



UNFORGIVING
QUEEN

A QUEEN TORN BETWEEN A SPARE AND THE HEIR...

EVA WINNERS

UNFORGIVING QUEEN

EVA WINNERS

CONTENTS

[Unforgiving Queen Playlist](#)

[Author Note](#)

[Blurb](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Chapter 47](#)

[Chapter 48](#)

[Chapter 49](#)

[Chapter 50](#)

[Chapter 51](#)

[What's Next?](#)

Copyright © 2023 by Winners Publishing LLC and

Eva Winners

Cover Image Designer: Eve Graphic Design LLC

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Visit www.evawinners.com and subscribe to my newsletter.

FB group: <https://bit.ly/3gHEe0e>

FB page: <https://bit.ly/30DzP8Q>

Insta: <http://Instagram.com/evawinners>

BookBub: <https://www.bookbub.com/authors/eva-winners>

Amazon: <http://amazon.com/author/evawinners>

Goodreads: <http://goodreads.com/evawinners>

TikTok: <https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMeETK7pq/>

UNFORGIVING QUEEN PLAYLIST

<https://spoti.fi/3QZ7Fjj>

AUTHOR NOTE

Hello Readers,

Please note that this book has some dark elements and disturbing scenes to it. Proceed with caution. It is not for the faint of heart.

It is important to know that this book **CANNOT** be read on its own. It is part of the trilogy and you have to read all three books to understand the plot. Please be aware of dark themes.

Don't forget to sign up for Eva Winners's Newsletter (www.evawinners.com) for news about future releases.

Falling in love is like holding a candle.
Initially it lightens up the world around
you. Then it starts melting
and hurts you. Finally it goes off
and everything is darker than ever
and all you are left with is the... BURN!

Syed Arshad

BLURB

A harmless kiss led to a fairy tale. Or so I thought. But unlike the happily ever afters you read about, my tale didn't end with a wedding gown and roses.

My fairy tale turned into heartbreak. Inked in pain and sealed in tears.
It almost cost me my life. And my family.

He moved on as if nothing ever happened while I was left to pick up the pieces.

Now he's back, and he wants me.

To him, I'm a pawn to be used. Leverage. But I'm no longer his.

I'm his brother's betrothed.

Stuck between two brothers, the push and pull unbearable. One wants me, the other needs me. But the Leone brothers will learn that this queen won't be a pawn.

To me, they are both men deserving of pain and poison.

My family thinks I'll accept my fate. Well, I plan to fight it.

*We started as two kids,
starved for love and affection.
We were never strangers.
Not until the end.*

-Eva Winners-

PROLOGUE

AMON, 12 YEARS OLD

“It was me.” I stepped forward, Dante by my side, as we claimed responsibility for the broken fifteenth-century vase that Father took great pride in.

The little girl stared at my father with wide eyes, her gaze darting from me to him, then back to me. Her golden curls bounced left and right, fear evident on her face. My father had barely glanced at her and her sister, yet the two of them shook with fear.

They must not get in trouble very often.

“What’s going on here, Leone?” The man I knew to be Tomaso Romero showed up with his wife, the latter rushing to the girls’ side. The pair were almost identical, except one had dark hair like her father and the other was the mirror-image of her mother, with sunflower-yellow locks.

Father didn’t acknowledge him, his eyes drilling into my brother and me. Could he read the truth in our eyes? I wasn’t sure. All I knew was that I couldn’t let him hurt these girls.

“Angelo,” Romero snapped.

Father’s eyes moved to the man with lethal calm. “Nothing. You, your wife, and your brats can go,” he stated in English.

The girls’ mother didn’t hesitate. She took the girls and ushered them away.

“You fucking—” Tomaso Romero was *pissed*. His face turned red and he reached for his gun, secured in the holster. As did Father.

“Tomaso.” The girls’ mother seemed desperate to get out, but Romero refused to move. His gaze locked with Father’s, neither one of them willing to budge. “Tomaso, let’s go home,” she whispered, her voice trembling as

she nodded toward the girls.

The one with wheat-colored curls locked eyes with me, worry filling her gaze. “Papà, can we take them home?”

Romero glanced down, following her gaze to Dante and me. His eyes came to rest on Dante for a fraction of a second before settling on me.

“I’m sorry, sunshine. We can’t.” He finally broke his lingering stare to address his daughter.

The girl pursed her lips. “But I don’t want to leave them, Papà. Please.”

My mom appeared in the hallway, her footsteps soft against the marble. “Angelo, I didn’t know we were hosting a party. I wouldn’t have gone to pray if I had.”

She took in the scene in front of her. Could she sense the tension? An expression I didn’t understand passed her eyes, but I didn’t get the chance to read into it before—

“What are you doing here?” Her voice was cold as ice. Why was she speaking to Romero this way? I’d never heard her take such a bitter tone before, not when Father was mean to her and especially not with guests in our home. Mamma’s eyes traveled over his wife and children, something resembling hate flickering in them.

“Regretting ever stepping foot in this fucking home.”

“Tomaso!” The way the man’s wife scolded him made me think she’d never heard him utter a single curse before.

The girl with dark hair tugged on his sleeve and motioned her hands. What was she doing?

“No, we can’t go back to California,” Romero answered. It dawned on me that she must be deaf. I’d seen a movie with an actor who used sign language before. “Now, let’s go,” he instructed.

The little girl with golden curls yanked her hand from her mamma and ran over to me, hugging me like I was her lifeline.

I stood stiffly, unfamiliar with this kind of affection from strangers. She hugged me tighter and I had to stifle a pained wince from the beating Dante and I had received last week as part of our training.

“Are you going to be okay?” she whispered while the bruises covering my back and torso throbbed from my last week’s beating. How could it be that a simple hug from a girl I’d just met made the pain feel better? It was all too confusing.

Her papà came over and gently tugged the girl away. The moment she

stepped back, the feeling of loss washed over me and I swayed on my feet.

“Stay away from my family and my kids,” Romero muttered under his breath. Whether his threat was directed at me or my father, I would never know for sure.

With the Romero family out of sight and earshot, Father turned to my brother and me. “You two will get a treat today.” He smiled coldly. “Nobody disrespects me in my own home.”

He flicked his gaze over our heads and dipped his chin. Two of his guards stepped forward from the shadows and exchanged words with him in English before dragging us away.

That night, our world turned black. Like a damn psychopath, our father had Dante and me beaten and tortured until it hurt to breathe. I couldn’t shut off my brain afterward. Instead, I learned the ways of self-preservation in that cold, damp basement, refusing to submit to weakness.

One day, I thought as I sat alone in the dark cell, I’ll get my brother and me out of this fucking place.

I made a vow then: I’d become stronger than our father. More powerful, more calculating. Better yet, I’d kill him.

Because it was clear that Angelo Leone was a sadist, not a father.

AMON, 23 YEARS OLD

Death was a part of life.

A breathless body. A splatter of blood. Empty eyes.

By my not so tender age of twenty-three, I had killed and tortured countless men. I didn't regret any of it.

But Reina Romero's pain felt like a bullet to my heart.

I felt her before I saw her standing there. To casual bystanders, the party was in full swing. Glasses clinking. Alcohol flowing. The rich and powerful in attendance, right alongside the heads of the criminal underworld organizations.

But I knew better. I knew her eyes were locked on me, and when I finally looked away from my date, I registered the hearts they still carried. Every cell in me itched to plow through the room and go to her.

Instead, I kissed Sakura, a model who'd made her debut at Paris Fashion Week. I'd been advised to be "seen" with her due to her family's connections to the Yakuza in Japan. To boost my image within the organization. As if I gave a fuck. The real reason was far more pathetic. She was on my arm tonight to keep me from doing something stupid.

It was only when I spotted Reina that I decided to take it a step further and kiss Sakura. I *had* to stop Reina from looking at me like she wanted me.

It backfired. I felt her pain like it was my own, piercing through my chest and stealing my breath. A shattered expression crossed her face. She froze, and I swore I heard her heart break before she turned around and left.

Mission accomplished. But did I stay put like I should have? No. I didn't. I followed her. I needed just one more glimpse of her—knowing it was wrong—to get me through the rest of my life.

I quickened my pace, using the distant echoes of her footsteps on the street like a homing beacon. Something in the air shifted and I heard the unmistakable grind of metal on metal. I took off running, my legs now moving at an impossible speed. I was barely a block away when the worst possible scenario stared back at me. A bloodied body sprawled across the pavement. Reina's small form tangled up between two vehicles. Her golden curls, matted with blood, stark against the pavement. Eyelids shielding her vibrant blue eyes.

My brother cradled her body, terror in his expression. I hadn't seen that look in his eyes since we rescued him from his kidnappers—bruised and with a thousand cuts on his body.

This is bad.

Reina's fragile limbs lay at a weird angle, her face deathly pale.

Panic wrapped around my throat, and for a moment, I was frozen in place. Unable to move. Unable to breathe. Unable to feel.

Heartbeats stretched into long seconds, possibly minutes, before fury flared inside my chest.

Fuck, this isn't the end.

She might be off-limits to me, but this wouldn't be the end of her life. She deserved to live; I deserved to die.

Pushing through the quickly growing crowd, my skull protested with every step as I neared her. The thought of Reina dead squeezed my heart and assaulted every fiber of my being. It was a fear like I hadn't experienced in a long time.

Let her live, I prayed to whoever was listening. Let her live and take my life. Take me instead.

I slid down onto the pavement. "Ambulance," I barked. "Someone call an ambulance." She was an angel bleeding out into the cruel, dark world.

"It's on the way," someone answered.

My knees brushed against her soft, limp body. Her lips were almost blue.

"What happened?" I shifted Reina's body from my brother's arms. It was cold, sending shock rippling through me. There was so much blood. "Where in the *fuck* is Darius? He's supposed to be watching her."

"If you'd read the status reports from Kian, you'd know Darius is overseas on assignment. Kian asked if you wanted someone else to fill in. You didn't fucking answer the email."

My head pounded, and so did my heart. There was an endless hole in my

chest. It'd gotten bigger and darker over the last three months. But right now... it expanded to depths I didn't think possible. I was terrified.

I had been so wrapped up in my head and with work, trying to ignore the outside world where Reina existed—without me—that I had completely missed Kian's email. Now I had no one to blame but myself. This could have been prevented.

