching, until the plug was in to the hilt.

She gasped. "Full. So damn full."

He gave her a grin and pushed the button on the vibrator.

Jazzy jolted underneath him, her eyes going wide, a scream erupting from her red, puffy lips.

His hands went to her knees again, pulling them wide. He liked seeing her holes stuffed with cock, even if it was by artificial toys.

He grabbed his dick and slapped it against her cherry lips. "Open up."

Her big hazel eyes looked at him, full of trust, as she opened her mouth and teased his cock head. Did she have any idea of the way she looked at him? How open, caring, confident in knowing that he would take care of her.

She gave his slit another lick. "Fuck my mouth. Please."

He tightened the grip on her head as he started to ram his cock down her throat. One hand feeding her his dick; the other, pinching and pulling a nipple. She was so fucking beautiful like this, with all her holes stuffed. It was the closest she was ever going to get to fucking multiple men.

Right when he was about to erupt in her mouth, he pulled out.

"No..." Saliva dripped out of her mouth, together with her protest. He saw it trickle down to her chest, leaving a shiny spot on the latex.

He dropped back onto her body and took her mouth. Their tongues fought a battle of wills, leaving them both breathless for a moment.

Her arms that were still holding the headboard were trembling, making her breasts shake. He got even harder just by looking at her breasts and bared pussy, while the rest of her body was hidden in tight latex that showed him her every curve. He removed the vibrator, shut it off, and tossed it away, but left the plug in.

She let out a soft moan as he grabbed her hips in a punishing grip and pushed into her pussy. He tilted her hips, so he could get deeper. He rode her for a while, enjoying her gasps and little cries. He pulled all the way back, and then rammed back in, burying himself inside her to the hilt.

She yelled, she cried, she bucked underneath him, begging him to make her come.

“Who do you belong to?” Even to his own ears, his voice sounded harsh.

Jazzy’s breasts were bouncing up and down, her mouth red and swollen, her head hitting the headboard.

“Please...Gio... please.”

“You know I love it when you beg, but answer my question. Who does your body fucking belong to? Every damn inch of it.”

He pressed in harder, making it hurt a little as his balls kept slapping her ass.

Her eyes spread wide open. “Gio...”

“From your beautiful hair to your little toes. Who do you belong to?” he roared.

Her hand landed on his cheek, but he didn’t scold her for letting go of the headboard.

“You,” she answered softly. “This body belongs to you.”

Damn straight, it did. He took her mouth as he kept fucking her, riding this mad wave they were both on.

“We’re just getting started. Hope your ass was stretched enough, ‘cause it’s time for it to take my dick.”

He flipped her onto her stomach and blanketed her body. With one hand, he pushed the latex away, and removed the plug; the other grabbed the tip of his erection and slowly pushed it into her ass.

She hissed at his invasion. He knew he was much bigger than the plug.

“Breathe out, *bella*.”

“It burns.”

Fuck, she was as tight as a fist. Why had he waited so long to take her ass? What a fool he had been.

Slowly, he started riding her ass, holding on to her hips so tight that he would leave marks on her rosy cheeks.

Jazzy’s face was pressed into the bedding, muffling her cries. She moaned, she bucked, she cursed, and then she started pushing her ass back to him. The room filled with the sound of their heavy breaths and flesh slapping against flesh.

All it took was one flick to her clit and she shattered beneath him, taking him with her as he poured his hot seed inside.

He collapsed on top of her, his face in the crook of her neck, heavily panting.

Madness. His addiction to her body was sheer insanity. Tonight had been the first time he’d gotten a taste of what it would feel like if another touched what he considered his.

Murder. It would make him feel like bloody murder.

CHAPTER 23

JAZZY

Today was Mike's birthday. It had been their tradition to go all touristy in their hometown that day, starting with a breakfast at IHOP—he loved their blueberry pancakes—then cycling to the Golden Gate Bridge, and having lunch at Fisherman's Wharf. He always bought her a treat at Chocolate Heaven. He would go for the dark chocolate breakup chunks, while she swore by Ghirardelli's delicious milk chocolate caramel squares.

It was the first time since they were kids that Jazzy couldn't celebrate Mike's birthday with him. As she sat in the kitchen, she looked into the garden, her eyes staring off in the distance. She didn't feel like eating. Or talking. Or working. She'd already sent a message to Tommie to hold the fort because she wasn't going to make it to the office today.

Thea looked worried, but after she couldn't get much more out of Jazzy than a few words, she left her alone.

In the distance, she could hear the doorbell, but she didn't feel like going to check on who was there. Thea would answer the door, or someone else would. It didn't really matter, for today was the birthday of her childhood friend, her first lover, the man she had shared her deepest, darkest secret with. The man who was no more.

The morning felt like an incredible low after the incredible high she'd had just the night before. She hadn't ever been into fetish wear, but knowing Gio had one designed just for her, made her feel special. Really special, and she didn't want to think of why that was. She was afraid that she could no longer deny that, somewhere over the course of the last few months, Giovanni Detta had conquered a place in her heart. Last night, he had worshiped every part of her body, including her tummy she had to admit she was somewhat self-conscious about.

"Excuse me, Jocelyn?"

She turned to Thea, who was standing in the door opening. "A package was delivered for you."

"What's in it?"

"I don't know. It's kind of big."

The package was big and square. The delivery guy had placed it in the hallway, next to the mirror. She had a feeling what it was, and as she unwrapped it, her hands started shaking.

Her stomach dropped, and tears filled her eyes when she uncovered a painting that depicted a red phoenix rising from the ashes. The bottom half of the canvas was black, making her think of darkness and despair. The beautiful bird had, however, risen from the deep dark, leaving behind a trail of fire as he launched himself toward the sun. Merely the tip of his tail still touched the dark, as if it was being pulled back somehow.

She immediately recognized the painter.

Mike...

“There was an envelope as well.”

She vaguely remembered taking the envelope from Thea and opening it.

Jazzy, if you're reading this, I'm gone.

I thought about leaving you letters, even a diary, telling you what you mean to me. What you have meant to me every day when you were by my side, holding my hand as I went through another treatment. In the end, I decided to show it to you, because I am a man that paints, not a man of words.

By now, I'm sure you have visited the masters, as I had always wanted but was never able to. Because that's the kind of person you are: if you make a promise, you keep it. There is nothing you wouldn't do for the ones you love, and I am honored to leave this life knowing that I was one of those people. I wish I would have been able to do the same for you. I wish I could have slain your monster. I may not have been able to do so in this life, but never forget that I am looking over you from above. Know that as I'm writing you this letter, that I am praying that you will find a guardian angel in this life before we meet on the other side.

Love you, always,

Mike

Her tears dripped onto the letter, making some letters go blurry. It was just too much. The thing with her sister, Tommie getting shot, and now this. She couldn't handle this. Not today. She dropped the letter and went upstairs, ignoring Thea's calls behind her.

I wish I could have slain your monster.

Why, why did he have to remind her of *him*? The monster in her closet, the darkest memory of her childhood that she so desperately tried to forget?

Dirty.

You little slut.

The memory made her feel so dirty.

She shucked her clothes off and stepped into the shower, letting the powerful jets hit her body. She didn't move from underneath the hard spray until she felt clean again. Then she turned the water off and crawled into bed.

Sleep. She needed to sleep until the pain would stop.

CHAPTER 24

GIO

Gio put down the letter from Mike. He knew the painter had been Jazzy's only lover. Another man might be happy to know that his wife didn't have many lovers, but he wasn't one of them. This Mike had been her only lover for a reason. What if she still had feelings for him?

Jazzy wasn't on the terrace or in the library, or in any of the other places he could usually find her. Instead, he found her in their bed, which was unusual, since it was only eleven o'clock. Jazzy was a bit of a night owl during the week, staying up till midnight.

He took a quick shower and went to bed. The second she felt his side of the bed dip, she rolled over and nestled against his chest.

He probably should ask about the letter and the painting, but he didn't. What he did do, was kiss her. This was what he'd been looking forward to all day. What he craved. The one thing in his life that was totally his. His to protect, his to pleasure, and his to hold. He was going to eradicate any other man from her mind.

She spread her legs and pressed up against him.

Never before had he fucked a woman who was so responsive to him. Jazzy was adventurous in bed and a natural submissive between the sheets. Outside of the bedroom, she might be hell on wheels but inside, she liked giving up control.

After he made her come, she cuddled up to him again. He had noticed that about her from their first night. She loved crawling against him in bed, seeking his warmth, and probably his comfort and protection; though she would never admit that.

"I received a painting today," she suddenly said.

"It's a good painting," he admitted begrudgingly. He might not like the artist, but he couldn't deny the talent. There was a beauty in the phoenix he'd drawn. A beauty and strength to it, up to the resilience the fire beneath the bird represented, and that he associated with his wife.

"It's from Mike. We grew up together. He was my childhood sweetheart. We had to keep it secret from my grandfather for most of our lives. Antonio Rossi's granddaughter with the son of a maid? God forbid."

There was a rawness in her tone that worried him. "Yet you kept seeing each other."

She nodded. "Up until the first year of college. When I finally got out of the mansion, away from underneath my grandfather's thumb, well, as away as was possible, we no longer had to hide our relationship. Ironically, that was when we discovered that we didn't want to be together. Not like that. It's odd how you can yearn for something when it's forbidden, and the second you get what you want, it loses its appeal. We knew we were better off as friends."

He would lie if he said that he wasn't relieved to hear that. The thought of her heart belonging to another man was maddening.

"Mike had always dreamed about seeing the big masters: Da Vinci, Rembrandt, Raphael, you name it. Unfortunately, he never had the money to travel and he would die before taking anything from me. That's why I went to Europe when I fled from you." She chuckled, and he was relieved to hear her laugh, even if it was at his expense. "I promised to finish his bucket list for him."

"What monster did he want to slay for you, *bella*?"

She stiffened in his arms. "You read the letter. You had no right."

No, he didn't. Still, he was glad he did. "Answer my question."

"It's just an expression."

"No, it's not. It was his last letter to you. Every word is thoroughly considered before it was written. See, he didn't speak in a general sense of monsters, but he used the word monster; singular. Tell me who your monster is."

"I can't," she whispered.

"Do you understand what you're asking of me? You're telling me to let go of a threat to my wife," he snapped. Like he would ever let anyone live that meant her any harm. For if, God forbid, anyone ever hurt her, he would make the world burn. Then another thought hit him. "Does Antonio know?"

"Please, Gio, just let it go."

She should know by now that he wouldn't, couldn't, let go of something that was a threat to her. "Of course he doesn't know," he answered his own question. "If he did, he wouldn't let him live, whoever this monster is."

Her lips remained sealed. Stubborn woman. For a second there, he expected her to bolt, and he was readying himself to chain her to the bed if necessary. To his surprise, she gave a deep sigh and snuggled into him.

“I’m safe with you,” she said. “I’m safe.”

The second part felt as if she were talking more to herself than reassuring him of her safety. Of course, he wasn’t reassured at all.

Tonight, he would let this go. But come tomorrow, Jocelyn Detta, was going to wake up in a brave new world.

CHAPTER 25

JAZZY

Jazzy sat in her car before the front gate, when she found her key wasn't working. The gate remained ominously shut.

A spark of worry fluttered in her chest. Hector didn't look like he was coming over to tell her the gate remained closed because of a technical flaw.

She lowered the car window when he knocked on it. "What's going on, Hector?"

"You can't leave."

"What do you mean, I can't leave?"