"You fucked up, brother," Dante said in a dry voice.

"Tell. Me. What. Happened." The edge in my voice was unmistakable. I was teetering on the edge of losing my shit. "Or I swear to God—"

"Two cars ran straight into her," Dante answered, his eyes locked on Reina's pale face. "I can't figure out where she's bleeding the most. We need to apply pressure, but I don't want to shift her."

My hands roamed over her. There were scrapes and cuts, but most of the blood seemed to pool around her waist. I grabbed her cold wrist and waited for a pulse with bated breath.

The whole world ceased to exist as one second passed. Two...

There it was—barely. A faint beat thumped beneath my touch, and I inhaled a lungful of air.

"What the fuck happened here?" Illias Konstantin appeared out of nowhere. His eyes flicked to Reina in my arms and recognition flared in them. Romero didn't keep his daughters hidden from sight per se, but I didn't like that Illias was here. That anyone from the underworld was seeing her in this vulnerable position.

I fucking hated it, actually.

"Her pulse is fading," I said, desperation lacing my voice. "*She's fading.*"

"My car is here," he said, motioning behind him. "I'll take her to the hospital."

I stood up with her in my arms and followed him, Dante hurrying behind me.

"Shouldn't you go back to your party?" Illias questioned as I held Reina's body to my chest, her blood soaking my hands. He likely had no clue how his words would crush me, that it was my fault she'd been racing out of there. Why in the fuck did I kiss Sakura? It was so fucking wrong.

I should have let Reina approach me. Instead, I let my fear of her proximity and my inability to resist her get in the way. Fuck, I should have been stronger!

I slid into the back seat of his car. "Fuck the party. Just get me to the

hospital.”

“I should take her,” my brother claimed.

“No.”

Dante refused to move, glaring at me. “You did this.”

He didn’t bother to hide his malicious stare as he spit his venomous words at me. The worst part? He was right.

Ignoring him, I looked at Illias. “Tell your driver I’ll pay all his traffic tickets. Just get us to the hospital.”

“I’m coming too,” Dante hissed, sliding in beside me.

My eyes remained on the girl who’d changed my life. The summer weeks we’d spent together were long over, and Reina had turned into a woman somewhere along the way. I couldn’t bear the thought of losing her, even though I could feel her slipping away. The weight of that reality felt like being trapped in a dark pit of my own doing.

But I refused to let her leave. She might not ever be mine, but I would see to it that she lived. And she would learn to be happy.

Even if it was without me.

AMON

Reina's condition was critical.

A whole twenty-four hours had gone by and she had yet to wake up. Her sister and friends would come looking for her soon if they hadn't already. The intel already had them blasting everyone's phones and reporting her MIA. They alerted the police, even goddamn Interpol.

So much for keeping Reina's identity a secret. It shouldn't have surprised me that Illias knew her. The fucker knew too much about too many things.

But it was beneficial that Illias had a doctor on his payroll who was already working to keep this a secret, but even he couldn't keep Reina hidden forever.

"Her family will have to be notified." Illias's reasonable tone was irking me. Why was he lingering in the hospital? I wanted him gone.

"Not yet." I needed more time with her. I needed her awake before I turned and left her behind again.

Reina had suffered broken ribs. Multiple fractures. Punctured lungs. *And a miscarriage.*

My fault. Guilt ate at me. It was all wrong—on so many levels—but I loved her, and I still wanted her... I probably always would.

This had to be my punishment. For fucking up so severely. For thinking I deserved heaven when I only knew hell.

A fucking miscarriage. *Incest.*

God, acid burned in my throat every time I thought of it. Now I wasn't sure which was worse. I should have protected her. Instead, I wreaked havoc on her entire life. Her innocence.

Her pregnancy was probably the reason she'd sought me out last night.

Fuck, fuck, *fuck*. I failed her. *Destroyed her*. I pushed both my hands into my hair, gripping it with my fingers. I was falling apart at the seams. It was all my fault. The miscarriage was a blessing in disguise.

Half sister.

Bile rose in my throat, but I pushed it down. I couldn't think about that now. The main thing was that Reina pulled through.

So, I focused on the sound of her pulse beeping through the machine. It was my lifeline. She needed to live. Head in my hands, I let my mind drift back to the party. I'd spotted her the moment she stepped on the terrace, her simple pink dress setting her apart in the best way possible. She looked out of place and so fucking *alone* that it made my chest ache.

Now I understood the desperation and emptiness in her eyes when she'd stared at me. I snuffed Reina's light out.

If she—no, not if. *When* she survived this, she'd never be the same. Her body would heal, but I didn't know if her heart and soul ever would. Shit like that left a mark. I'd wanted to save her from the pain; instead I tore her apart.

I let my eyes roam over her body, covered in stitches and casts. It seemed there were tubes protruding everywhere from her as an IV supplied a constant source of pain meds and nutrients into her body.

Fortunately, aside from her miscarriage, her internal injuries were minimal. Other than her lungs, which were on the mend already, all other organs were functioning. She remained unconscious, but there were no signs of brain swelling. We'd get a better idea of the extent of her concussion when she woke up, and I knew I wouldn't take a complete breath until then.

Her complexion was still pale from the loss of blood. She wasn't responsive to the doctors, and that was what terrified me the most. It was as if she'd gone to sleep and decided not to wake up.

Dante left in the night and brought me back a change of clothes. It was the only time I left her side, and even then, I'd used the bathroom in her medical suite. Dante lingered, wandering in and out of the room. Illias remained too, although I still didn't understand why. Nor did I care.

None of it mattered right now.

I brushed the soft flesh of her wrist, gliding my finger over it. I shouldn't touch her, and yet I couldn't stop.

"I'm sorry, cinnamon girl." My throat squeezed, suffocating me. "I was trying to do the right thing."

Silence was my only answer, taunting me. If she heard me, she didn't

show it. She hadn't moved since the doctors patched her up and brought her back into her room.

Part of me envied her escape from reality, as sick as that was. My own world had turned black in the past three months, and I'd become a shell of myself. But still, I couldn't hide from the memories. Every word I'd ever spoken to her bruised me black and blue on the inside. Each day without her light grew colder and I knew—fucking knew—I was going under.

Neither one of us would ever be the same.

Having her by my side wasn't a possibility under any circumstance, so I'd settle for her existing in this world and not being mine. I'd settle for her being someone else's, as long as she was alive.

"My birthday is coming up," I rasped. "You promised you'd be here for it. Just be on this earth, that's all I ask."

I hurt her by chasing her away, but in doing so, I'd hurt myself even more. The red mist was the only company I'd had since she'd been gone.

The pain lingered with a vengeance, shredding me to pieces and wrapping me in its darkness. It felt worse now that I'd tasted her light.

"Fuck," I cursed under my breath, running a hand through my hair.

The door slid open and I lifted my head as heavy footsteps echoed on the floor. Both Illias Konstantin and my brother stood in my peripheral vision, looking grim.

"Amon, we can't keep this a secret much longer," Dante attempted to reason. "Illias agrees. Her friends have blasted her face all over social media. They called Interpol, for fuck's sake."

Konstantin was a member of the Omertà, as well as the Pakhan of the Russian mafia. Well, when Sofia Volkov wasn't stealing his thunder, that was. Not that he seemed troubled by any of it.

"We need to call her family."

"Let me do it," Dante suggested. "I'll message her sister and let her break the news to the rest of her family."

Illias wasn't the one who worried me. It was my brother. Dante's glare and arctic demeanor hadn't eased since the accident. It seemed Dante had switched sides and decided to become Reina's protector.

It burned like acid through me, but I had to ignore it. I had no right to her, and having someone like my brother looking out for her well-being *should* bring me comfort. I just had to work on being a bigger man and accepting that fact.

“Her sister alerted Romero and their grandmother that Reina has been missing for days now,” Illias reasoned. “It’s only a matter of time before they find her. I’ve been throwing off their searches and misleading the authorities by dropping false information, but it’s only a matter of time before they figure it out.”

“Keep leading them astray,” I urged, sounding calmer than I felt. “I want to be here when she wakes up.”

“It’s too late to care now,” Dante snapped. “Let her family take care of her.” I tilted my head, meeting his furious gaze. His breathing was harsh as he directed his anger at me.

I was on him in the blink of an eye, slamming his body against the wall. The windows rattled with the force of it, alerting nearby nurses and doctors. Illias shut the blinds, but not before I felt their gazes through the glass. “Why the fuck do you care?” I asked, the warning in my voice unmistakable. I might not be able to have Reina, but I’d be damned if I’d let my brother swoop in.

He said nothing, simply holding my glare and returning it in kind.

“Watch it, Dante,” I warned, my eyes narrowed on him. “I don’t know what the fuck your problem is, but I suggest you get a handle on it now. And don’t concern yourself with Reina.”

My brother and I had always seen eye to eye. Mostly. We had our disagreements, as all brothers did, but we’d never physically fought outside of practice. *I guess there’s a first time for everything.*

A hand landed on my shoulder.

“Amon, this is neither the time nor the place,” Illias warned.

I ignored him, my hand still wrapped around my brother’s neck. “I don’t want you near her.”

Dante sighed. “I’m not your enemy, Amon.” He jutted his chin in Reina’s direction, her body unmoving and giving no indication of being aware of us. “Ever since you broke it off with her, you’ve been different.” It was hard to dispute it. I *had* changed. There was a black hole in my chest. “Just work it out, or you’ll destroy us all.” His eyes locked on the bed where Reina’s body lay. “It’s already destroyed her.”

“I fucking know that. Don’t you think I know that?” I hissed under my breath. “Do you think I need you to point out the obvious to me?”

He opened his mouth to answer but Konstantin cut him off.

“Dante, why don’t you step outside for a moment?” Judging by my

brother's expression, he was ready to tell him to fuck off, but before he could do that, Illias added, "Now."

Illias's tone said he wouldn't take no for an answer. He was a fair but brutal Pakhan. As part of the Omertà, he could easily destroy us if he learned of our role—no, my role—in Reina's accident. In my effort to distance myself from her, I had pushed her too far. I'd never fucking intended for her to become collateral damage in any scenario.

And yet she became exactly that, my mind whispered.

Dante met my eyes, shaking his head. "Fucking bullshit," he muttered under his breath as he moved over to the door.

It wasn't until it clicked shut behind him that Illias said, "I certainly hope you know what you're doing." My jaw tightened. "Fucking Romero's daughter is a sure way to get yourself killed."

"I'm not fucking her," I gritted. *Not anymore.*

And that was the worst part. I still wanted her. I still craved her. No matter how much I tried, I couldn't see her as my half sister. Goddamn it! I was all fucked up in the head. What kind of disturbed person still wanted a woman after learning they were related?

My throat constricted. Bile rose up again, but I swallowed it down, the bitter, disgusting taste souring my insides.

"Fine, have it your way." Illias slid his hands into the immaculately tailored pockets of his suit pants. I had yet to see the guy wearing anything else in all the years I'd known him. He valued his appearance almost as much as his stalking skills when it came to Tatiana Nikolaev. Of course, he didn't know I knew that. "Reina Romero can't stay a secret here. You know that as well as I do. It's a miracle the doctor hasn't seen her picture on social media yet."

"Thanks for pointing out the obvious," I muttered, averting my eyes.

"If Romero—or anyone else from the Omertà—learns that we kept her hidden, it will cause a war among the families. We cannot afford to be weak, Amon." I remained still, knowing he was right but not giving the slightest shit. They could all go to war and die for all I cared. "Do you think it was a coincidence she was hit?"

I snapped my head up. He had my attention now. I hadn't given it any thought, and honestly, I didn't fucking know. Praying she stayed alive had been consuming me since we stepped foot in the hospital.

"What information do you have?" The comment couldn't have come out

of the blue. Illias was a smart man and conducted himself with precision. He didn't blurt shit out.

"I know your cousin has kept an eye on Reina Romero for years."

I narrowed my eyes. "That's nothing new."

"And he tried to use her to strengthen his relationship with the Brazilian cartel."

"Again, old news. Get to the point because I know you have one." My patience was running thin and my eyes kept darting to the girl in the hospital bed, listening to that soothing but too faint beeping from the heart monitor.

"The driver. Look into him." There was my confirmation. "He and some of his family have worked on and off for the Cortes cartel in the past."

He'd barely finished the statement and I was already sending a message to Ghost—namely, Kingston—and Dante. It would keep my brother busy, and Ghost would ensure the driver was found.

"Thanks for the tip."

"It's clear you care for the girl." Fucker. I'd have to work on my poker face. *After she's awake*, I thought. "It's clear you want to protect her."

"Well, you're full of revelations," I deadpanned.

He ignored my sarcasm. "Take over the Yakuza. Become so powerful that nobody can touch her. That's how you protect her."

"And what do you think I'm trying to do?" My tone was dry.

Illias smiled, like a cat that just ate the canary. "I suspected it, and I'm glad I was right."

"What does any of it have to do with Reina?" None of my power would make any difference when it came to the cinnamon girl. She would still remain out of my reach. She was the sun and I was the ocean, basking in its glittery shine but never reaching it.

"Become the head of the Yakuza and Romero will jump at the opportunity to give her to you."

I let out a bitter laugh, knowing the secret that ripped me in half. I almost wished I didn't, but that was neither here nor there. I would let Illias believe it, because the secret of my blood relationship with Reina would die with my mother and me.

My eyes ventured back to her just in time to see her body start to twitch. Her breathing turned harsh. Her eyes opened to slits, but panic lingered in them.

"Call the doctor," I ordered, then strode to the hospital bed, leaning over

her. I took her small hand in mine. “Hey, you’re alright.”

She didn’t respond. Instead, she gasped for air, her blue eyes unfocused. It was as if a haze covered them, stealing their brightness.

“Reina,” I called. As if my voice made it worse, the heartbeat displayed on the machine sped up and became louder. Her lips twitched but no sound came out. Her eyes rolled to the back of her head and she lost consciousness once again.

3

AMON

I entered the room designed for torturing our enemies and extracting answers to find my brother had started without me. No surprise there. I just wished he hadn't beaten them to the brink of death. My gaze traveled over Dante, noting his labored breathing, destroyed knuckles, and blood-splattered clothes.

It was good to know he still nurtured his crazy.

"Are you sure that's them?" I asked my brother.

I focused on the man tied to the chair, while Dante stood in front of the guy hanging from the chains in the basement of our club. If the people dancing above us knew what went on under their feet, they would bolt out of here screeching like damn birds.

"Yes."

The images of Reina unconscious in her hospital bed played in my mind on a reel. Over and over again. It set my teeth on edge. It threatened to boil over and explode like a volcano. My ears buzzed with rage and my vision blurred as I saw nothing but red.

"Did he say anything?"

"The idiot knows nothing."

"We'll see." I looked at the unconscious form. "He'll talk. And then I'll cut out his tongue and dig his eyeballs from their sockets."

Dante caught my gaze with a curious expression. "Huh. I'm impressed."

He stood in front of the other unfortunate soul in our holding cell. These were the men who'd run over Reina. Dante had caught them with Ghost's help yesterday. I watched from where I stood as blood dripped down his chin and bare chest onto the concrete floor.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

It reminded me of the tempo of Reina's heart monitor: slow and weak.

"Yeah, well..." I trailed off, retrieving my knife from its holster and moving over to the bastard. I grabbed a fistful of his hair and lifted his head. He was out cold. I flicked a look at Dante. "Give him a shot of adrenaline."

Dante went to the table and retrieved it, returning to inject it into the man's outer thigh.

"About the hospital—" Dante started, but I shook my head.

"Not now."

"Then when?" he snapped. "It's been three days since the accident. Over three months since you and Reina broke it off. You started seeing other women." I tried to move on and failed. "Yet you attack me when I'm trying to reason with you to move on from her. It's time to let her go."

Let her go.

Cackling filled the cell, each drum of my heart a betrayal to human decency. To my brother, I had given up Reina, yet I couldn't fully let her go. The thought of anyone near her had my insides twisting and my fury unleashing. What was wrong with me? She was my half sister, for fuck's sake. I'd tried to move on, he was right about that. In the three months after breaking it off with her, I had done nothing *but* try.

"She's just another girl." My words rang anything but true. I didn't believe my own voice, and according to the disbelief in Dante's eyes, he didn't either. "This has nothing to do with her."

His scoff further indicated what he thought about that.

"Then why go to the hospital and stare at her?" Dante questioned, frustration flickering on his face. "Why attack me?"

The man stirred, saving me from an answer.

I strode over to the table in the corner and picked up the bloody pliers from it. Ghost must have collected his payment—in the form of a tooth. Deciding against the pliers, I picked up an AED. "This is a portable medical device," I explained in a drawled tone. "See it?" I didn't wait for him to confirm. "It's designed to help people in the midst of cardiac arrest by sending a shock to your black heart." I grinned maliciously. "However, before you get too excited, there'll be no saving going on here today." A whimper escaped the asshole's busted mouth. "I'll send a shock to your fucking heart. I ensured the device is calibrated to override the safety that'll recognize a healthy heart, so we can prolong this until you give me answers."

So you see, it's in your best interest to tell me everything."

When I was done with this fucker, he might actually need the device for real. Too bad I had no intention of using it that way.

Dante slid his hands into his pockets and leaned against the wall, watching me. It would seem he'd gotten his fill of torture to sate his madness.

It was my turn to lose myself to rage and my own form of madness.

I charged it up before pressing the electro pads against his ribs and...
Boom!

His entire body convulsed, speeding up his heart. Maybe I shouldn't have used adrenaline, but I wanted him lucid. Fucking sue me.

His head darted between Dante and me, looking for the weaker man. He wouldn't find one here.

His pupils met mine—wide, unfocused, and dilated.

"What are you doing, man?" he spat out, saliva dribbling down his chin.

"So we have your attention," I deadpanned.

He shook his head. "This is a mistake. You have to release me."

"Release you?" I repeated slowly, my lips curling to reveal the sneer I'd been keeping controlled. He nodded his head, likely mistaking it for a smile. "I'm just getting started," I drawled.

His eyeballs just about popped out of his head. "I demand—"

I punched him with one of the electrodes, relishing in the sound of his skull cracking. "Why did you flee the scene when you almost killed a girl three days ago?"

"I didn't."

"Okay, let's try this again." I pressed the pads on his chest again and...
Boom!

His eyeballs rolled to the back of his head before they came back to focus on me.

"Don't know—" I raised a pad, ready to shock him again, when he screamed, "No, no, no."

"Last chance, or I'll fry your brain cells with this."

I might have spotted a tear or two in his eyes. "I was instructed not to get caught," he whimpered.

My eyes flitted to Dante who finally looked interested in this conversation.

"By whom?"

"I don't know."

I shocked him again, relishing how the skin on his ribs twitched. “By whom?” I gritted.

“I don’t know,” he cried like a baby. Each shockwave had him drooling. His tongue lolled as spit streamed down his chin. His eyes were red-rimmed from a combination of torture and sleep deprivation. Dante and Ghost had been at him for hours. His skin was covered in welts and he smelled like piss. I zapped him again, feeling a sick satisfaction at the way his body convulsed—just as the product promised when I’d bought it off the dark web. “All I know is that they want your distribution lines. The blonde girl was meant to be leverage.”

I unleashed.

Static filled my ears as I gave my full attention to the asshole in front of me.

I pulled my knife, grabbing his hair so he could meet my gaze. “If you think my brother was brutal, you haven’t seen anything yet.”

I rammed a blade into his abdomen with such force he let out a piercing scream. For the next thirty minutes, I sliced his skin, carving it to pieces while Dante toyed with the other guy, ending his life way too soon.

“Give me the name,” I gritted, twisting the knife in his body. “Or I’ll slice you open and make you watch as your bowels are splayed all over the floor.” His face filled with agony and blood sputtered from his mouth. “Last chance.”

He met my eyes, terror lurking in his dull brown gaze.

“All I know is that they want an open route to move their products,” he panted.

“What products?” It might narrow it down to the organization if I knew what they were moving.

“Drugs.” Every fucking organization in the underworld. “Weapons.” Okay, that eliminated a few families. “Flesh.”

I stilled. Human trafficking had been eliminated from the Omertà. Most of Europe. The entire U.S. East Coast. Colombia. But the Brazilian cartel and the Yakuza still dipped their toes in those filthy waters. It couldn’t be a coincidence.

“Who is it?” Dante growled. “Brazilians?” The fucker just stared blankly. “Yakuza? Venezuelans?”