"Gio's orders," he said, giving her a scrutinizing look. "Something about keeping you inside while he was on a monster hunt. I really hope he doesn't mean some role play by

that, ‘cause my men get paid by the hour and they ain’t cheap.”

Unbelievable!

She drove her car back into the garage, and then stomped into the house, all the while dialing Gio.

“Yes, *bella*?”

“Don’t you ‘*bella*’ me. I want you to call off your henchmen.”

“Henchmen? All of Hector’s men are highly trained ex-military. I don’t think they would appreciate the word you use for them.”

“I don’t care what they would or would not appreciate. How about you consider things that *I* don’t appreciate? Let me give you a hint. Being locked up is at the top of my list!”

“Since we’re discussing things we don’t appreciate,” he said, his voice suddenly sounding dead serious, “my number one is not appreciating it when my wife is keeping things from me. Especially when that thing concerns her safety.”

She hung up on him, fuming from the inside. The rest of the day, she spent cursing her husband and holding a conference call with Tommie. Since it was too embarrassing to admit that she had been grounded like a child, she told him she had the flu. By the time the sun had set, she was still spitting mad, but at least had some sort of idea how she was going to handle Mr. I’m-king-of-your-world.

She waited for him, draped over their bed, wearing her sexiest lingerie. It was a red, completely see-through, negligee. When he walked inside their bedroom, his eyes flamed up.

Good.

She gave him a sweet smile. “Take a good look. Because that’s all you’ll be doing until you let me out of this house. Looking, but no touching. You want to keep me a prisoner in my own home?”

“So you admit this is your home?”

She ignored that comment. “If *I* have to suffer, so will you. These knees are staying closed.”

He walked up to the bed, while taking off his dress jacket. “Who do you think to punish with this attempted dry spell, *bella?*”

She didn’t deign that with an answer.

He stalked toward her, his eyes on her breasts, and literally pounced on her. She tried to roll over but didn’t make it before he came down on top of her.

“Get off me, I’m pissed at you.”

“Tell me who this monster is.”

“Get off me,” she repeated.

He let go of her with a sigh.

They didn’t make love that night, or the following night. Nor did she speak a word to him, giving him the classic silent treatment. Unfortunately, he only seemed to find that amusing. She was beginning to suspect that her silence was more of a reward than a punishment.

She’d hung Mike’s painting in her home office. It felt too personal to hang it out in the open for everyone to see. Looking at it, she knew what her friend had tried to do. Much like Mary, he had insisted on her getting help to deal with her issues concerning the past. She had always refused. The phoenix, and what it represented, was his final plea for her to face her demons. Sadly, she couldn’t do that. Some things were just better left buried.

On the third day of her imprisonment, Jazzy was ready to climb the walls. Of course, she wouldn’t give Gio the satisfaction of showing him what he did to her mental state of mind. So, she’d kept to herself, only leaving the house for a run. Luckily, their estate was huge, so she had enough room to cover. Unfortunately, it was also extremely well-guarded, which she discovered when she went looking for weak spots while casually strolling around. Something that had Hector actually smirking.

Today, she also received the news that her grandfather was admitted to a hospital. She spoke to him on the phone, and although he reassured her that he was fine and already back home, she wanted to go see him for herself.

She waited all day for Gio to return home. She even had Thea prepare his favorite meal to get him in a good mood.

He gave her a curious look from over the dining room table, when she asked if he wanted more wine. When he said he did, she poured him another glass and sat back across from him.

“My grandfather was admitted to the hospital today. I would like to go visit him tonight.”

“No.”

It was as if a vice constricted around her heart. “No? That’s it? Just, no?”

“No.”

That one word crushed her and left her heartbroken. “I’m starting to understand how you earned the name Black Ice,” she whispered.

If she thought the comment would phase him, she couldn’t have been more wrong. He continued his dinner, as if she hadn’t spoken a word.

Unable to sit at the same table with him, she rose to her feet and left the room.

Counting on his sympathy clearly wasn’t going to do it. It was time to call in the big guns. She went into her home office and called Tess.

“Hi, Jaz, haven’t heard from you in a while,” her friend’s cheery voice sounded. “Need me to ground some more bad guys for you?”

“Hi, Tess. Nothing like that, but I do need some info on someone. A slimy someone.”

“Ooh, I like the sound of that. How slimy are we speaking here? The kind you want me to dig up dirt on and

send his ass to a galaxy far, far away, as in, to prison by an anonymous tip? You know I can find anything on anyone,” she boasted.

No matter how dire the situation, Tess always managed to make her smile, and put in a *Star Wars* quote. “I just need to know that this person is still far, far away from me. As in, ‘on another continent’ far away.” She gave her Marco’s name and some basic information.

“On it. I’ll get back to you ASAP.”

She was going to have to be the reasonable one here. So, her plan was simple. Marco was in Monaco, or somewhere else in Europe, living the good life. She was going to make Gio promise to not take any action against him, and then show him proof that Marco hadn’t entered the States in over a decade. It seemed like it was the only way she was going to get out of this damn golden cage.

The next morning, she woke up to Gio’s hand gently grabbing her chin, turning her face to him. Then his hand trailed down over her body. Over her breasts, kneading her mounds, but not giving any attention to her treacherous nipples that had already sprung to life. From there, it continued its journey to her belly button, dipping in it, after which, it went to her special place. Her hot core that was already wet and burning for him.

All the while, they were silently laying next to each other, his face studying her. Him on his side, her on her back, panting, as his fingers reached her core.

She couldn’t help herself. She spread her legs, giving him more room to wreak havoc on her body, make the magic happen.

But even in her lust-induced mind, she had to keep this real. She wasn’t the type to lead anyone on, least of all him.

“I’m not going to suck you off or ride your dick,” she said, putting her foot down. He had to know what he was in for.

He didn't react. He just pushed two fingers inside her, pumping them ferociously, as the pad of his thumb drew circles around her mound, making her shudder.

This was crazy. They were both in bed, covers tucked up to their waists, barely saying a word as Gio fingered her. He kept up the pace, going faster by the minute, harder, deeper; oh so deep.

She bit her bottom lip, determined not to make a sound as she got off. Yes, it was petty, but he enjoyed her being vocal in bed, and he didn't deserve to enjoy this. This was for her. She'd earned an orgasm after all the stress he had put her through, damn it.

Her back arched when he pressed all five fingers inside her, and a violent quake moved through her, making her collapse into a quivering heap.

"You are so beautiful in your passion," he said softly, finally breaking his silence. "How can you expect me to stand by and let harm come to that?"

With those words, he rolled out of bed, leaving her body behind, satiated, but her mind all the more clouded.

That afternoon, Tess called. Marco Rossi had boarded a plane to San Francisco in the morning.

CHAPTER 26

GIO

Never before had Gio cared about what others thought of him; apart from his family, that is. He knew his reputation and name in the cutthroat real estate world. Black Ice. No one had ever dared to call him that in his face, or even mention the nickname in his presence. Jocelyn's remark had cut through him like a knife. Not because he was hurt by it, but because it was at that point he realized how much he hurt her by keeping her basically imprisoned.

Something had to give, and he feared that if he didn't find a solution to their impasse, for the first time, that might be him.

So, what was a man to do, when his wife wouldn't budge? You went talking to the people she grew up with, and

was highly protective of, to gather information. With Carmen still out of the country, Mary seemed the next best choice.

Since Hector had some business in the shelter, he tagged along. As they walked inside, Gio was pleased to see there was a guard inside, and not surprised at all that it was a woman.

“I see Mary has already chosen a security guard.”

Hector grunted. “Already? She pestered me about it the second you promised her one. The woman is tenacious when she wants something.”

They met Mary in the canteen. She was holding a small child in her lap, feeding her a bottle.

“You said it was urgent,” she said, with a glance at Hector.

He told Mary about the letter. Obviously, she knew Mike. Mary’s face was like an open book. He doubted she even knew how to properly lie.

“He had a painting sent to her after his death?” Mary seemed impressed. “I can’t really say that I’m surprised. They always had a special connection.”

He didn’t come here to hear about that special fucking connection. “Tell me who Jazzy is afraid of. She won’t tell me.”

“Oh, Jazzy won’t tell you anything,” Mary assured him, patting the baby on her lap. “She could out-stubborn an ox. You have no idea how often she went head-to-head with Grandfather, neither of them giving an inch.”

He’d figured as much, which was why he was here. “Give me his name.”

As if on cue, Hector stepped closer to Mary, boxing her in. It was like a real-life version of the Beast hovering over Beauty.

“That’s not going to work, you know,” she said, sending Hector an annoyed look. “Those scars and your huge exterior don’t scare me. I may not have seen much of the world yet, but I do know that what’s on the outside is only skin-deep.”

Maybe he hadn't given Mary enough credit. She appeared all fragile and angelic, but the acid look she was giving Hector was anything but.

His friend was clearly taken aback by her stance as well. After a grunt, he relaxed, and took a step back.

Obviously, it was time for a different approach. "I can't protect her if I don't know who I need to protect her from."

Mary visibly relaxed. "I...I can't betray her trust like that. I'm sure she will tell you when, if ever, she's ready to talk about it. You know, I wish she would. I tried to give her Dr. Stein's number, but she wouldn't take it." She sighed and looked away for a moment. "I owe her my life, and it kills me that she carries a guilt she should not be carrying."

Gio exchanged a look with his friend. He didn't have to say it; they had a lead. All they had to do was find the doctor.

Hector handed him a copy of Mary's patient file a short while later. There was a deadly scowl on his face as the big man paced in Gio's office, while Gio went through the files.

What he read made him sick. It made him want to murder someone. It *was* going to end with bloody murder, probably preceded with a good torture session. Sadly, that had to wait. Marco Rossi hadn't visited the States in over a decade. Only when his father ended up in a hospital, had he gained the courage to do so.

According to his sources, the fucker had flown into San Francisco this evening, only to take a flight back to Europe a few hours later. The only pit-stop he apparently made was at his father's. Gio could only imagine what the old man had threatened him with.

"I'm going after him."

After Marco. Hector didn't have to say the name.

Gio looked up to his friend. "He's already trailed back to Europe, and probably gone underground. It's easier to just

send some men after him. It could take you weeks, even months, to track him down.”

“Don’t care. I’ll find the fucker.”

Gio had no doubt he would. No one escaped a former Marine. There was a reason his team had dubbed him the Wolf.

After Hector left, Gio went to pay a visit to Antonio Rossi. It was time to confront the man who should have put an end to Marco in the first place.

The old man sat in his library, looking like he’d aged ten years since the last time he’d seen him. Gio knew of his health problems. The old man played it down to the girls, but Gio knew his days were numbered. Antonio must have seen something in his face, because he asked for the room to clear.

There was no need for pleasantries. He didn’t come here for chitchat. “I’m going to kill your son.”

He had to give it to Antonio, the man didn’t even flinch. He also didn’t try to pretend like he didn’t know what Gio was talking about.

“How did you find out? Jazzy would have never told you.”

And wasn’t that what Antonio had been counting on for all these years? The silence of his granddaughters. In hindsight, it explained a lot. Why Jazzy was raised the way she was. Why she had so much more freedom than the other girls. And why Antonio didn’t put down the law for her, as was usual in their world. He felt too damn guilty—as he should.

“She didn’t. I found out from Mary’s records.”

His lips thinned. “I’ve banished Marco from the States.”

“Yet he came back.”

“He will not come back again. Not even after I’m gone. I told him who Jazzy married. He knows she is protected.”

“Not good enough. When you find a snake, you chop off its head.”

Antonio's mouth tightened. "A man cannot enter heaven with the blood of his son on his hands. I've done a lot of things I'm not proud of. I have committed numerous crimes, but a child killer, I am not."