“I. Don’t. Know.” Then he surprised me. He started laughing. Maniacally. Disturbingly. It was the kind that sent a creepy cold feeling up

my spine. “Fuck. You.”

This fucker wouldn't tell us anything else.

I jerked the blade upward and opened him up. He slumped forward again, life quickly leaving him. Stepping back, I slid the knife out and part of his bowels dropped with a grotesque splash onto the floor.

Another jerk of his body and the life left his wretched face.

I stared at him, seconds stretching into minutes. My heart was in agony, each beat more painful than the last. I knew at that very moment that there'd be no getting over Reina. When I turned, Dante was staring at me as if he'd never seen me before.

I raised my eyebrows. “What?”

“You never lose your cool.”

I went over to the sink and washed my hands and the knife. My shirt and pants were black, so nobody would notice blood on them.

“Dante, stop looking at me,” I growled when he still hadn't moved. “And call someone to clean up this mess.”

I left him standing in the room and headed out, car keys in hand. I prowled through the club and hit the street, spotting my red Ferrari F8 Spider. I turned on the engine when Dante slipped in through the passenger-side door.

Turning my head to look at him, I gripped the wheel. I didn't have the patience for this. I wanted to get back to my place, wash up, and get back to the hospital in case Reina woke up.

“What?” My control was teetering on the brink of madness, and somehow that beeping sound was the only thing that could calm me down.

“I hope you're not going back to the hospital.”

I sent him a warning look. “Don't start.”

It didn't faze him at all. “Whatever. The cleaning crew is on the way,” he drawled, getting himself comfortable.

“Fuck!” I rammed my fist down on the steering wheel, hitting the horn. “I can't do this with you now, Dante. Get the fuck out of the car or I swear to God, I'm going to—”

He raised his hands, shaking his head. “Fine, fine. Have it your way.”

I peeled out of there the moment his boots hit the pavement.

I needed to get back to Reina.

4

AMON

I arrived at the hospital full of hope, which felt like a heavy brick as it sank, fast and steady.

“She’s having trouble breathing,” the doctor explained patiently. “There’s a rattle when she breathes and she’s wheezing a lot.”

Fear gripped my throat. It sounded bad. Very bad. “What does this mean?”

“She has fluid in her lungs. We’ll have to drain them so she can breathe without the assistance of a machine.”

“Then do it,” I demanded, tensing my jaw as I willed myself to calm down.

“We need her next of kin to sign off on it.” This fucking doctor was starting to piss me off. The fact that he was on Illias’s payroll was utterly pointless and useless. “In case there are further complications,” he added. “I can’t risk my medical license for *this*. She’s too visible.”

Goddamn it! He must have seen all the fucking posters searching for her.

Desperation clawed at me. I knew what I had to do, yet I couldn’t bear not being with her until she opened her eyes. I needed it to keep my sanity.

“You know what needs to be done, Amon,” Illias said in his dry voice. “It’s a miracle I was able to keep Romero and his family off his daughter’s trail for the past three days. He’s tearing down this world and ready to start a war that he cannot win.”

“Let him fucking fight it.”

“You’d let his daughters become orphans?”

My chest twisted. I wasn’t in the right frame of mind right now to make any decisions. I just needed to see her wake up. I’d give it all—even my own

life—just to see her blue eyes open. However, I knew the moment the Romero family showed up, my access to Reina would be cut off.

“I can read it on your face, Amon. You’d never hurt the girl.” I let out a bitter-filled breath. He was so fucking wrong. I already hurt her. “Do the right thing.”

Do the right thing. Nobody else was doing the right thing. Her family would have her for the rest of their lives. I just wanted another day to see Reina pull through. Why couldn’t Illias just keep throwing them off the trail until then?

My jaw clenched, resentment slithering through my veins. “Don’t you have anywhere to be?”

“Not right now.” Of course the Pakhan had insisted on remaining here. If he’d left, I’d have bribed this motherfucker of a doctor and stayed in here until the police or Interpol showed up. “What’s your deal with Romero?”

“No deal.” Just couldn’t stand the motherfucker even more since learning he was my biological father. *He* cost me Reina. I didn’t give a shit if my blame made sense or not. I pinned it on him.

“Is she awake?” I asked, hoping I could get at least that.

“She’s been in and out.”

“I need to see her.” Illias didn’t seem moved by my persistence.

“And she needs her family.” His voice was grave. “She needs this surgery.”

“Then tell this guy to do it,” I snapped. “He will if you green-light it.”

“I will not.” Dr. Dubois’s no-nonsense face told me he meant it. I had a feeling my heart was going to give out if I didn’t save the cinnamon girl even at the cost of my own sanity.

So I did the only thing I could.

“Fine.” I cleared my throat so I wouldn’t choke, and there wasn’t enough air in the fucking room as I braced myself to finish. “I’ll give you her family’s contact information.”

Fuck, it killed me to say that.

“It’s the right thing, Amon.”

Then why did it feel so fucking wrong? I walked over to peer through the glass, her unconscious form deathly still on the bed. Her golden curls framed her pale face, making my heart twist.

I did that. Me.

I wrenched myself from the window and turned to find Illias staring at

me. Somewhere in the room, the soft drip of a sink registered. The scent of bleach and disinfectant perfumed the air.

“I never thanked you,” I started, raking a hand through my hair. I forced myself to take deep breaths until my heartbeat slowed.

“You would have done the same thing for me.”

I nodded. “I owe you. I won’t forget it.”

Illias let out a sardonic breath. “If you owe me, I won’t bother collecting from Romero.” I couldn’t tell whether he was joking or not. It didn’t really matter.

“You’ve met Reina before?” I asked.

No answer.

He leaned against the nearest wall, his expression unreadable. “What’s the story with you and her?”

“No story.” *Not anymore.* He scoffed and shook his head. “It’s none of your business,” I finally added, hoping he’d drop the subject.

Illias’s sigh contained exasperation. “Ah, to be young again,” he muttered. “Believe it or not, I’m on your side.”

“For now.”

Another, deeper sigh. “I’m not in the habit of switching my alliances, Amon.”

I glanced between Illias and the girl who’d brought sunshine into my life. “I know.” Illias Konstantin was a man of his word.

“It’s obvious there’s something going on with you two,” he remarked. When I didn’t answer, he continued, “I saw her at the party. She seemed pretty distraught when she saw you with your woman.”

I swallowed the lump of guilt in my throat.

“Not my woman,” I muttered, closing my eyes and pressing my fingers to my temple. “I’m going crazy.” The last three months had felt like a train wreck, and it was catching up to me.

“Explain.”

I cracked my eyes open and met his dark gaze. Tension shot down my spine and my muscles stiffened. “We met last summer. It was—” I pinched the bridge of my nose. “It’s complicated.”

“All the things and people worth having in life usually are,” he deadpanned, staring at me with a glint in his eyes that I couldn’t read. “Fight for her.”

If only it were that simple.

“It’s over,” I said, my shoulders tense. “Anyhow, her father would never give his blessing.”

It was safest to leave it at that; I couldn’t reveal that I was Romero’s illegitimate son and Reina was my half sister. Not without dragging her into the pits of hell with me, which I had no intention of doing.

The pressure in my chest refused to ease and each breath I pulled in was excruciating.

“Don’t be a stubborn fuck and let what matters most slip through your hands,” Illias stated, flicking a piece of lint off his suit. “You’ll never get that time back.”

It sounded like he spoke from experience.

The worst part was I would fight the whole goddamn world for her... if only things were different.

“You’ll be miserable until you work shit out with her.”

I tilted my head back and shut my eyes again. “Probably,” I agreed. “But right now, I just need Reina to wake up.”

“She’ll be okay.” His voice held conviction I didn’t feel.

Only time would tell if his words would prove true. All I could do was pray that Reina’s family would allow me around until she was out of danger.



Beep. Beep. Beep.

Two hours and she never stirred. The sound was both comforting and dreadful now because it counted down the seconds until her family showed up. But it was also proof she was still breathing. Fighting for her life.

Holding her hand in mine, I sat in her hospital room and memorized every perfect line of her face. Yes, there were cuts and bruises, but she was still the most perfect woman I had ever laid eyes on.

With each beep of the machine, I was also losing my mind. I was halfway to madness already. My heart and my soul kept trying to claw their way out and stay by Reina’s side, getting battered and bloody in the process.

But it was pointless.

Illias left the moment I provided the doctor with information on Reina’s grandmother. I wondered why he didn’t bother doing it himself. Now, I wasn’t so sure the choice was smart. I had shit to hold over Romero’s head

but nothing on the old dragon of a woman.

“I’m sorry I hurt you,” I whispered, my voice soft. She was my pull to the light and losing her made the darkness all the worse. “I wish—”

Her eyes remained closed while my heart disintegrated in her hospital room. *Piece. By. Fucking. Piece.*

This hurt worse than anything else.

“You will get better, cinnamon girl.” My fingers trembled around hers. “And don’t you dare settle. You’re going to thrive, and I’ll end anyone who gets in the way.” *Including myself.*

Her hand still in mine, I placed it over my heart. “I’ll never be the same,” I murmured softly, my words choking me. “You... you were the best thing that ever happened to me.”

Beep. Beep. Beep.

Her silence gave me a preview of the future, robbing me of her voice. Robbing me of everything.

The door swung open, hitting the wall with a loud thud and causing the glass to clatter with the force of it.

The old dragon stood at the doorway, steaming with fury, but only for a flicker of a moment. Once her eyes landed on her granddaughter, she barged in and started yelling.

I shot to my feet. “Keep your voice down. Reina doesn’t need this right now.”

Diana Glasgow threw her hands in the air. “How dare you...”

They should have called Romero. He didn’t have the balls that this woman had.

“If you can’t keep your tone in check, you’ll find yourself out of this room,” I said.

She pointed her finger at her granddaughter’s sleeping form. “What are you doing here? And what did you do to Reina?”

“Nothing.” *Everything.*

God, I was already regretting my choice. It would have been easier if Reina had been moved under the care of a doctor I could control, without anyone else interfering.

Confrontational silence suffocated the air while the constant beep of the machine soothed my irritation. I placed my hand at Diana’s back and ushered her out of the room.

“Tomaso Romero and your family have done enough damage to mine,”

Diana hissed once we were in the hallway. I caught a glimpse of something—was that worry lurking in her eyes? “That stops here and now. I want you out of here.”