"What about your granddaughters, who were also children back then? The ones that got bitten by the snake. You don't let a snake slither away for it to come back and bite you one day. If you do that, sooner or later, someone else has to clean up your mess. Which, in this case, would be me."

"It seems like you've already made up your mind. Why are you here, Detta?"

"I'm here to give you a heads-up that you will attend a funeral soon. Don't get in my way. Also, if you start a war over this, know I'm ready. If you care about Jazzy at all, don't make her attend your funeral before your time."

Antonio narrowed his eyes but didn't react.

Good. The time for talking was over anyway.

Later that night, as he once again stared at his wife's back in bed, he contemplated his next move. Jazzy hadn't broken down yet—though she had looked particularly anxious today. And even though a part of him was furious with her, another part of him was damn proud of her. Still, the discord in his marriage left him unsettled, making him feel unbalanced. But this wasn't just about her safety, although that was his primary concern. It was also about trust.

Like you've trusted her?

Perhaps her refusing to trust him with her secret, he had no one to blame but himself. Why would she trust him if he hadn't entrusted anything to her?

"The first week in the group home, I almost got raped," he spoke, to her back. "I was ten years old and a scrawny kid back then. Two of the older boys held me down while the third

one came up to me. Had it not been for Hector, I would have ended up with much worse than just a split lip and a scar on my eyebrow.” He was still for a moment. “What I’m trying to tell you is that I know what it feels like to be powerless. That day, that very moment after Hector kicked the crap out of those kids, I vowed that I would never be that vulnerable again. Not me, and not my brothers, nor anyone else I considered to be family. I will protect you from harm, even if protecting you means locking you up and you hating me. Because I can live with you hating me. I can’t live with the thought that I have failed to protect you, which is my most important job, as your husband.”

To protect and provide.

“That’s not the most important one,” she whispered. Before he could ask her what she meant by that, she finally started talking.

“I found him in Mary’s room.”

JAZZY

She could tell him now, because Marco had broken the deal. He came back to the States. From the moment Tess had delivered the news, she’d felt like a ten-year-old again, feeling Marco’s hot breath on her neck, sick to her stomach when she climbed on top of him. Beyond terrified, but determined to get him off of a crying Mary.

“Gio...he’s...he’s here.” She didn’t know how to start her story, not while all she could think of was that Marco was somewhere in San Francisco. Her grandfather had been right in his prediction. Marco had returned from his exile the second something happened to him—though she was pretty sure her

nonno had expected that something to be his death, instead of him getting hospitalized.

“I know.”

Her head snapped around. “You know? How can you know? I haven’t told you anything yet.”

“You’re the most stubborn woman I know, Jaz. I couldn’t wait for you to come to your senses and tell me who the threat was. I found out for myself today.”

“How did you—?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Why didn’t you tell me you knew?” It should have been something to lead with, the moment he stepped inside their house.

His eyes softened as he stroked her hair. “I wanted to hear it from you, *bella*. I needed to know that you trusted me with this.”

And she did. And it wasn’t just because she was terrified, which she was, or she didn’t have any other options, which she did. Deep down, she’d known that Giovanni Detta wouldn’t let his wife get hurt, no matter how they fought like cats and dogs sometimes.

“I found him in Mary’s room,” she repeated. Jazzy bit the inside of her cheek before she turned away from him and forced herself to tell the truth to the wall. “By him, I mean, Uncle Marco. Later, I found out it was the first time he took it this far, actually trying to get into her bed instead of staring at her from her bedroom door. I didn’t immediately understand why Mary was crying, but I knew something was wrong. So, I went up to the bed and when he saw me, he told me to leave. Mary’s eyes were closed. She sat on the bed, her fingers white from clutching the bedsheets. There was no one at home that night, other than Mary’s nanny in the adjoining room. I went up to the bed, and”—she swallowed—“I leaned against him, and touched his arm to distract him from Mary. It worked. He was a bit drunk and sluggish. His hands were clumsy as he pulled my shirt from over my head, all the while, telling me

how I would do for now. Mumbling to himself that I wanted this. I let him kiss and grope me, while trying not to throw up. As he ducked and fumbled with my pants, I saw a pair of scissors on Mary's bedside table. She used to redesign the clothes of her dolls all the time. I grabbed the scissors and struck him. It wasn't even intentional, but I hit him straight in the eye. He started bleeding like a stuck pig. His scream woke up Mary's nanny. I fell off the bed and somehow ended up cutting my wrist, almost making me lose my arm. I don't remember much about what happened next. I do remember the nanny bursting into the room, looking stark white when she saw the scene that met her." And she remembered Marco's words that he was going to make her bleed.

Silence echoed through the bedroom until Jazzy couldn't stand it anymore. She turned to face Gio's judgment, only to discover that there was none. All she saw in his deep blue eyes was compassion and anger on her behalf. His fingers lazily played with her hair.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"You know what I'm going to do."

Yes, she did. And she wasn't sure how she felt about that. She certainly didn't feel sorry for Marco. Given the chance, she would have cut off his balls herself, but she knew Gio would never let her get anywhere near that monster. "Would you consider not—"

"Don't ask me to spare him," Gio cut her off. "That's not going to happen. He needs to be put down. He should've been years ago. Men who prey on children shouldn't be allowed to walk the earth. Every day that fucker lives, he's a danger to other kids."

"I agree. I was just going to ask you to make it...quick. I don't want him to be unrecognizable. That would kill my *nonno*. Think about his heart."

"I don't give a damn about Antonio's heart." He put his hand on her chest. "But I do care about my wife's."

Unsure about how to react to that statement, and her eyes getting suspiciously misty, she kissed him.

Of course, one kiss led to another, and before she knew it, they were groping each other, rekindling the flame that had been on a slow burn for so many days.

“Missed this,” he said with a hiss, as he slammed into her and started a hard and punishing rhythm.

As her toes curled, and the familiar heat zinged through her body, she realized that she’d missed this as well. The past few days had been torture. She was afraid of what that meant. She feared that in the end, it was going to leave her behind, heartbroken.

CHAPTER 27

JAZZY

Jazzy shifted to the left and right, viewing her dress from all angles in front of the mirror. Gio was taking her to a fundraiser tonight and she couldn't wait. It was the first time they were going to a social gathering together, where she had to get all dressed up.

The same woman as on her wedding day had shown up, with a wide selection of dresses, and heaps and heaps of shoes, to

choose from. In the end, she went for a silver sleeveless dress with a side split that hugged her curves and accented her ass. Gio loved her ass, bubbly or not. The entire ensemble was topped off by pumps, of course. The only jewelry she wore was the necklace he gave her.

She couldn't keep her eyes off him when he emerged from his dressing room, wearing a tuxedo, looking smoking hot.

"I don't think I want to go anymore," she confessed. She just wanted to peel his clothes off and see him naked.

He came up to her and cupped her cheek. "That would deprive me of the chance to show off my wife." When she cocked a brow, he added, "And sex in the backseat of the car."

She couldn't help but smile as he led her downstairs and into the limo. They were making out in the backseat when Gio suddenly pulled away.

"Give me your panties," he ordered.

Drunk with desire, she did as he asked. Because, why not? She giggled when he

opened the window and simply threw out her silk panties.

“I can’t believe you just did that.”

His hand went to her thigh high split, creeping up higher and higher, drawing circles. “Better believe it. I want you available for me all night. It will be the only thing getting me through this boring event.”

She nipped at his bottom lip. “Why are we going if it’s so boring?”

“Detta Enterprises is sponsoring one of the charities, so I have to show my face. It will be filled with people who pay a thousand-dollar entrance fee, and another thousand per platter. All so they don’t feel guilty living the good life, and can pretend to do something good out of the kindness of their hearts.”

“Sounds like you don’t like these people much.”

“I don’t. Most of them have never known hunger a day in their life. Never struggled with anything. Just born and raised with a silver spoon in their mouth. They wouldn’t survive a day on the streets.”

She pondered that for a second. “I’m like them. I mean, I’ve never known hunger in my life. Can’t say I would have survived on the streets either.”

He tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “You are a survivor, *bella*. Don’t ever think otherwise. You protect the ones you love. Mary and Carmen are a testament of that.”

I love you.

She froze, only able to relax when she found that she hadn’t spoken the words aloud.

Ever since their confessions, two days ago, something had fundamentally shifted between them. She couldn’t put a name to it, but Gio seemed different; even more protective than he already was. They hadn’t talked about Marco again and somehow, she knew he would never mention him again. As for Marco, after a pit stop at her grandfather’s, he’d apparently made it straight back to Europe. She had a feeling this was because he’d found out who she was married to.

It hadn't escaped her notice though, that Hector wasn't her bodyguard anymore, leaving another hulking figure to trail her. From Tess, she had learned that her former bodyguard had left for Europe. Yeah, Gio wasn't the only one keeping tabs on people.

They were greeted by a hostess who was dressed in some elaborate green dress. "Welcome, Mr. and Mrs. Detta," she crooned, shaking their hands. "It's so wonderful that you two could make it."

After the exchange of some more pleasantries, a waiter led them to their round table, which they shared with two more couples.

Though Jazzy wasn't much for haute cuisine—really, those tiny bits couldn't fill the stomachs of a mouse family—she still appreciated the five-course meal that was served. The plates looked like pieces of art. She wanted to check her makeup before the bidding started, so she excused herself.

In the ladies' room, she was met by an unpleasant surprise. Lisa; as in, "I give fellatio to married men at a wedding" Lisa. Jazzy had totally forgotten of her existence,

or the fact that she orbited anywhere near Gio's world. After reapplying her lipstick and ignoring the heavy silence between her and the other woman, she left the restroom.

The minute she left the ladies' room, Jazzy was cornered by a man in a trench coat, who stunk of cigarettes. He looked like a washed-up detective from an eighties movie. Who even dressed like that anymore?

“Mrs. Detta?”

Why was he holding out a phone to her?

“I'm James Harvey with the SF Parole. Would you like to comment on the rumors of your husband's entanglement with the Russian Bratva?”

Ah, not holding out a phone then, but recording their conversation. Not that she planned on giving him anything to report about.

She tried to pass him, but he stepped in front of her, blocking her way.

“Do you have any comments on your husband's real estate war with Kristoff Romanov in Pacific Heights?”

“Could you please step aside?” *Or I’m going to kick you.* Not very ladylike, but surely effective.

Then Harvey turned mean. “Guess the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree, does it?”

An unexpected pair of clicking heels came to her rescue. It was their hostess, looking absolutely horrified as she rushed up to her, with security guards in tow.

“I am terribly sorry, Mrs. Detta. I don’t know how he got in.” She snapped her fingers at the guards, who dragged a protesting Harvey away. “I can assure you it will never happen again.”

As she continued to apologize profusely, Gio joined them. Her hand reached out to him, as if on its own accord, needing him close.

The hostess continued apologizing, basically repeating the same words to Gio. His eyes turned hard and, ignoring the hostess, he pulled her away into an abandoned corridor.

Tired from the night, she leaned against the wall.

“I’m beginning to understand why my grandfather never allowed us to go to these kind of events. Gina always berated him for it. I suppose he was just trying to protect us.”

“That. And to possibly protect you from men like me. Had I seen you at a fundraiser before, I would have snatched you up.”

She was never sure if he meant it, saying things like this. They didn’t marry out of love. Yet sometimes she felt like it could actually work out between them. Other times, she feared he would put her on the street as soon as the two years had passed. Every day, it became more and more difficult to keep her distance, to maintain an invisible wedge between their passionate nights and her heart. She feared that, one day, her brain was going to malfunction and blurt out that she loved him. And that would be the day he’d look at her with pity because he wouldn’t return her feelings. Because, if nothing else, Giovanni Detta was no liar.

“How do you deal with this? People judging you? Even if they don’t say it to

your face, knowing what they think of you?”

He grabbed a nearby chair and sat on it, pulling her onto his lap. “I’m used to it. No matter what I do, some people will always see me as the son of a gangster. In their eyes, I’m guilty by association.”

She looked at him speculatively. “And are you?”

He bent his head to her. “Are you asking me if I have blood on my hands, or if I deal with the mafia?”

“Both.” She knew there was a challenge in her voice, but if he thought she was going to back down now, he had another think coming.

“I am not squeaky clean. I can’t be, even if I wanted to. I’ve done certain things to get to where I am today. Do I have ties to the Bratva as some claim? Yes. Though, not of the kind you might think. I don’t do illegal business with them that could get back to me or my family.”

“But you’re doing business with them?”

He was silent for a moment. “I have certain connections there. Nothing you need

to worry about.”

“I’m not worried.” And she truly wasn’t. If there was one thing she had learned about her husband, it was that he was very protective of those he considered his. Overprotective even, but she’d like to think she was working on that.

“And you shouldn’t be. Nobody gets to touch you.”

“Still, doesn’t it bother you that people throw your past in your face? That they just assume you’re a gangster because of your father?”

“Why should it? I’m not ashamed of who my father was. He did his best with the cards life had dealt him. The only mistake he ever made in my book is letting our mother get murdered. See, a made man knows how he might end up one day. It’s most likely in jail or six feet under before his time has come. What a man, however, does take care of, is his woman. My father failed at that, letting his business touch my mother. It’s the reason why I chose to go legit.” *Mostly*, his eyes seemed to say. “I can’t have my brothers dying in some turf

war. Though, even being legit, I still seem to have failed my family.”

“You didn’t,” she protested.

A hard laugh. “Oh, but I did.”

“How did you—”

“Luca.”

A name she’d never heard him, nor another Detta, speak before. Lucas’ incarceration was like a dark cloud hanging over the brothers. “You will get him out. I have no doubt of that.”

“I will. One way or another, I will. Just as I will take down the man who murdered my parents.”

“You know who he is,” she said softly.

He nodded.

“Is he still alive?”

“For now.”

“Why?” It was a legitimate question. She highly doubted that he was collecting evidence to hand the man who had done his family wrong over to the authorities.

“Because it took a long time before we found out who he is. When we did, he was

practically untouchable. Taking him out would not have been a problem, but the aftermath would have. There's always a trail, and I couldn't have that follow back to my family. See, we want him to know who ends him. I want him to know, without it having a backlash on my family. It took us years to make his empire crumble, until he became a nobody. Also, we want him to be alone, and broken, to suffer before we end him."

It sounded like a promise. An ominous, dangerous promise. She didn't like this dark mood that suddenly washed over him.

"Let's go home," she whispered.

"You don't want to bid on anything?"

"No. I already have everything I need." She probably shouldn't have said that, revealing too much of the conflicting emotions she felt, but she couldn't stop herself.

Gio's eyes turned into a dark blue, smoldering fire. He kissed her hand and made a call to Raoul to pick them up.

Then, he showed her exactly why she didn't need any panties that night. Yep, in

the back seat of the limo.

CHAPTER 28

GIO

Gio stared at the report Jackson handed over to him. His brother didn't say a word, just sat across the desk from him. After Gio had read it, he understood his stony silence. A part of him wasn't entirely surprised about the latest development in the ongoing investigation on their parents' murder. After all, they lived in a dog-eat-dog world, in which only a very few people were to be trusted. It did explain, though, how Bianchi had managed to lure their father into that warehouse.

Still, he wished the report was wrong. Just this once.

"Are you sure about this?"

"Positive," Jackson said. "You know what this means."

Sadly, he did.

“Unless...” Jackson shrugged. “Unless you decide to not to take any action.”

“That’s not just my decision to make.”

“No, but you *are* the one who has the most to lose if you do take action, no matter what you claim. Think of what will happen. This is your future we’re talking about here. You can’t just—”

“Where are we on Bianchi?” he interrupted his brother, before Jax would start summing up all sorts of rational reasons why Gio should ignore the information he’d just read. As if ignoring it made it any less real.

Jax sighed. “Oscar Bianchi seems to have fallen off the face of the earth.”

Of course he had. Bianchi was like a rabid dog who had lost everything. Nowhere to go, nowhere to hide. Thing was, rabid dogs could become dangerous if not put down.

But Jackson was right on the other thing. Before he made the call to set in motion an irreversible chain of events, he had one more person to talk to.

The San Quentin state prison reminded Gio of what his life could have been like if he had followed in his father’s footsteps. It also reminded him of his failure to protect his brother, Luca. Luca, who had put down a rule about only being visited once every few months. He guessed his brother didn’t like being reminded of the outside world, any more than Gio liked the inside.

As he sat waiting in the visiting room that practically reeked of pain, misery, and the loss of hope, a part of him was glad that his father was dead instead of being locked up. Which was probably a fucked-up way of thinking, but a part of him was glad to never have seen his father, a man larger than life, being reduced to living behind bars. His dad had lived by the sword, and had died by it too.

Protect and provide.

In the end, his father had failed on both accounts. No one had protected or provided for the Detta boys after his death. His father had never fathomed that his wife could be taken out on the same night as he was killed. They had been lucky that their estranged grandmother had claimed them. It couldn't have been easy, taking care of a bunch of little boys, at her age and on her pension, but she never complained. And they always managed to get by.

When the Scolini family was wiped out, together with the family that had attacked them, it had created a power vacuum that had been swiftly filled by the Bratva. Which made it all the more ironic that Gio paid the Russians to keep his brother safe inside.

Of the four of them, Luca was the one who liked the finer things in life the most; always surrounding himself with the best of the best. Gio understood him all too well. When you spent most of your youth with other people's hand-me-downs, you went all out once you made it. He understood, because he hadn't denied himself Jocelyn Rossi, the second he'd touched her.

He looked up when Luca entered the room in his orange jumpsuit. It seemed like every time he visited, his brother's once sleek and toned body was getting more buff.

"I hear congrats are in order, big brother." Luca gave him a hug, ignoring one of the guards in the back. They were paid well to turn the other way when Luca ignored the prison's "no touching" policy.

"Wish you could have been there." The reception hadn't been big, and a fast arranged one, but the only ones he cared about attending were his brothers anyway.

"You're the first of the Dettas to start the next generation. To protect and provide, brother. I really hope she's worth it."

There was a bitterness in Luca's voice that hadn't been there before. Luca had been the easygoing one of them. The Golden Boy with a knack for investments. That is, until he got

locked up. The second he was arrested, his fiancée had left him. As far as Gio knew, she had never visited him in jail.

“Jocelyn is...different. It was difficult to get a hold on her at first.” Well, it had been, but that was over now. Once the lion had caught his prey, she was his to do with as he pleased. And fuck, did she please him.

Luca raised a brow. “Why do I feel like there’s a story behind that?”

Gio shook his head. They had more important things to discuss. “Let me make a call to our Siberian friend.” He changed the subject. They had this conversation almost a year ago, when Luca had been sentenced and the chances of an appeal had seemed bleak.

“No.” Luca was adamant about it. “I don’t want you to owe that Russian.”

No one did. If Gio was named Black Ice, then Kristoff would be just Ice. A man had to at least have a heart for it to be black.

“He’s half-American.”

Luca was being unreasonable. It wasn’t as if Gio didn’t know where his sudden loathing for anything Russian stemmed from. His fiancée had sure done a number on him.

“I don’t care if he’s a half-god. I don’t want his help.”

Gio didn’t mention that they already owed Kristoff’s contacts in here. Keeping Luca alive and well in prison came at a price. Protection money he gladly paid.

“Damn it, Luciano. I hate seeing you here. We *will* be having this conversation again.”

Luca nodded. They both knew what he meant. If Luca would still be stuck inside in another year, Kristoff would seem like a better option. The Russian had the means and the manpower to break Luca out. They could transfer Luca to a non-extraditing country in no time.

“So, how did you and your bride meet?”

A change of subject. One of Luca's newly-adapted specialties since he was inside. In this case, it was actually a great bridge to what Gio had come to talk to him about.

"We met at Antonio Rossi's house; that's her grandfather. Then, she fled the country to get away from me. Let me tell you how I caught her."

Gio returned back to the office after talking to Luca, to pick up that damn report. Just as he grabbed his suitcase, a knock sounded on his door. To his surprise, Lisa Martell, the wife of one of his office managers, entered his office.

"Gio. Could I speak to you for a moment?"

"I was about to leave."

"It won't take long." She hurried inside, closing the door behind her, but not before his assistant, Gale, stopped the door from shutting all the way.

Gale glared at Lisa, obviously not happy with Lisa slipping past her.

Gio motioned for her that it was okay; this wasn't going to take long. Her lips pursed, and she took away her arm, but didn't close the door behind her, leaving it open a small gap.

"I came to apologize," Lisa said, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "For what happened at the wedding, I mean." She sounded a tad nervous.

"My wedding was months ago. It's a little late to come apologize now." Had it only been a few months? It seemed much longer, because he couldn't remember what his life had been like before, without Jazzy in it.

Lisa leaned over his desk, not subtle at all, over showing cleavage. "I needed some time to sort some things out...Edwin and I have separated. I was busy dealing with that."

Like he gave a crap about the marital status of his employees. A marriage was private, and just like he would never allow another to meddle in his, he wouldn't entertain gossip of another's.

“Apology accepted. You can leave now,” he dismissed her, and went into the adjoining bathroom where he’d left his jacket.

When he returned to his office, he found Lisa sitting on his desk. Naked.

She’d put her hands on her knees, with the palms up. Her long, blond hair was spread out over her breasts. It wasn’t the first time she’d propositioned him, letting him know she was available for him to fuck. Still, stripping in the middle of his office was a bold gesture, even for her.

Thing was, she had nothing on his wife. They weren’t even in the same league.

With a deep sigh, he walked over to her.

CHAPTER 29

JAZZY

Jazzy took a long pull from her celebratory margarita, as she was lazily draped over a couch with a view over the ocean. Life didn't get much better than this.

“To our first client!” Tommie called out. He had made reservations for a table at the Eagle Cafe, their favorite place at the wharf.

He'd also sent out a call to Mary for an impromptu celebratory drink. Much to Jazzy's surprise, Gina showed up as well. The contrast between the two sisters couldn't be any bigger. Gina, looking Rodeo Drive chic in a tight, knee-high dress and killer boots. Mary, dressed as the eternal student, in jeans and a hippie-style flowing top.

Their table was stocked with a delicious seafood platter. The only thing missing was Gio, to share her joy with. Then

again, her new bodyguard, who sat at an adjoining table, reminded her that—though he might not be there in body—Gio was with her in spirit. After she had learned what drove him, and the unjustified guilt he felt over his brother going to jail, his protective streak made more sense. And that, in a way, helped her to deal with it more easily.

“I have some exciting news to share with you guys as well,” Mary said.

Gina rolled her eyes, clearly already familiar with the news, and obviously not impressed by it.

“I’ve been asked by my friend to become a godparent for her little sister. I’m so excited!”

“Congrats, Mary.”

“I know, right. I mean, Zoe is six already, and we’re not going to have an official ceremony or anything, but I would like it if you would come to the celebration anyway. It’s going to be at the shelter next week.”