Fuck, nothing was going to plan. I wanted to stay until Reina woke up. I needed to see she was fine before I forced myself to move on. Alone.

5

REINA

The sound of a door slamming jostled me from my nightmare. I had to still be sleeping. Everything was dark, and all I felt was... pain.

Excruciating pain.

It was a struggle to breathe. To think. Even letting go seemed to be too much.

The muffled shouts pulled on my consciousness, but I couldn't fully wake up. Where was I? What was happening to me? Why did everything hurt?

"I don't want to see you anywhere near her again." Grandma's voice. "The connection to you has her fighting for her life now. I blame you for this."

I opened my mouth to say something—what, I didn't know—but nothing came out. She had to be talking to Papà. She always blamed him for everything. I tried to shift on the bed so I could draw attention to myself.

But I couldn't move. It was as if I weighed a ton, and I found myself fighting just to inhale and exhale. My chest ached, and each breath threatened to crack my ribs.

More words were exchanged, but they were hushed. My mind was too fuzzy to distinguish more than fleeting words.

"My granddaughter might die because of you. What you need is irrelevant here."

Then the silence followed. Dark. Lonely. And so fucking quiet.

The sound of a door opening and footsteps approaching trilled in my ears.

I needed someone to pull me out of this painful haze. I blinked my eyes furiously, willing them to open but failing. The mattress dipped as someone sat by my side.

“Oh, Reina.” My grandmother’s voice cracked and she sniffed. “I failed you too.”

I opened my mouth to assure her I was okay, but the only thing that came out was a wheeze.

The mattress shifted again. “Rest your voice,” she rasped. Something wet dripped onto my hand and it took me a moment to realize what it was. *Tears.*

The bed creaked. I imagined she was wiping away her face before someone caught her in this vulnerable state.

“You were in an accident, Reina. The doctors are optimistic,” she whispered, her forehead meeting mine gently. “They’re going to take you into surgery soon and then—”

And then what, I wanted to ask. *What kind of accident?* It was all too much.

Even if I’d been able to say the words, I wasn’t sure I’d want to know the answers. Being strong sucked. Being weak even more so. Where did that leave me?

Alone. Without *him.*

“You and Phoenix are all I have left,” she whispered. “Don’t you leave us. Losing your mom just about killed me. Losing you... I wouldn’t survive it.” Her voice cracked and she cleared her throat. “You fight in there. Fight for your sister. Fight for me. Fight to live.”



Beep. Beep. Beep

My eyes fluttered open.

The buzzing in my ears was constant. Beeping rattled my skull. Bright fluorescent lights assaulted my eyelids and I groaned, reaching to touch my temple.

My eyes instantly grew wide, spotting tubes attached to my veins. My fuzzy vision cleared with each blink, and I lowered my gaze to find the heavy cast on my other arm. Bruises and cuts painted every inch of visible skin.

“What’s—” I coughed, my throat as dry as the Sahara.

“She’s awake.” I heard my grandmother’s voice before I felt her warm touch on my hand. I turned my head slowly, squeezing my eyes shut and then opening them again to look at her. My girlfriends and my sister were sitting

behind her. Four wide-eyed, tear-stained faces. Grandma's lips came down to my forehead, fluttering over it. "I'm so glad to see your beautiful eyes. How are you feeling?"

I swallowed, the lump in my throat still there.

The images started filtering in. The party. Amon. I remembered how fucking bad it hurt to see him with someone else. I remembered my anxiety being dulled out by the pain of my heartbreak.

Then a set of headlights.

And another.

There was a voice I heard before I passed out.

It sounded familiar, yet not. *Don't make me resort to drastic measures.*

"How did I get here?" I coughed out, my chest tight.

The girls shared a glance before Phoenix looked at Grandma, who averted her eyes and straightened her spine. I waited, holding my breath. I didn't know what for, except that I needed to hear it.

Phoenix stood up and walked over to the window, pressing her forehead against the glass. Rain pounded on the other side of it, and somehow I knew she'd felt this pain before.

This heartbreak.

It was what she'd been warning me about all along. Phoenix wiped at her eyes and turned to face me. My big sister looked drained. Tired. Exasperated. But she didn't say anything.

"A good Samaritan," Grandma answered simply.

My heart squeezed. "Has anyone come to visit me?"

Something flickered in her eyes.

"Just your papà and us." Why did it feel like she was lying to me? My memories were scattered, my thoughts confused. I'd thought I'd heard Amon's voice, but maybe it was all in my head. I took a deep breath in and slowly exhaled, focusing on my feet under the blanket. I swallowed, my lungs burning. Or was it my eyes?

"What's the prognosis?" I asked, my voice weak.

A heartbeat passed before Grandma answered, "It's not the best. The doctor needed to perform an urgent surgery, but with time, he thinks you'll be back to normal." *And the baby?* I wanted to ask, but I couldn't find my voice. I suspected the answer and was terrified to hear it. "Your abdomen will be sore for a while, but the damage isn't permanent. You'll be able to have children one day." I swallowed a lump in my throat, the back of my eyes

burning. My fingers reached for my necklace, twisting my necklace just like my heart. "I'm going to call the doctor and let him know you're awake," she added softly and I wondered if that was my confirmation that she knew I was pregnant.

She pressed a soft kiss on my cheek, then whispered and disappeared from the room.

The door barely clicked behind her when Phoenix signed, "*I told you he was no good for you.*"

She wasn't angry, just resigned.

I blinked, trying to keep my tears at bay. I didn't know what to say. I chanced a glance at my friends. Raven rubbed the back of her neck and Isla gazed away, but the same worried expression lingered on their faces.

"I'm sorry I scared you," I rasped, the beeping sound of the machine louder than my voice.

Athena looked up, tears glimmering in her eyes.

"I'm so happy you're okay, Reina." She managed a teary smile, and it was painful to see how much damage I'd done to my friends. I'd been self-centered ever since crossing paths with Amon, and in the process, I'd hurt them all.

And still, I'm waiting for him.

Amon was my reason. My whole life. My ruin.

I wanted to walk this earth feeling whole—with him—while he wanted to live his life without me.

Such a stupid, naive fool. The words floated in my mind, mocking me and my romantic ideations. It took one summer to tear them apart, and I was no better because of it.

"Did you see *him*?" Isla asked, her tone tentative, almost as if she was scared to bring it up.

"Yes."

"*And?*" Phoenix demanded. "*I don't understand why you had to go see him. What was so important?*"

I shrugged, dropping my eyes to the bed and training my focus on the finely threaded lines in the crisp white sheets. I never told my friends I was pregnant, and it was a moot point now. None of it mattered anyhow.

I lost the baby. The lump in my throat suffocated, stealing my oxygen.

"Did you talk to him?" Isla asked. I shook my head, unable to find my voice. "We should have never let you go there alone," she continued with a

stern expression. “We should have been there with you.”

“We should have kicked that bastard’s ass,” Raven growled. “Smashed that pretty face.”

Isla rolled her eyes. “As if you’d ever succeed. He’s like a whole foot taller than you.”

Raven just flipped her off.

“We’ve been going crazy,” Athena chimed in. “You’ve been MIA for three fucking days. The scenarios that ran through our heads... Your papà and grandma tore the city apart.”

I swallowed, the backs of my eyes burning with tears that wouldn’t come. “I’m sorry.”

“*Papà and the authorities kept getting wrong intel.*” Phoenix twisted her hands. “*I thought you were dead. Isla asked her brother Maxim to help.*”

“Unfortunately, he wasn’t very useful,” she muttered. “Illias would have been, but I worried he’d demand I return home, thinking there’s some kind of conspiracy going on.”

“We cried a fucking river,” Raven croaked. “I wanted to find those two Leone brothers and murder them with my bare hands.”

“We would have all helped,” Athena assured, smiling shakily. “I’m just glad you’re alive.”

I caused so much stress. So much pain. “I don’t know how to make it up to you,” I said, clearing my throat. “I promise I’m done with him.” My vow sent a hollow ache through my soul, but I ignored it. “I never meant to cause you so much pain.”

They all waved their hands. “*All that matters is that we are together again,*” Phoenix assured.

“But no more of this,” Isla demanded softly. “My heart cannot bear it.”

“You have to get your shit together.” Raven’s words were harsh, but her gentle tone made up for it. “No man is worth your tears.”

I nodded wordlessly.

“You’ll be okay,” Athena murmured softly. “Soon you won’t even remember him. All this will be a distant memory.”

I raised my eyes and met their worried gazes. “Stop telling me that I’ll be okay. I won’t be. How could any sane person forget all this shit?”

They lapsed into silence that lingered like the memories that swarmed my mind. It felt like I’d stumbled into a nightmare of my own creation, all my demons coming to haunt me. I wished to forget it all, but it was tattooed in

my mind. The way he looked at me. The way he kissed me. It was all destroyed by the image of him with someone else.

I stared up at the white-tiled ceiling, cursing myself for not being strong like Raven. Or my sister. Any of my friends, really. Instead, my mind kept trying to conjure an excuse for his shitty behavior. He was a heartbreak waiting to happen; I just didn't think it would happen the way it did.

My sister interrupted the strained moment suffocating us all.

"Get some rest," Phoenix signed. *"You look tired."*

She didn't need to ask me twice. "I am," I murmured.

I drifted off again, secure in knowing that my family and friends were still here. As the arms of sleep pulled me under, the last thought on my mind was him.

The boy with galaxies in his eyes.

6

AMON

She gave me heaven and I gave her hell.

I never thought that slice of darkness in my soul would end up consumed by the cinnamon girl.

It had been three weeks since I saw her last. Unmoving and deathly pale in that hospital bed. I'd attempted to see her, but her family had a list of approved visitors. The nurse basically told me to go fuck myself. Not even my growling or groveling worked in this instance. It was pathetic, and in the grand scheme of things, I was thankful my brother wasn't around to see the state I was in.

Besides, her grandma, Romero, and her friends were always there, taking turns watching over her. I hadn't heard from Romero, which left me to believe Diana Glasgow had told him nothing about seeing me in the hospital. Not to mention they'd put security and guards on the hospital floor. It was tight. It was good. It'd keep her safe.

It was for the best.

But I still came every day, lingering outside the hospital like a thief in the night. I had been watching her from the shadows and hacking into hospital records, tracking her progress. Today, she'd be released.