“Don’t forget to tell them why it’s being held at the shelter,” Gina added. “Or that your friend is an addict who lives there.”

“Former addict,” Mary chastised her. “And she’s getting her life back on track.”

Gina snorted, and took a large gulp of her wine.

“Not everyone is as lucky as we are, or can find a rich fiancé in a matter of weeks,” Mary continued with a frown. She might look all sweet, with golden curly locks, but Mary had a spine of steel when challenged about something she was passionate about.

“You’re engaged?” Jazzy couldn’t help but sound surprised. She would have expected that tad bit of news to be Gina’s opening sentence instead of a casual remark.

Gina waved a big rock on her finger. “Practically engaged,” she corrected her. “Oscar hasn’t asked me yet, but he will. Any day now.”

Mary rolled her eyes. “It’s all she can talk about these days. Oscar this and Oscar that.”

“He *is* an interesting person to talk about,” Gina said. “His family owns vineyards all over California.” That was the start of a fifteen-minute biography on how wonderfully successful her “almost fiancé” was.

“That’s nice to hear and all,” Jazzy interrupted her. “I mean, him being successful and all, but what is he like as a person? You didn’t mention anything about love.”

Gina’s editorial on everything Oscar came to an immediate halt. “What does love have to do with a marriage? I like Oscar enough and he wants me. What more is there?”

“It makes me sad to even hear you say that.”

“Oh, step off your high horse, Jocelyn,” Gina said snidely. “You are the last person who gets to judge me. We both know there wasn’t any love involved when you married Giovanni Detta.”

“That’s true,” Jazzy admitted, “but—”

“That is totally uncalled for,” Tommie came to her aid. She’d told him about her marriage, right before she confessed that she fell in love with her own husband. “You both know the circumstances that led to that marriage.”

Gina gave Tommie a sharp look. “Still. It’s easy for her to speak; she’s already secured herself a billionaire.”

“I sure did.” Any other time, Jazzy might have made Gina eat that hateful comment, but not tonight. Tonight was a night for celebration. But most importantly, the reason why she wasn’t going to give Gina any shit was because she did love her husband. Her marriage might not have started out that way, but she couldn’t deny the way she felt.

“You forgot hot monkey sex,” Tommie chimed in. He was staring at her new bodyguard from over the rim of his glass. “You know, about what’s important in a marriage. Hot, so deliciously hot, makes your toes curl permanently, sex.”

She snatched away his mojito. “Stop drooling over the man.”

“Speaking of man,” Gina said, sending her a glare, “there’s mine.”

A man dressed in a Marino wool suit was standing on the threshold of the cafe. Gina waved him over and he soon joined their table. Close up, Jazzy could see his salt ‘n pepper hair and bronzed skin. There was a smile on his lips that, for some reason, made her feel uncomfortable.

“Hello, ladies. Nice to meet you. I’m Oscar Bianchi.”

Jazzy considered the celebration to be a success, despite Gina’s hateful remarks at the beginning of the evening. The second Oscar had joined them, she’d become all sugary sweet, not showing a hint of the tongue-lashing she was famous for.

But after another round of drinks, and with Oscar constantly looking on his watch, Jazzy decided to go home and wait for Gio.

“We can drop you off,” Oscar offered.

“Oh, you don’t need to do that, really,” Jazzy said, as she grabbed her bag from the table. “I’ll just—”

“I insist,” Oscar said, flashing a set of white teeth. “Your bodyguard can just follow us.”

Oscar’s ride was a rental, because apparently his Bentley was in the garage, as he assured them. She wasn’t sure yet how she felt about him. Though he did seem exactly Gina’s type; dropping hints at how much he owned every few sentences.

Fifteen minutes into their ride, Oscar made a turn downtown. “That’s not the way to my home,” Jazzy said.

“Ah, I’m sorry,” Oscar apologized, taking a look in the back mirror, probably to make sure if her bodyguard was able

to keep up with him. “I just assumed that you would want to celebrate with your husband as well. That’s why I’m driving to Detta Tower. Do you want me to turn around?”

Actually, surprising Gio didn’t seem like a bad idea at all. “No, it’s fine. You can drop me off there.” When he pulled over in front of Detta Tower, she thanked him before she stepped out.

She ignored Gina’s glare. Obviously, her cousin didn’t like her boyfriend giving Jazzy any attention, even if it were only out of politeness.

She took the elevator up to Gio’s floor, while trying to coordinate her thoughts. He deserved to know that she loved him. She had a slight buzz going, which hadn’t disappeared by the time she exited the elevator. It was late at night; the whole floor was empty. Even Gio’s assistant Gale, who was like part of the furniture, was nowhere to be seen.

When she glanced inside the small opening to Gio’s office, her buzz disappeared instantly. And just like that, her heart exploded into a million pieces of shrapnel.

She spun around and ran back into the elevator, which was still there. She tried to avoid the mirrors that were mocking her for being so gullible. For trusting him. For... loving him.

It wasn’t Vanessa she had found naked in his room, waiting for him. No, it had been Lisa, and somehow, that was even worse. That moment at their wedding, when he’d sided with her in throwing Lisa out, had been a ruse. The moment she had decided to take as the foundation to their marriage had been a sham. And that, she could never forgive. It was like being stabbed in the back and punched in the gut at the same time.

Unsure of what to do when she left the building, she looked around in the cold night. She spotted her bodyguard in his car. No. The last thing she needed was him giving his boss a call about her being upset. Because no matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t keep the tears at bay.

She was done. This time, when she disappeared, it was going to be for good. But first, she had to get rid of her security detail. She started walking, up until she saw her bodyguard leave his car, to follow her on foot. The second he crossed the street, she ducked into an alley and ran. She ran until her feet hurt, until the pain in her lungs was almost as bad as the one in her heart.

The call from her bodyguard came within less than a minute. She pressed it away.

The next call was from her husband. She decided to pick up because he deserved to be told what an unfaithful asshole he was.

“Gio,” she answered, trying to put as much venom in his name as possible. Unfortunately, the catch in her voice screwed that up.

“You’ve ducked your bodyguard. What’s going on, Jocelyn?”

He sounded worried. Well, he never needed to worry about her again.

“I left him behind. Just as I’m leaving you.”

Silence. Then, “You are what?”

“You heard me. I. Am. Leaving. You.”

More silence, and she could just imagine his jaws grinding, trying to remain his cool and collected self.

“Is there”—a chill crept into his voice—“someone else?”

“Excuse me?!” No longer able to control her anger and hurt, she cursed. “I’m leaving your ass because you cheated on me, you asshole. I saw her in your office. Naked as the day she was born.”

Was that a sigh of relief she heard? Was he for real?

“Listen to me, *bella*. That wasn’t what it looked like. Come back and—”

Wasn’t what it looked like? As if she didn’t know what that meant.

“No! You listen to *me*. We always knew this was going to end someday. You...you got control over my grandfather’s company. You don’t need me anymore. I won’t file for divorce until we’re married for two years. But we’re through. Please, Gio.” She closed her eyes for a second. “You...broke my heart. At least have the decency to let me lick my wounds in peace.”

With that, she ended the call and turned off her phone. When she rounded another corner, a car stopped next to her. Afraid that Gio had somehow found her, she was ready to bolt when she recognized it was Oscar’s.

The car door flew open and she looked at Gina’s frown. “What are you doing outside in the cold? Didn’t we just drop you off at your office?”

“I...” Jazzy looked around in the busy street, feeling hunted, and made a split-second decision to step inside the car. “Please drive.”

Gina looked baffled. “Drive where?”

“The airport.”

“Why—”

“Not now, Gina. I’m really not in the mood for any explanations. Just get me out of this city.”

“Don’t worry, Jocelyn. I will get you out of here,” Oscar assured her.

CHAPTER 30

JAZZY

Somewhere in between stepping into Oscar's car and her ride to the airport, something had gone wrong. Terribly wrong, judging by the lingering scent of chloroform.

Waking up zip-tied to a chair in some ratty motel room was getting old. Jazzy groaned as the blurry room came to life, with the distinctive sound of a man talking.

For some bizarre reason, she expected to see Marco's face. A part of her had always feared, and dreaded, that one day he would come for her. Come back and make good on his promise to kill her. It didn't matter that he had tucked tail and run back to Europe. He was always there, in the back of her mind.

Her jaw dropped when she saw it was Oscar staring at her, instead of Marco.

Oscar was screaming into his phone. "I know it was you! You've ruined me, and now I'm going to ruin you. If you want to see your wife again, make a fucking donation to this bank account."

He named an obscene amount of money. The hate in his eyes, though, told her that it wouldn't matter whether Gio paid him or not. This man was not going to let her go. It wasn't about the money. Well, not just the money. This was personal. What she didn't know yet was the how. How was this personal?

Oscar returned to her with a syringe in his hand. He hit her leg with the

tranquilizer, and she could barely hold in a cry of pain.

“So you can be transported nice and easily,” he said by way of explanation, as if she’d asked him for one.

“Where’s...” She cleared her dry throat. “Where’s Gina?” They might not always see eye-to-eye, but it would devastate her to know that the cousin she had grown up with, had been in on her kidnapping.

“You should think about yourself instead of that airhead.” He held the phone to her ear. “Tell him you’re alive.”

“Jocelyn. *Bella*, are you okay?” Gio’s voice sounded clipped.

“I’m...fine.” She was anything but fine, but she didn’t know what else to say. Hearing his voice again, after she’d vowed to herself she would never see him again, was both surreal and painful. God, it was so painful.

“He’s not going to touch you. His business is with me.”

“What...what business?”

Oscar snatched the phone away. “You have one hour, Detta.” Then he shut his phone off and removed the SIM card.

A knock sounded on the door and Oscar let in that cigarette-smelling reporter. What was his name again?

“Glad you could make it, Harvey.” Oscar shut the door behind him and gestured toward a chair.

Harvey’s jaw dropped when he saw her. “You kidnapped Giovanni Detta’s wife? Are you insane? He’s going to think I had something to do with this. Oh shit. Shit, shit, shit.” He looked as if he was ready to burst a blood vessel.

Oscar ignored Harvey’s breakdown; instead, his crazy eyes focused on her. “Your husband ruined my life!” he snarled, and slapped her across her cheek.

Shit. That burned.

“Jesus!” Harvey lit up a smoke and took a deep pull. “What the hell. Don’t hit her...”

“I might be on the Detta list”—Oscar spat in her face—“but I will take his heart with me before I go.”

The maniacal glee in Oscar's eyes terrified her. Gone was the man trying to charm her cousin. "I don't understand how ___"

"I've heard of the way he looks at you. Your dumb cousin wouldn't stop talking about it. She mistakes it for possession and basic lust, but I know what it is. It's the same way his father looked at his mother. Brianna should have been mine. *Mine!*"

And suddenly, all pieces of the puzzle fit neatly together. *Oh no. Oh no, no, no.*

Oscar turned away from her, tousling his hair, then pointed a finger at her.

"I have a scoop for you right here, Harvey. Write it down. Every black smudge on Giovanni Detta's wife. Just like you wanted."

Harvey puffed out more smoke. The small room that looked like it stemmed from the Jazz era, was quickly becoming misty.

"A scoop on his wife? What the fuck would I do with that? You promised me an exclusive on the San Francisco underworld!"

“Oh, but to understand how the underworld works, you have to understand what makes them tick. How a man would do anything to protect his family name. Anything.” Oscar’s lip curled up. “But first, let me tell you about what happened to Jocelyn and Mary Rossi a decade ago.”