I hoped for one last glimpse of her.

My phone buzzed and I flicked a glance at it.

It was my brother.

Where in the fuck are you? Need you at this Omertà meeting.

I ignored it.

I had the rest of my miserable life to deal with the underworld. I only had

today for Reina.

I leaned against the farthest tree in the lot, staring up at its naked branches. The leaf-covered ground trembled with the wind, and I pulled my coat tighter. It was an especially cold November afternoon and the sun was already preparing to set. Thanksgiving was coming, and I guessed Reina would celebrate it with her family. The holiday made no sense to me, but Americans liked to stuff their bellies and drown their thirst.

I checked my watch and wondered for the umpteenth time why they hadn't released her first thing this morning.

Dante was right. He'd seen through me all along. She was my obsession, and would likely be my damnation. There was a line between right and wrong.

I crossed it; we crossed it. Unknowingly, but that didn't absolve us of our sins.

If I were a better man—a stronger man—I'd walk away and keep away. Reina had a family. They loved her. They'd take care of her and protect her.

But I wasn't a better man. I was a selfish bastard who wanted another glimpse of her.

One. More. Time.

To ensure she was alright. To see that halo around her head. I knew an angel was never meant to end up with a bitter prince.

She'd called me her prince. She was wrong. I turned out to be her executioner. I'd almost cost her the ultimate price. I cost her—

I swallowed, my Adam's apple squeezing painfully. My chest ached so fucking bad, I wanted to pound on it to ease some of the pressure. I suspected it wouldn't do me any good. Reina Romero was a part of me. She'd found a way inside my broken soul and lodged herself there so solidly no surgical knife would get her out.

A glimmer caught my attention, and I inhaled a sharp breath.

Her grandmother was the first to step outside, draped in gold and fur like the old legend of Hollywood she was. Romero was next, wearing his Italian suit and black trench coat.

I held my breath. *There she is.*

A loud thud cracked in my chest and my heart resumed beating. At least for now.

Reina was being wheeled out of the hospital by her sister, a blanket covering her legs to protect her from the brisk air. A nurse tracked along on

her left. Huddled into herself, Reina sat in the wheelchair, her face still pale and her full lips a few shades lighter than I was used to. She looked far too fragile and weak.

Even from here, I could see dark circles around those sapphires that no longer sparkled.

A dark cloud seemed to hover above as she stared blankly, lost in who knew what nightmare. Phoenix stopped, and Reina turned to the nurse, her lips moving slowly. There wasn't a hint of a smile on her lips.

I did that.

God, I'd give anything to turn back time and change it all. I would have kept my distance, leaving her innocence intact.

Now, I'd pulled her into my darkness. I'd damaged her, and we were both left with nothing. And I had nobody else to blame.

Reina shifted in the chair, wincing as she did, and I couldn't help my body as it drew forward, needing to help. To take care of her. Her grandmother, sister, and father all jumped to help her too, but whatever Reina uttered had them freezing on the spot. All but her sister since she was deaf. But Phoenix must have gotten the message because she stepped back.

I watched Reina attempt to slowly stand. My hands fisting, I fought to keep my feet planted on the ground and out of sight.

A pained expression marred her beautiful face, but she took a step, determination clear on her features.

And it was then that I realized it.

She'd move forward, but I'd remain in her shadow.

She was no longer mine, but right or wrong, I'd forever be hers.



I lifted my head and stared at the gray, grim sky.

A week had gone by and the only thing I'd succeeded at was stumbling through a pathetic, self-destructive drinking bender. I ignored my brother, my mother, and the whole fucking world.

I looked around my Paris penthouse, tempted to set the entire building aflame. Every single inch of this apartment reminded me of her.

The doorbell rang. I didn't bother answering.

When I heard the soft click, I made a mental note to change all my locks.

The soft footsteps against the hardwood told me my mother was approaching, and I braced myself.

“You missed the Omertà meeting.”

I took a swig of whatever cheap vodka I’d blindly purchased at the store down the street. My last resort.

“I doubt I missed anything important.”

“You can’t ignore your duties.” I should have told her to stop talking, but I didn’t have the energy for it. “Dante wouldn’t tell me what’s gotten into you, but I suspect it has something to do with *her*.”

“Save the concern for someone who cares.” *And deserves it.*

“Your father will start noticing,” she scolded softly.

I scoffed. “Do I need to point out he’s not my father?” She flinched. I knew she hated the reminder. *Join the fucking club.* “By the way, I ran into Diana Glasgow.” Her expression turned guarded. “She was very distraught, accusing our family, along with Tomaso Romero, of bringing misery to theirs.”

The woman wasn’t wrong. It was the only reason that’d kept me from strangling her right there and then.

Silence stretched, tense like a rubber band ready to snap.

Except my mother’s next words were a blatant lie. “I don’t know what she meant by that. They caused misery, not the other way around.” She lifted her chin and made her way to the large french window.

“And how is that?”

“Their family never belonged in the underworld. They don’t understand the way things are among families in the Omertà, the importance of business relationships.”

I twisted the yin and yang bracelet Reina gave me on the day I learned who my birth father was. It was meant as a beginning, yet it turned out to be an end. I didn’t care that it was derived from Chinese culture. It only reminded me of her.

“And you do?”

My mother whirled around, her eyes flashing with anger. “I do. I grew up in this world. We belong in this world.”

I was beginning to see things in my mother that I didn’t like. Maybe it was my resentment, or maybe my eyes were finally being opened.

7

REINA

There were a few times over the last few weeks where I thought death was better than staying alive. It would have spared me the pain and the tears that came at night.

In death, I would have found peace.

Instead, I sat and stared at the gray landscape stretching for miles outside of Glasgow castle. An hour outside of London, the countryside made you believe you were hundreds of miles away from the city and civilization.

It was Thanksgiving and Grandma decided we'd celebrate it in her husband's hometown in Cambridge. The estate was vast and had enough rooms to accommodate both our families and our friends. Of course, they didn't celebrate Thanksgiving in England, but considering the Duke of Glasgow's granddaughter was born in the States and followed the customs, it was a novelty for their entire family.

I watched Livy and her husband play with the triplets—Lily, Lena, and Liam Caldwell. A normal life. That was what it looked like they had. My heart lurched. It had been so long since our family was normal... Assuming we ever were.

My mind drifted and a forgotten memory filtered in without permission.

A loud bang sounded in the distance.

I looked up from the Lego castle my sister and I were building. "What was that?" I signed, then remembered she couldn't hear.

She just shrugged.

I was just getting back to our Legos when I heard another loud bang, followed by shouts. Jumping to my feet, I ran to the living room window and peeked outside.

There were five men out there. With guns!

I darted back to the spot where Phoenix sat on the floor, staring at me with a confused look on her face.

“We have to find Mamma.”

I stuck to signing, worried that someone might hear me outside. Just as I was about to pull her to her feet, Mamma and Papà burst into the room.

“You two, hurry,” Papà urged. “You’ll go with your mother.”

He didn’t sign, leaving Phoenix to search my face for clues. I quickly translated and then followed him toward the fireplace where he was patting down the stone sides. Mamma was pale as a ghost, her fingers trembling as she pushed my curls out of my face.

“Everything will be okay,” Papà said over his shoulder, but he didn’t sound so sure.

“How can you even say that?” Mamma hissed, her face tight. “This is not what I signed up for. This isn’t a life for my daughters.”

The fireplace shifted and a dark hole appeared. I stood frozen. I didn’t like tight spaces.

“Get in there,” he ordered. “We’ll talk about it later.”

Papà grabbed my arm and pushed me inside. I squealed in pain as I fell to my knees, crawling into the corner and wrapping my arms around my legs. My heart was like a hummingbird, hurting my little chest.

Bang!

Strange voices trickled in, spurring Papà into a frenzy. He pushed Phoenix in next, who shook like a leaf, and I wrapped her into my arms, clutching her, whether for strength or to offer comfort, I was unsure.

I looked up to see Papà holding something shiny and black—a gun, I realized—his eyes narrowed on Mamma.

“Love, you have to go in there.” Mamma’s curls bounced wildly as she shook her head. She was terrified of small spaces too. “It will be okay. Just for a few minutes.”

“Tomaso, no.” Her voice was a whimper, but it didn’t seem to deter him. “I swear to God, I’ll leave you if you do this.”

“Would you rather die? Cost our daughters their lives?”

“They can’t just kill us in our own home.”

“I’d rather not take the risk and be proven wrong.”

He took her elbow and forced her in. I watched the scene unfold with wide eyes. She fought against him, but he was stronger. Then she was in the

darkness with us. Before she could protest further, Papà swung the door shut.

Mamma's small fists hit the red brick. "Tomaso." Her wrath vibrated in the small space. "Goddamn it, Tomaso. Open—"

Phoenix's soft whimpers filled the air, and it anchored me.

"I—it's okay, Mamma," I whispered. I forced my hand to reach out to her and pat her on her back, just like she always soothed me when I had bad dreams. "Papà is stronger than all the bad men."

"If only," she mumbled. "I won't let anything happen to you two."

Enveloped in the darkness, the three of us huddled together. My ears roared with my heartbeat. I couldn't sign, the space was too small and too dark, so I just held Phoenix closer to me.

We were silent for a while, save for the sounds of our ragged breaths, when voices drew nearer and gunshots rang out again. My body shook harder and screams bubbled in my throat. Terrified of being found, my hand came to my mouth. More shouting.

Bang. Bang. Bang. More shots.

A loud giggle yanked me out of my memory and back to reality.

I blinked away images of the darkness and the feeling that had gripped my throat. Maybe things had been bad even before Mamma died. It would have made sense. If either Phoenix or I weren't Papà's, it meant Mamma had sought happiness from somewhere—or someone—else.

I didn't know. I wasn't sure of anything anymore.

Chasing the confusing memory away, I focused on the family in front of me. There were so many things to be thankful for.

Being alive. Having an amazing sister. A family. Best friends. Yet, I couldn't muster an ounce of goodwill or holiday spirit.

I rubbed my chest while my mind filled with different memories, this time of the boy I loved too much. Or maybe not enough. All I knew was that it had left me empty.

My nights were filled with doubt and regret, desperate to relive happy moments only to end up at this same exact spot: staring at nothing, wishing I could disappear.

I tapped my fingers against my thigh, restlessness itching at my skin. If I moved, someone would rush over and fuss over me, suffocating me.

The hairs on the back of my neck rose, aware of a presence close by. I didn't shift, waiting for whoever it was to say something. Or preferably nothing.

My hands twisted the pendants hanging from my platinum chain. I should get rid of the one Amon gifted me, but each time I went to take it off, I found myself unable to. Maybe I was a masochist, and this was my punishment.

“Reina.” Papà’s voice was low, soft. Almost as if he thought a raised tone could destroy me.

If only.

Slipping the necklace under my shirt, I turned to see him shifting toward the empty chair.

He sat down, his movements almost robotic. His usually immaculate hair was messed up and his jaw was set tight. His eyes were hollow, exhausted—more so than ever—and I guessed it wasn’t just about his criminal dealings. He’d aged a lot in the last few months.

Pots and silverware clanked, chatter and laughter soaked the air, and the sounds of footsteps and the triplets’ toys made up the ordinary soundtrack of Thanksgiving. But nothing felt the same, because *I* wasn’t the same.

“Reina.” I blinked and found him staring at me.

“Sorry, Papà,” I muttered. “I was lost in thought.”

He watched me with a patience I wasn’t accustomed to from him. Not since Mamma died.

“Want to tell me what happened?”

I shrugged. “A car accident.”

A distant look crossed his features. “But there’s something more, isn’t there?”

The way he watched me, I feared maybe the doctor had broken the rules of doctor/patient confidentiality and told him, but that would have likely made him furious. I wrapped my arms around myself, the cold creeping into my heart.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s been too much,” he said, pursing his lips. “Ever since your mamma died—”

His voice cracked, just as it always did when he talked about her. “I’m okay,” I lied. Maybe if I said it over and over again, eventually I would be. “Don’t worry. The bruises are almost gone and soon the cast will be off too.”

My heart ached, but I didn’t think there was a cure for that.

“Your professors contacted me,” he continued, and I knew what was coming. “You’ve missed a lot of classes this semester.” That was an understatement. I’d been so heartsick, I could barely get out of bed. The

accident didn't exactly help. "I talked to your professors. They'll let you catch up on assignments, even let you do them from home while you recover. You'll stay with Grandma until after the holidays and then return to Paris."

I was grateful for the support of my family and friends, but I needed time. Space. I couldn't breathe—not in Paris, not here.

"Couldn't I go back to Malibu?" I asked, twisting my fingers.

"No. It's too dangerous."

I sighed and dropped my shoulders. "Okay. You convince Grandma to let me stay in the opposite wing though, away from everyone else." It was as close to getting some space as I would get. He stared at me with concern scrawled all over his face. His skin tone was yellowish, his cheeks gaunt. "Papà, are you feeling okay?"

He reached out his big, wrinkly hand and cupped my cheek softly. "You look so much like your mamma." Then he shocked me by leaning over and pressing a kiss to my cheek. "Just focus on healing. For me and your sister. Once you're feeling better, you and I have to talk."

It didn't escape me that he didn't answer my question. Not. At. All.

8

REINA

My sister and friends all crowded around my bed.

Thank God these medieval rooms were spacious, otherwise I'd suffer from lack of oxygen.

"Well, dinner was uneventful," Athena started.

"Did you expect drama?" Isla mocked while signing, her eyes connecting with Phoenix for a brief second before flickering to me. "Besides, that hottie Alexander would have murdered anyone who upset his wife or children."

"He's protective," I muttered. "It's how it's supposed to be."

"In my experience, fathers are usually deadbeat, good-for-nothing men," Raven commented, sipping on her wine. Leave it to her to drag a bottle of thousand-dollar wine up because she wasn't ready for Thanksgiving to be over.

"Forget deadbeat fathers." Isla leaned forward as if she had state secrets to share. "Can we go back to the fact that Alexander is hot as fuck?"

I rolled my eyes. "He's married too. In love with his wife."

Raven shrugged. "She doesn't want to bang him, just admire"—she cleared her throat, giving Isla a pointed look—"his assets."

"Right, because we always just look." I shot them a disapproving look. "Don't you all want to go to bed?"

"Pffft." Athena took the bottle out of Raven's hand and gulped the wine straight from it. "It's only seven."

"It's dark," I muttered under my breath. Papà said we'd talk but never elaborated about what. It set my teeth on edge.

"Reina, you have to move on," Athena countered. "We've done a piss-poor job of—"

I raised my palm, stopping her. “Please don’t go there.” The four of them looked at me with such pity I had to close my eyes. “Just don’t. I’ve moved on. So let’s just pretend last summer never happened.”

Isla shook her head. Phoenix kept her expression blank, but I knew her enough to know she worried. The same way I always worried about her.

“You just have to get laid by someone hotter and better.” Clearly Raven’s suggestion was dumb because the last thing I needed was another man in my life.

“*Maybe we can watch a movie?*” Phoenix suggested. “*A Christmas Story?*”

I shrugged. It was my favorite Thanksgiving/Christmas movie, but I wasn’t in the mood for it. I wasn’t in the mood for much of anything lately.

Instead, I turned to my sister. “Phoenix, do you remember when Papà shoved us in the dark hole behind the fireplace?”

If the tense silence that followed didn’t tell me she did, her raised brows and flushed neck would. With this influx of memories lately, I wondered what else I was forgetting. Phoenix might have had a better memory because she was a little older than me when Mamma died, but it didn’t explain why I was suddenly uncovering these black holes from my childhood. I couldn’t help attributing it to how chaotic life had been this past year. I’d have to remember to mention it during my next session with my therapist.

Our friends just stared, waiting for one of us to explain, until Isla couldn’t hold back her exasperated breath anymore.

“Okay, can you elaborate? Because I’m imagining all kinds of fucked-up scenarios here.” It was Raven who commented.

I traced patterns on the blankets absentmindedly and waited for Phoenix to answer.

“*Papà was attacked the summer we went to Italy with our mother,*” she explained, signing calmly. “*He made us get into a safe room behind the fireplace.*”

“Who attacked him?” Raven asked, her eyes like saucers.

Phoenix shrugged, something flickering across her expression. “*Don’t know.*”

I narrowed my eyes on her. “But you know something,” I countered. She started to shake her head but stopped when I said, “Don’t lie to me. Remember, I know all your tells.”

She let out a heavy sigh. “*I really don’t know who they were. All I know is*

that they looked like...

She didn't finish and my blood pressure spiked. "Like?"

"Like they were Japanese."

A round of gasps followed. "Do you think—" Athena cut herself off, her gaze flickering to the girls with a guilty expression.

"What?" I demanded. It irked me to no end, feeling like an outsider. Like I was the last to know. "Finish the sentence."

Raven poured herself another generous amount of wine, gulping it down in one go.

"We're all thinking maybe it has something to do with Amon," she announced, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand.

God, just hearing his name sliced my heart.

I shook my head. "First, A—" I couldn't even whisper his name. "He and the family on his mother's side are not the only Japanese people on this planet. Secondly, he was a kid at that time."

The incident from boarding school flickered in my mind. I hadn't quite forgotten about it, but I remembered it in vivid detail now. Amon had saved me from his cousin then. I swallowed a lump in my throat, refusing to believe that Amon's family would deliberately hurt mine. But... if he hadn't been there that day all those years ago, I likely wouldn't have escaped.

I didn't think this was the right time to share with the group, not when they already thought so low of Amon. It was another secret best left in the past.

"His mother wasn't a kid," Isla pointed out while everyone nodded their heads in agreement.

"So you're saying his *mother* attacked us?" They were being ludicrous.

Isla shrugged. "It seems far-fetched, but crazier things have happened in this world."

"Yeah, like Japanese samurais becoming vampires." Huh? Athena must be on her fantasy kick. Judging by everyone's expressions, they thought so too. "Yeah, okay. That's improbable. I watched this movie—"

"Not now, Athena," Raven scolded her, giving her a pointed look. I let out a heavy sigh, too tired for this shit.

"Just forget all that," Phoenix signed. *"Focus on getting better and coming back to Paris."*

"We could all turn a blind eye, but there's some kind of connection there," Raven muttered. "Trust me, last time I opted not to see something, it

bit me in the ass big-time.”

“And what was that?” I asked, eager to focus on someone else’s problems rather than think about my own.

“Well, for starters, he was a red flag and his gorgeous body was the pole.” She waved her hands, drawing in the air, and whatever it was didn’t look that attractive. At least not to me. “Jeans that hugged that ass. Holstered gun. Slightly stalkerish, obsessive behavior. Red fucking flags that I refused to see. Until a man was killed in front of my eyes.”

My eyebrows rose to my hairline. I knew for a fact this was the first time any of us were hearing this story. Maybe it was the wine loosening her lips.

“Wow, did you call the cops on him?” Isla questioned. “And testify against him?”

Raven gave her an *are-you-fucking-crazy* look. “No, I fucking bolted. Distance and no contact was the only solution. I can’t fight an attractive man. Murderer or not.”

Her priorities might be skewed, but it was hardly the time to point it out.

“Okay, this is getting too dark for me,” Athena announced, getting to her feet. “I’m going to bed.” Her eyes found mine. “We miss you, the apartment isn’t the same without you.”

“Yeah, especially because Raven is a walking mess,” Isla remarked, her green eyes sparkling.

“I got it. You’re looking for a maid.”

Their eyes rolled in sync. “*You take cleaning to a whole new level,*” Phoenix claimed, although not wrongfully.

“Speaking of levels,” Raven started, her tone tentative. “I haven’t told you, but he-who-shall-not-be-named commissioned me to paint him a replica of some painting that used to belong to his grandfather. The only thing I have to work with is a picture of the thing because he lost the original. Or some shit like that.”

My heart drummed painfully in my chest, but I refused to dwell on it.

Instead, I shrugged. “I hope you charged him an arm and a leg.”

“I did, but it still feels wrong to take money from him, all things considered.”

Raven was an amazing artist and it was a shame the world hadn’t discovered her yet. If Amon Leone exposed her art to the world, then maybe there’d be some good to come out of all this.

Isla slid off the bed, heading for the door. “I’m off to bed too. I’m beat.

Those triplets are like Energizer Bunnies. They need an off switch.”

Our friends all left, leaving me alone with my sister who studied me with inquisitive eyes.