Jazzy’s head snapped up. For a second, she didn’t feel the throbbing pain in her cheek, or the bone-wrenching fear of being in the clutches of a madman. She felt disgust and shame. “Don’t...”

Oscar laughed. “Oh yes, you vicious little slut.” Then, as if it gave him great joy, he started to unfold her dirty laundry.

How had Oscar found out? She thought her grandfather had buried any files on that night. Then again, when you had the resources, it probably wasn’t too difficult to find out anything about anyone.

“Please don’t,” she whispered.

A part of her hated herself for the pleading tone in her voice. She hated it because it made her sound weak, and also a hypocrite. Such a damn hypocrite for telling Mary that she’d done nothing wrong, that

no seven-year-old would invite a man to her bed. All the while, feeling guilty herself for letting Marco touch her. If she made it out of this alive, she was going to see a damn shrink.

When Oscar finished commemorating the story of the worst night of her life, Harvey looked baffled.

“That’s your big, dirty secret on Detta’s wife? That she was abused as a child and stabbed her attacker. Really?”

Oscar looked as if he wanted to say more, but then another knock sounded on the door.

The reporter jumped up once again and lit another cigarette. For a crime journalist, Jazzy found him acting very skittish.

“Guess this is your first time being an accomplice to a kidnapping, huh?” she said, giving Harvey a glare.

His mouth opened and closed like a fish before he turned back to Oscar. “Who’s at the door?”

A nasty smile appeared on Oscar’s face. “That would be Kristoff Romanov.”

Harvey's jaw dropped. "You called the head of the Russian crime syndicate? Jesus, fuck! Are you insane? That man is a beast. A stone-cold killer. He will never, ever dignify himself to come over here. It's like asking Al Capone to take care of a pest problem for you. You're going to get us killed!"

When the man in question however *did* walk in—by himself, as far as Jazzy could tell—a bone-wrenching fear coursed through her system.

Kristoff Romanov had tall, dark, and dangerous plastered all over his big frame. Romanov's shoulder-length strands of hair gave him a surprisingly young and rakish look. He wore a dark custom-made suit like Gio, but that was about where the similarities stopped. Romanov's eyes were cold and flat and the oddest shade of green.

For some reason, she had expected him to be ugly and wearing a striped suit, almost a caricature-looking bad guy. Except he wasn't, if she didn't count the absolute chill in his eyes.

Oscar approached him tentatively, looking like a puppy searching for his master's approval. "You came alone."

"You sound surprised, Bianchi. Yet this is what you requested, no? Now, show me this great deal you have for me."

If words could be turned into meteorological conditions, Romanov's words would come out as icicles.

Not caricature-looking, but he did have the heavy Russian accent. Which was probably a ridiculous thing to focus on, since there were more pressing issues to concentrate on. Like, how she was going to get out of here alive.

"You know, they call my husband Black Ice," she said. "But I have a feeling he has nothing on you."

Romanov cocked a brow at that. "I will take that as a compliment, Mrs. Detta."

"You know who she is?" Harvey chimed in.

Romanov's eyes narrowed at the reporter, who was trying to disappear against the ugly brown wallpaper.

“Of course I know. I know about all the major players in my town. Even the insignificant ones who are like lice in my hide.”

Harvey blanched at that. His eyes scurried around the room, trying to peek through the dusty curtain rods. Jazzy could have told him that there was nowhere to go. There was only one way out of this room, and that was through the door Romanov stood in front of.

Oscar’s eyes flicked to her mouth, making her blood run cold.

“I want you to take her. Sell the whore through your contacts.”

Bile rose up her throat when she heard his plans for her. Unfortunately, it wasn’t the promise of a quick death, which sounded better by the minute.

“He doesn’t trade in women,” Harvey said nervously.

“The nicotine-smelling *suka* is right. It’s the one thing I actually don’t trade in.”

Before Oscar could respond, the Russian made his move. He gave him a

right hook, and Oscar dropped like a rock onto the filthy linoleum floor.

Standing over Oscar's knocked-out body, Romanov scoffed, "I also don't like to be summoned."

Harvey took an unsure step toward Jazzy, as if in some twisted way, he was seeking comfort with her. "Mr. Romanov —"

"I don't like to be called Romanov. Didn't your extensive background check on me tell you that? I'm not impressed by your reporter skills, Mr. Harvey."

"Sorry. Of course, I...I knew that." The reporter started to stutter again. "You hate your father's name, and—"

"You called me a stone-cold killer," Kristoff cut him off.

Harvey paled. "I didn't mean..."

"Of course you did. And you should, because it is exactly what I am. Never apologize for telling the truth."

Harvey stupidly seemed to consider Kristoff's words as praise. "Yes, yes, indeed. Speaking of the truth. I want to do

an editorial on you. An exclusive to show the public the real man behind the name.”

“Ah, yes, your editorial on the Bratva. What is it that you want to hear? Do you want to hear about how I grew up on the harsh streets of Moscow, as an orphan?”

Jazzy could almost see Harvey typing inside his head. The idiot even took another pull of his cigarette before he took out his phone to type.

“That...that would be a good starting point.”

Kristoff’s eyes almost looked like the Ice Age. “Except...I wasn’t born and raised in Moscow. It was right here in California.”

Harvey looked up from his phone. “But, according to your birth certificate...”

“Anything can be forged, you fuck,” Kristoff suddenly said, in perfect English, with no trace of an accent. “When powerful men want to rewrite their history, they can make anything happen. Even turn a loving mother into a whore, making her put her pimp’s name on a birth certificate, instead that of her illegitimate child’s American father.”

Jazzy was wondering why Kristoff was sharing his life's story with a man he clearly despised. And then it hit her.

Dead men don't talk.

Harvey's mouth almost dropped open by the sudden change in Kristoff's demeanor. Gone was the semi-easygoing man, and back was the crime boss who casually pulled a gun on him.

"Oh, God." Harvey stumbled backwards, his head hitting the wall. "I won't tell anyone about what happened here tonight. I swear!"

Kristoff didn't move or even blink. "You don't know this yet, but I am doing you a favor, *suka*. If you knew what Detta had planned for that shit stain on the floor, you would beg me to make it quick." He aimed his gun at Harvey's mouth.

"Please don't shoot me!" Harvey started sobbing and begging for his life, while Jazzy had difficulty keeping her eyes open.

"I'd say cigarettes kill, but that stick in your mouth isn't going to be the thing that kills you," Kristoff said, right before he pulled the trigger.

Blood splattered all over the wall behind Harvey.

Jazzy felt sick, looking at the reporter's head, with a hole in the middle.

Kristoff then turned to her.

“Now, what to do with you?”

She wasn't sure if it was the drugs finally kicking in, or the fear, but suddenly, everything went dark.

CHAPTER 31

GIO

Gio handed Kristoff a glass of his best scotch, while he waited for his wife to wake up.

The Siberian had installed himself in the comfortable leather chair before a bookcase, facing the window. Kristoff never had his back to any door or window. Not even when he was sitting in a library, in a house that was surrounded by high gates and around-the-clock guards. Kristoff's men were

waiting for him downstairs. Probably playing poker, as Gio and Kristoff did once a month. No matter how much money they had now, they still played with one-dollar bills, to reminisce the old days, when they were both starting their business in San Francisco's worst neighborhood, trying to make a buck. Kristoff and the Dettas had each other's back. Even though their lives had gone into different directions, that had never changed.

Kristoff downed his drink in no time. "I like this scotch."

"I'll have a case delivered to you."

"You should come try the new vodka I have imported from St. Petersburg. Smooth as a stripper pole, and with a killer burn. One bottle, and it will have you swaying on your feet." Then he gave him a smug smile. "We are even now."

Gio knew what moment he referenced. A decade ago, Gio had taken down a man that was about to stab Kristoff in the back. Literally.

"You sound all too damn happy about it."

“Owing you my life...irked me.”

Gio smirked. “And the package?”

“At your disposal, in a silo near the docks. I put him in a nice cage for you. You can put his legs in concrete, add a few cuts, and he is shark’s bait.”

Kristoff was known for the colorful ways he disposed of bodies. Not that the bodies in question were ever found. He was too smart for that. But Gio had heard the rumors.

“Your generosity knows no bounds.”

“I know. I’ve ordered Damon to put that on my tombstone.”

“A few more good deeds like this and before you know, you’ll go completely legit,” Gio said, as he tried to hold in his smile.

Kristoff scoffed. “What, and turn my back on the Dark Side? I’ll leave that to the Dettas.”

Since he lingered, something Kristoff wasn’t prone to do, Gio knew the man had another thing on his mind. “You want something.”

“I want your woman to take Katya on one of her girls’ nights. You know the one I mean. Where they wear flimsy dresses, drink too much alcohol, and talk about flower power and shit.”

“Flower power and shit?”

“She’s turning twenty-one in a month. We’ve had an argument about how she’s never even had a drink. Then she quoted some shit about women empowerment and called me dominant and controlling. I’ve killed men for saying less.”

“You *are* dominant and controlling,” Gio pointed out.

Kristoff raised a brow, as if saying, “Pot, meet kettle.”

Gio raised a glass at that. “I’ll take care of it.” Taking Kristoff’s protégé on a night in town could turn lethal if anyone gave the girl any shit. He’d have to up their security detail.

They discussed a few more details in their joint venture at Pacific Heights until they were interrupted by a knock on the door. Thea’s head peeked through the door opening.

“She’s awake, Gio.”

Kristoff apparently took that as his cue to leave, because he got to his feet. “See you around, *bratan*.”

After Kristoff had left, Gio downed the rest of his drink before he walked to his bedroom.

Jazzy sat in her pajamas at the edge of the bed, her back facing the door. She refused to acknowledge his presence when he walked in.

He pondered, for a moment, how to handle this. Yesterday had been the worst day in his adult life, and the only person who he had kept his sanity for refused to look at him. It was true what they said. Sometimes it took almost losing someone to realize how much you’d miss them if they were gone.

After her phone call last night, he got confronted by his biggest fear: that she’d met someone else. Someone who didn’t belong in the gray world he lived in, always balancing on the sharp edge of a sword, between right and wrong. Some cheery asshole with a death wish who believed he

could get away with stealing his wife. It was almost a relief when he discovered that she intended to leave him over a misunderstanding. Of course, that relief didn't last long. By the time he had taken care of making sure Lisa could never enter his building again, and went in search of his wife, Bianchi had gotten his hands on her. It had been a mistake to pull the rug from underneath Bianchi, leaving him all exposed and desperate, and not taking him out immediately. It had almost cost him his wife.

Finally, Jazzy turned to him.

“Are you going to keep me a prisoner again?”

“No. You can choose to stay or leave after we talk.”

“I don't have anything to say. Well, except thank you for coming for me. Though, I shouldn't be surprised. After all, I *am* still carrying your last name.” She sighed, sounding tired. “But really, it doesn't change the fact that I'm still leaving. We had a deal, and you broke it.”

“I had a deal with my brothers too, but I broke it. For you.”

“I don’t understand what—”

You will. “Aren’t you going to ask me?”

She looked confused. “Ask you what?”

“If I love you back.”

Once again, a storm brewed in her hazel eyes. “Don’t have to. Your naked intermezzo with Lisa was my answer.”

Stubborn until the end, but at least she hadn’t taken her words back. So, she wanted proof that he loved her? As if words spoken in any language could describe a fraction of what he felt for her.

“Look,” she continued, “we agreed this marriage would only last two years and then we would part our ways. Obviously, since —”

“No.”

“What?”

“We did not agree on such a thing. This marriage isn’t fucking temporary.” It might have started out like that, but he wasn’t letting her go. Ever.

“But I assumed you—”

“You know what they say about assumptions,” he growled. “There is no out of this marriage, and it’s time you get that through your stubborn skull.”

After his little speech, he all but dragged her from the bed, took her through the corridor, and into his work room. He then closed the door behind them and let her go. In a quick pace, he got behind his desk, opening a drawer with a lock.

Jazzy just stood there, her hands clutching her arms.

She jumped up when he threw a big manila envelope on the desk, then walked back to her.

“Read it.”

“What’s that?”

“That, my dear wife, is the last man responsible for the death of my parents. The last asshole on our death list.”

She stared at the envelope, like it was a snake that would bite her.

“I don’t think...I don’t see what this has to do with me.”

Gio still simmered with rage when he thought back on his conversation with Antonio Rossi.

“You were the man that led my father into Bianchi’s trap.”

The report from the PI had been damning. The truth had been hidden deep, but in the end, all trails led back to Antonio Rossi. The only thing they didn’t understand was the why.

Antonio hadn’t denied it. The man had sat in a garden chair, overlooking his estate, and took a deep sigh as he started confessing.

“Oscar had your father killed because of greed and lust.”

The greed part Gio understood. Oscar had taken over his father’s assets after the war that took the Scolinis out, but the lust part was new. “Lust?”

“Brianna.”

One word was all it took for Gio to connect the dots. “He wanted my mother?”

Antonio nodded. “Your mother was a beautiful woman. It was practically

impossible to not be enamored by her. She was kind, nurturing, and completely devoted to your father. I knew they would be a perfect match.”

“Why?” It was the only question that was left.

“Bianchi had dirt on Marco. A film with him and a fifteen-year old girl. A girl with influential parents. He threatened to expose it, unless I helped him get your father to that warehouse. I presumed Oscar just wanted to take over your father’s place, but he wanted much more. We’ll never know what exactly happened that night, when he went to your mother after having killed your father. I assume he propositioned her, and Brianna rejected or attacked him. Ending with him killing her.”

“That’s why you kept giving him loans from Rossi Enterprises, even though he was a liability.”

Antonio’s lips thinned. “That, and because he clearly kept an eye on Marco, expecting that my son would fuck up again. Bianchi found out about what happened that night with Jazzy and Mary. I couldn’t

let my girls get exposed like that. A stain like that, on one's family, takes generations to clean, so I did what I had to do to protect my family."

Gio was close to snapping Antonio's neck. The only thing stopping him was Jazzy. Because, however much he hated the old man, he loved his wife more. He no longer believed it was a coincidence that the old bastard had propositioned him first to marry one of his granddaughters.

"That was quite a risk you took. Assuming I would fall in love with Jazzy." And by that, protecting his granddaughters, even when he would be out of the picture.

"What man wouldn't fall in love with her?"

Antonio Rossi was the most manipulative son of a bitch. By giving him Jazzy, the fucker had taken the joy out of exacting his revenge.

Except, it wasn't just *his* revenge. He'd had to ask his brothers, one by one, to agree to not put Rossi down. The talk had gone over easier than he'd expected. Especially

the one with Vince, his most volatile and impulsive brother.

“I like Jazzy,” Vince had said. “Wife trumps bastard. Also, he’s dying anyway. I love the idea of him rotting from the inside every day. Hurting and being in agony like a motherfucker.” Vince was also the most vicious.

“The only reason we’re letting you live is Jazzy.”

The old man had Stage Two liver cancer. Which meant a slow, and painful, death. No one deserved it more.

Speaking of deserving, his wife deserved the truth. Trailing back into the present, he took the envelope and pulled a black and white picture from it. “Let me show you why it involves you, *bella*.”

JAZZY

When he turned the photo and Jazzy stared into the face of her beloved *nonno*, her heart broke into a million tiny pieces.

“No...” She looked up into Gio’s eyes that were blazing fire.

“Now, tell me, *bella*. Do you think, knowing me for who I am, that I would have let Antonio live, for any other reason than for you?”

“What are you trying to tell me?”

He dropped the picture and pulled her against him. “You’re going to make me say the words, aren’t you?”

A trembling started from inside her. She didn’t dare hope. Not while she had the picture of her grandfather with a red cross on it still fresh in her mind.

“I do like words,” she mumbled.

“I’m telling you that the only reason Antonio Rossi is still alive, is because I fucking love you. Antonio lured my father into a trap, so Oscar Bianchi could kill him for reasons I will tell you later. Yet, I decided to find a way in my black heart to forgive—never forget, but forgive—him,

for what he's done, because hurting him means hurting you."

She tried to put together what he meant to say. Which was no easy feat with her emotions—fear, anger, and hurt—jumping up and down tonight.

"You love me." For some reason, she needed to voice that thought.

"I do." He pulled away from her. "I didn't choose you because you are beautiful, smart, and spirited; all of which you are. I picked you because every man needs a strong woman, and you are a queen. *My* queen. Now, use that smart brain of yours. Do you think, knowing all of that, that I would cheat on you?"

When put like that...

It was as if a huge weight was lifted off her chest and she could breathe again.

"Now, say the words," he demanded.

She looked into his smoldering baby blues. He needed to hear the words just as much as she did. "I love you." Then she cleared her throat. "Now, let's talk about why there was a naked woman in your office that wasn't me."

“I didn’t touch her, other than to pull her up and show her the door.” He took her in his arms and traileed back to their bedroom, where he dropped her onto the bed.

Gio crawled over her body like a hungry predator. He grabbed her wrists and slammed them above her head.

Oh yeah, she loved being handled like this.

“The only naked woman I’m interested in is you.”

She could see the truth in his beautiful eyes. In the way he looked at her, that he cherished her, that she was his. She couldn’t see it before because of her insecurities clouding her judgment. How silly she had been to horde her love, the most exhilarating emotion in existence, instead of expressing it to him. Never again, she swore, giving in to his scorching kiss. Every day, she would tell this man how special he was to her. Love wasn’t something to keep to yourself; it was meant to be shared.

EPILOGUE

Two months later

Another Wednesday afternoon, and Gio was nowhere to be found. That was three weeks in a row now. Jazzy hadn't paid any attention to it the first few times she had visited him during her lunch break, but it was becoming a pattern. Now, of course, this could be something totally innocent, like him working at the soup kitchen or feeding cats at the animal shelter during those times, but she highly doubted that.

She decided to wait for him in his office. Gale offered her a cup of coffee. Jazzy liked the older woman. She wasn't all dolled up like the rest of the women on the executive floor.

"Mr. Detta will be here at exactly two o'clock," Gale said. Her tone held a hint of irritation mixed with amusement. "Exactly on time or too late, depending on how you see it."

"I'm sensing you're trying to tell me something, Gale."

Gale smiled. "Oh, I am. If you want to find out why your husband makes himself scarce every Wednesday afternoon, then please pick up the call when he enters his office."

Intriguing.

At exactly two o'clock, Gio showed his face. She waited for him, sitting on his desk, legs spread, inviting him over to stand between them.

When he did, and his hand slid underneath her dress, the phone rang. Jazzy grabbed it before he got the chance. Gio tried to take it from her, but she held the phone out of his reach.

There was a woman on the other end of the line, who sounded aggravated.

“Oh, I see. So you have to reschedule his appointment. Again.” She gave Gio a pointed look. “My husband is a very busy man, and I’m sure he forgot about it.” She listened to the voice on the other end. “Really? So, there’s an open spot for this afternoon. Thank you. We’ll be there.” Jazzy hung up and started giggling. “You ran away from the dentist?”

Gio’s lips thinned. “I don’t like people poking in my mouth with sharp objects. The damn woman is like a mule. She keeps rescheduling the damn appointment every Wednesday afternoon, until I go.”

That was it; she was gone. She turned into a puddle of tears and howling laughter.

“Tell you what. You go to the dentist this afternoon, and you can take out your frustration on me later tonight...when I wear a costume.”

He started unbuttoning her dress. “What kind of costume?”

It was difficult to keep her thoughts together when he started trailing kisses along her neck. “Sexy dentist.” When he stopped his caressing, she added, “To help cure you of your dentist phobia. I *am* your loving wife after all, and helping you out during the bad times kind of comes with my job description.”

Finally, the kissing continued, and once again, she was reminded of how far they had come.

On her wedding day, she couldn't have fathomed that they would be where they were now. Back then, she couldn't wait for the day to be free of Gio. Now, she couldn't imagine her life without him.

Was everything perfect? No. Her man still had his "king of the universe" moments. Anything concerning her safety was non-negotiable. But as her *nonno* always said, the occasional marital spat was the pepper to a marriage, giving it spice. Then there was her sister. Carmen had gone through a personality change, as radical as she had ever seen. It was as if, one day, she woke up and had decided to not show any emotion anymore. It made Jazzy realize how dangerous it was to bottle everything up inside you, instead of dealing with what life threw at you. That was the second reason why she had taken the plunge into therapy. The first one being the promise she had made to herself when she was being held hostage by crazy Oscar and a Russian crime lord. Of course, back then, she didn't know Kristoff and Gio knew each other from way back, and she ultimately didn't have anything to worry about.

Another worry was her relationship with her grandfather. It was more strained since she'd learned that he was responsible for Gio's parents' deaths. But she couldn't turn her back on him. He was still the man who had raised her after her parents had passed away, and she still loved him. Every time she went to see him, he seemed to shrink a little more. Gio didn't try to keep her from going over to the Rossi mansion, and she was grateful for that. She wasn't sure, if the situation had been reversed, she could have done the same. But if there was one truth she was sure of, it was that Giovanni Detta loved her and would do anything to see to her happiness.

Anything.

"My grandfather's housekeeper called," she informed Gio, looking him in the eye. "It seems that my grandfather has left for Europe this morning, to bury his son." Silently, she asked him if he had anything to do with it. The faint smile on his lips told her all that she needed to know.

"Happy six-month anniversary, *bella*."

Some men bought jewelry for their wives on an anniversary, other's flowers. Her husband gave the best of gifts, for he had the power to slay demons. He gave her closure and peace of mind. After all, he was a Detta. As he had told her numerous times, he only had one job: to protect, to provide, and—as she had added to the new family slogan—to love.

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“The Enforcer”

CHAPTER 1

MARY

The call came in the dead of the night.

Mary’s head almost hit the wall when she reached for her phone on the nightstand. Then she remembered that her bedroom no longer had space for a nightstand, since it was so tiny. Three months in her new home, and she still hadn’t gotten used to the lack of size of the apartment. After having lived in big mansions all her life, it was quite the adjustment.

She reached for the window sill above her to pick up her phone. Britney was calling. Her friend calling this late was never a good sign.

“Britney. Everything okay?”

“I...I’m so sorry, Mary. I couldn’t stop myself.” It was all she croaked out, and then she started sobbing.

Oh, no.

“I tried...I really did...”

Mary pushed her legs over the side of the bed and switched on the lights. “Where are you?”

“I can’t do this anymore,” Britney rambled on. “It’s too much. I’m tired. So tired. Zoe deserves a better sister than me. She deserves someone like you. Can she... can she stay with you for another night?”

“Of course she can.” She grabbed her jeans from the dresser and put them on, which was no feat with one hand. “Please tell me you’re home.” *And not in some dirty alley.*

Another sob. “I’m home.”

Mary had known that the “Kicking your Addiction” program would be hard on Britney. Though, she hadn’t expected her to take to the needle this quickly again.

“Okay, sit tight, I’m coming over. I just need to find someone to watch over Zoe.” Even though her goddaughter liked to think of herself as all grown up—and part-time superhero—she still was a six-year-old.

She ended the call, finished getting dressed, and went to Zoe’s room. The girl was sleeping in a bed that seemed to disappear between stacks of boxes that cramped up the place. Once again, Mary wished that her sister Gina would pick up her stuff that mostly seemed to consist of apparel and shoes. Gina wouldn’t want to be caught dead in Mary’s apartment, but she sure liked to use it as a storage unit.

She was debating on who to call at this hour. Her cousin Jazzy or her friend Tommie would usually be her first choice, but they were at a convention until tomorrow. Jazzy had given her a number for emergencies, though. Not having another option, she called it.

“Yeah.”

Mary froze and dropped back onto the bed. She would recognize that deep, grouchy voice that sent delicious tingles

down her spine any time of the day. What was Hector doing answering Jazzy's emergency number?

"Um... this is Mary. I'm looking for Jazzy."

"This is an emergency number that connects to Diaz Security."

"Oh." She wasn't sure how to continue. She knew Hector provided the security for Jazzy's husband.

"What's the emergency?"

The sarcasm in his voice couldn't be missed. The man really didn't like her and for the love of God, she had no idea why. "I need a sitter."

Silence. Then, "Excuse me?"

That came out wrong, so she tried again. "I just got a call from a friend. She's not doing well, so I have to go over there. Her little sister is staying at my place and I can't take her with me, so I need someone to look after her."

"Call someone else."

She silently prayed for patience. "Don't you think that if that had been an option, I would have done so already?" His attitude was starting to piss her off. He was the only person who could get under her skin so fast.

"Shit. Fine. I'll be there in fifteen."

"In fifteen?" she asked, but he'd already hung up. She didn't know where Hector lived but she didn't think it was in her part of town.

Still, fifteen minutes later, right when she put on her sneakers, the doorbell rang.

Opening the door, she discovered he wasn't alone. Next to him stood another behemoth of a man. With his rippling muscles and shoulder-length hair, he was basically a blond, friendlier-looking version of Hector.

"Hi there, I'm Achilles," the stranger introduced himself.

Hector and Achilles? There must be an interesting story behind that. If only she had the time. “Nice to meet you, Achilles. I’m Mary. Zoe only needs one sitter, really.”

“Achilles is here for the kid, I’m going with you. Jazzy would give me shit if I let you go alone at night like this.”

Right. Of course he found it necessary to point out that he wasn’t here of his own accord.

His lovely words were followed by a frown. “You gonna let us in?”

“Of course.” She stepped back, and they followed her into her living room. The small place seemed to shrink as the two large men filled the room.

They were sizing up the stacks of boxes covering half the hallway—Gina’s stuff hadn’t fit in just the guest room.

“My sister doesn’t have her own place yet.” She suddenly felt the need to defend herself.

“How the mighty have fallen,” Gina had scoffed when she’d first entered Mary’s apartment. Unlike her sister, Mary was a ‘glass half full’ kind of person. Yes, she no longer lived in the luxury her late grandfather—banker to the mob—had provided her with, but her new life presented new opportunities. It didn’t have the restrictions it had before, and that was incredibly liberating. She could follow her own path instead of the one her grandfather would have chiseled out for her. There was no reason she couldn’t make it on her own. Millions of women did it every day, under far worse circumstances.

Mary grabbed her bag and keys from the coffee table.

“Thank you so much for coming over. Zoe’s asleep, so she shouldn’t be any trouble. Please, make yourself at home.”

Hector grunted and walked outside.

When she started toward her car, he shook his head. “Not happening.”

She had to give it to him; he would barely fit in her tiny Toyota.

To her surprise, he bypassed the van with the Diaz Security logo on it and stepped onto a Harley. Not wanting to get into a discussion about transportation, she just put on the helmet he gave her.

She told him the address and he took off.

The ride over to Britney's house was nothing if not amazing. It was the first time she got to ride on a bike and she loved every second of it.

Unfortunately, it ended far too quickly. Britney's place looked even worse from the outside than Mary's did.

When Hector made an attempt to dismount, she stopped him.

"Britney gets nervous around big men. Could you please wait here while I check up on her?" She didn't wait for an answer but dismounted, handing him over the helmet.

"You have fifteen."

What was it with him and fifteen minutes? She hurried up the stairs to Britney's apartment while contemplating what to do. They had met at a support group at the women's shelter. It was the place where Mary had found the courage to speak out. There was great power in confronting your traumas and fears. The alternative was going down a rabbit hole of denial that often resulted in alcohol, drugs, a depression, or a combination of those. She considered herself lucky for finding the right people to support her and not going down that dark road. Britney, unfortunately, hadn't been that lucky.

Using the spare key, she entered the apartment, unsure of what she would find inside. A lot of times, Britney would just be lying on the couch, staring at a wall.

The only sound coming from the living room was some grunting.

She opened the door to the living room and came face to face with a man just stepping off of Britney.

"I'll be back for the rest tomorrow, cunt," he sneered, pulling his zipper up.

Lovely. Mary hadn't seen him here before. Britney didn't usually invite men over. Especially not the creepy-looking kind with bloodshot eyes and bad teeth.

She looked past his shoulder. Britney was sprawled over the couch, naked from the waist down. Her eyes were closed, and Mary wasn't sure if she was even conscious.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"I'm Ivan. This slut's boyfriend."

Her lips thinned. She really doubted that he was Britney's anything, apart from her drug supplier, maybe.

"Get out."

She stepped over Chinese take-out boxes that littered the floor, and knelt next to her friend. She grabbed a blanket off the floor and threw it over Britney's lower body to cover her nakedness. Britney was in really bad shape. Her eyes were sunken into her pale face and she barely had a pulse.

Suddenly an arm wrapped around her chest.

She yelped when Ivan pushed her onto the ratty carpet. She swung her fists, but to no avail. He straddled her body and grabbed her hands in one fist.

"Get off of me!" she started yelling, which only made him laugh.

"I like 'em feisty."

Oh God. His breath smelled like a sewer.

Okay, don't panic. You know what to do.

When his hands went to her breasts and ripped open her top, she made her move.

Her teeth latched onto his scruffy cheek and she bit. Hard. Not letting go until she tasted blood.

Yuck.

"Fucking bitch!"

She poked him in the eye, followed by a move she'd learned from self-defense class, and got away from under Ivan.

Those classes Jazzy had dragged her to were finally paying off.

Stepping behind the coffee table, she put more distance between them, and took a defensive stance.

Adrenaline was coursing through her veins, making her blood sing. Knowing that she could take care of herself was incredibly empowering. Unfortunately, she wasn't sure as what to do next. Her Krav Maga lessons had been about fending off your attacker and then run the hell away. Well, that last part hadn't been in the instructions, but she'd filled that in herself. Except, she couldn't just leave Britney with this creep.

Ivan crawled back on his feet, his eyes blazing fire. "I'm gonna cut you open, bitch."

She sucked in a breath when he pulled out a knife, her flight instinct almost taking over.

Make a stand!

Do I have to?

Yes, you do!

Following the advice of her inner dialog, she was just channeling her inner Amazon, when the door was bashed in. Yep, bashed in, because Hector literally broke the door off its hinges when he stormed inside.

One look at her torn clothes, and his eyes turned into razor sharp shards of green. He didn't speak when he walked up to Ivan. In the blink of an eye, he disarmed him. Then he just grabbed him by the throat and introduced his face to the wall. Repeatedly.

Mary winced when she heard bones break. She could see Death in Hector's eyes. Maybe she should stop him. On the other hand, prison had conjugal visits. It might be her only way in with Hector Diaz.

"You have any idea who you're messing with?" Ivan spewed. "I'm Ivan, and—"

Hector swung him toward the sink. Ivan's head thudded against the sink mirror and bounced back. Hector kicked his

knee, then did a spin to his head until Ivan was knocked out cold.

Mary checked on Britney again. Her not waking up, after all the ruckus around her, was a bad sign.

“Overdose,” Hector said, while pulling out his phone. His eyes went to the needle on the table.

“Oh no, no, no, no.” What would she tell Zoe?

“Mary?”

She blinked up at Hector. Judging by his frown, it wasn’t the first time he called her name.

“Yes?”

“Why don’t you get your friend some clothes? And some other stuff she’s gonna need.”

Right. She got up and busied herself by stuffing some underwear and clothes into a plastic bag she’d found underneath Britney’s bed.

The next few hours passed by in a blur. Britney was loaded into an ambulance and they followed suit. Then there were nurses and doctors to speak to. Nobody could tell her much, except that Britney was in really bad condition. Thankfully, she wasn’t alone; Hector didn’t leave her side once. He didn’t say much—the guy wasn’t a talker—but she drew strength from his presence.

Then, around three a.m., the news came: Britney didn’t make it. Just as Hector had predicted, it had been an overdose that had ended her life.

Mary felt numb while the doctor told her in a clean and medical way what had happened. All the comforting words in the world couldn’t drive away the pain. Britney had only been twenty-five, merely four years older than Mary, and now she was gone. Her life had hardly begun before it ended.

There were forms to be filled out. So many forms. Again, Hector was her rock. He kept her calm and even took care of funeral arrangements.

By the time they returned to her apartment, Mary was exhausted. All she wanted to do was crawl back into bed and think about tomorrow, well, tomorrow.

They were met with Zoe and Achilles sitting on the couch, watching TV. The big man dwarfed Zoe who was plastered to his side.

The little girl jumped up when she saw her.

“Mary! We are watching *Wonder Woman*.” Then she came to a halt, peeking past Mary. “You’re the Wolfman,” she whispered, looking up at Hector with eyes like saucers.

“I might have told her a tale or two about real heroes,” Achilles said, getting up. “The PG-rated version, of course.”

“It’s late, cupcake. You really have to get back to bed.” Tomorrow wasn’t a school night, but it was still well past her bedtime.

A pout followed. “But the movie’s not finished yet.”

Achilles tousled Zoe’s hair. “Listen to Mary, oh fierce Amazon.”

This earned him a chuckle. Not that the words had any effect. Zoe was practically bouncing on her feet.

Mary groaned when she spotted the crumbs and brown layer around Zoe’s mouth. “You gave her chocolate chip cookies.”

Achilles had the decency to look guilty. “Sorry about that. She woke up and looked frightened when she saw me, so I offered her snacks. It immediately broke the ice.”

Of course it had. Zoe was a cookie monster. “Thank you for watching her.”

She turned to Hector, who was still standing in the doorway. “I want to thank you as well, for—”

“Yeah, it’s fine. Let’s go, Achilles.”

And just like that, without him even letting her finish her sentence, Hector left.

Achilles gave her an apologetic smile. “Don’t mind him. Gratitude makes him uncomfortable. If you need a sitter again, give me a call. I was voted coolest uncle last month.” He sounded proud.

Then he was gone as well, leaving her alone with a little girl who, as of tonight, was practically alone in the world.

Mary crashed next to Zoe on the couch and pulled her close. Zoe was used to Britney being ‘sick’ all the time. Her sister had checked out mentally a long time ago. For the past year, Britney’s depression had gotten so bad, she rarely left the house anymore. Mary was the one to take Zoe to school and pick her up on the days Britney couldn’t leave her bed.

As she hugged Zoe closer, her brain hurt from thinking of the consequences of Britney’s death. There was one dark, prospect looming above all. With Britney out of the picture, Zoe had one living remaining family member left; her uncle. She remembered seeing the scars on Britney’s back, the small dots of cigarette burn covering her arms and chest.

Over her dead body was that monster getting anywhere near Zoe.

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