I smiled, barely suppressing a yawn. “I’m fine,” I murmured, signing at the same time. “I promise.”

“*You keep saying that, but I’m worried.*”

“I know, but it’s better,” I assured her. “Each day is better. My bruises are almost completely gone.”

“*But the scars are there.*”

“Grandma offered me her plastic surgeon, but I said no.” My hand clutched my necklace, tugging on it gently.

“*It’s not the scars I’m talking about.*” Our eyes locked, and the lump in my throat doubled in size. Why did everyone insist I talk about it? It only made me feel like shit. “*The Leone brothers,*” she started, her hands hesitant. “*They are no good. And they’re bound to fuck up everything they touch.*”

I blinked in confusion. It wasn’t a statement I expected to come from her. It almost sounded as if she’d experienced it firsthand.

“People break up every day.” Her answer to my half-assed defense was a deadpan stare.

“*It’s not that,*” she retorted, bitterness crossing her features. She let out a heavy sigh before continuing, “*I don’t want to talk about all of it. Just know that Dante Leone seduced me, and now he pretends to not even know me.*”

My mouth formed an “O” shape and just about dropped to the floor, or at least the mattress.

“When?”

“*It was two years ago.*”

“Why? How?” I couldn’t come up with a coherent question. “Why didn’t you say anything? How did I not know about it?”

Pain flickered in her eyes. “*I was ashamed. I still am. For being so damn stupid.*” She pushed her dark brown hair out of her face, her fingers trembling. “*I thought he was so sweet. Making an effort to talk to me. Even learning ASL for me. Then boom. He disappeared, and I didn’t see him until we ran into him again in Paris.*”

There were two broken hearts in this room, I realized. Each at the hand of the Leone brothers. However, my sister had nurtured hers a lot longer, and in my selfishness, I’d been too blind to see it.

I pulled her into my arms and hugged her tightly. My eyes burned, tears

threatening to break free, but I refused to let them fall. I blinked, chasing them away. We stayed like that for a while, hoping that with time, our hearts might mend.

She pulled away and our gazes met. Hers sparkled with unshed tears, just like mine. *“I should have told you before you got involved with Amon, but you’re such a romantic at heart and I wanted it to be a fairy tale for you. Not this clusterfuck.”*

Maybe the Leone brothers had used us. Maybe not. It could be that they were just broken beyond repair and we’d stepped in their paths. All I knew for sure was that Amon would forever hold my heart—whether I liked it or not. Our love story was made for the big screen. So was our tragedy.

I sensed that Phoenix felt the same way because I recognized the look in her eyes. Two years had gone by and she still hurt.

Had she loved him? Did she still love him?

“I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you,” I rasped, my hands heavy, just like my heart. “I should have been.”

She shrugged. *“You are always there for me, Reina. You’re the younger sister yet you’ve always protected me. It’s my turn to protect you.”* I shook my head, my chest squeezing painfully. Mamma hadn’t been happy. Would the two of us find happiness? *“You and I are not so different. You have been keeping it all in. Almost getting killed forced it out into the light for you. It’s better than leaving it festering inside.”*

“You need to let go too,” I whispered softly. “Are you talking to anyone about your pain? Was I the only blind one?”

She gave me a soft smile. *“Our difference in age in high school felt bigger. Now, not so much. I know I can always come and talk to you.”* I nodded, feeling closer to her than ever. *“But promise to let go of him. For your sake.”*

My instincts told me she was right. I should let go of Amon Leone. Forget about him and pretend he never existed in my world. Not the boy who’d saved me from his father, and certainly not the man who I fell madly in love with.

My body would heal, but my soul refused to.

She leaned over and pressed a kiss on my cheek. *“Go to sleep. You look like hell.”*

I smiled weakly. “Talk about an ego booster.”

She padded barefoot out of the room. The door clicked softly behind her,

followed only by her ghosts, leaving me alone with my own.

Reaching for my new phone, I scrolled through the contacts. But his wasn't there.

I had lost every piece of him. Forever.

9

AMON

Christmas Day.

The day that wishes came true. All but mine.

It'd been a month since I saw her. A month in which I'd gotten barely any sleep. When I wasn't hunting the Brazilian cartel members, I stumbled in and out of a drunken haze. They were my only suspects, so I searched relentlessly. The ones I didn't kill off I managed to push out of Europe and North America completely.

I wouldn't be satisfied until every single one of them was dead. But deep down I knew not even their deaths would be enough. *Nothing* would be enough.

Hunting the Cortes cartel members and the resulting torture sessions became my only pastime. Digging through Romero's past with my mother took a back seat. Somehow it seemed nothing good came from that end, so I focused on the shit I could destroy, and that was those who'd hurt Reina.

When it came to my mother, nothing made sense anymore. For one, her desire to get her hands on the document in Romero's possession contradicted her desire to keep her connection to Romero a secret. It was pointless to dig up the document between Ojisan and Romero now that I knew who my true father was and we were keeping it a secret. It no longer mattered what Ojisan and Romero agreed to because the secret would die with us. So I stopped searching for it, even though Dante hadn't.

I washed my hands of fucking family drama and wallowed in pure mania in my quest for punishment. Except I couldn't punish the two main orchestrators of my destiny. My own mother and Reina's father.

My only solution at the end of the day was alcohol.

The only light in my life had been taken away from me. The world was upside down and no amount of liquor or time seemed to tilt it upright for me.

Fuck.

It had been months since my mother dumped the news on me and I still struggled with the truth. Emotions were a fucking nightmare. I shut them out, extinguished them, but the memories refused to leave.

My penthouse in Paris became my tomb. My own personal prison. Every corner was full of her presence and her light. Some days, her scent lingered in the air, taunting me. On the rare occasions that sleep found me, I would dream of her.

Soft arms wrapped around me. The scent of cinnamon and peace. The softness of her curls across my chest.

I wanted to open my eyes and return the hug. Feel her against me. But even in my sleep, I knew if I woke up, she would vanish. So I remained still, clinging to the ghost whose warm touch made life worth living.

I never wanted to fucking wake up to a world where she wasn't part of my life.

It terrified the fuck out of me to think I had years of this shitty life ahead of me.

A bang on the door reached my ear. I ignored it. I wasn't in the mood for visitors—Christmas or not.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

“Amon, we know you're in there.” Fuck, it was the last person on this planet I wanted to see. “Now open the fuck up.”

I didn't move.

I heard the click of a lock and the door opened.

I looked up to find my mother, brother, and father standing in front of me. Three shadows darkened my world. I didn't move, seated in my armchair with a glass of scotch, staring in the direction of her apartment.

Although I knew she wasn't there. She'd yet to come back to Paris.

“What are you all gloomy about?” Father glowered. He'd taken to watching his tone with Dante and me, knowing he no longer held all the power. “Since you refuse to show up for Christmas in your parents' home, we decided to crash your party.”

“Crash away.” I brought the glass to my mouth and took a sip.

“*Musuko*, we always spend Christmas together.”

I shrugged. It was never a joyous affair. Father would give us presents

only to take them away. Or teach us some stupid lesson that never made any sense but left scars on our bodies.

“What’s with the blood, Amon?” Dante’s voice had me glancing down at my shirt. I must have forgotten to clean up when I came home last night.

I stood up and bypassed them all, but before I made it into my bedroom, my mother blocked my path. Her eyes were darker than ever before. She wore that fucking pink kimono, and it only served to remind me of what she’d taken away from me. That color belonged on Reina and Reina alone. I couldn’t stand to look at anyone wearing pink anymore.

Not now. Not yet.

“What is it?”

Her lip trembled, and I knew I was being an ass. But I couldn’t stop. “When was the last time you slept?”

“Hard to sleep when I have uninvited guests.”

She sighed, flicking a glance over her shoulder. “*Musuko*—”

“Please, don’t.”

There was nothing she could say that would make this right. My motivation and goals had gone out the window. All I could see was my bleak future. Even worse, I didn’t give a fuck about that future.

She sighed. “Take a shower and change into clean clothes. The staff is coming, we’ll set up your place.”

I sidestepped her and shut the door behind me, not bothering to answer.

Of course, when I was out of the shower, towel wrapped around my waist, I found Dante sitting on a chair, his ankle crossed over his knee.

“There he is!” he drawled, his hand casually on the armrest. Contrary to his casual posture, there was a hard glint in his eyes.

My jaw clenched. I wasn’t in the mood for his shit today. “Get the fuck out of my room.”

“No.”

I ignored him and got dressed. Christmas Day didn’t seem like a good time to beat up my brother.

“How long do you plan on sulking?”

I narrowed my eyes on him. “Is there something you want to say? If so, spit it the fuck out.”

His eyes softened, and it hit me all wrong. He didn’t even know the truth about Reina and me, or that my father was the prick Romero. Fury lanced up my spine. Even after all these months, just the thought of Romero made me

want to rage.

From an early age, I always tried to take care of and protect my brother. Now it seemed our roles had reversed. I was staring at the version of him that seemed to have matured while I... I had descended into madness.

“I’ve known you all my life, I know when you’re upset. What worries me is that I’ve never seen you *this* upset.” His voice was too fucking gentle for my liking. My brother was the reckless one, losing his temper during his raging moments. I usually kept a cool head and my emotions reined in. Until now, apparently. It only took a girl to tear my self-control down. “I remember when we were young, you refused to let anything, *anyone* break you. Stubborn as a motherfucker. But now... since you got involved with *her*, I’m watching parts of you disappear, and I don’t know what to make of it.”

Father used to randomly decide when it was time for his “lessons.” Dante hated them, and whenever he got wind of it, he’d want to run and hide in hopes of being spared. He’d make sure to come find me and drag me away with him too. I’d thought it was because he was scared to be in trouble alone, but now I realized he was as protective of me as I was of him.

But there was a major flaw in his protectiveness over me.

There was nothing left of me to save. I couldn’t breathe without her. I didn’t exist without her—she was my beginning, middle, and end.

“If there’s a point, you should probably get to it fast.”

He released a breath. “I don’t know what happened, but you cannot become this.” He jutted his chin my way. “Whatever *this* is. It’s going to destroy you if you don’t let it go. This violence spree won’t help you.”

“It seems to be helping you,” I said, referencing his need to torture criminals to release his pent-up frustration.

“Something affected you, worse than any torture you’ve gone through. Any betrayal by your fucking cousin. But if you didn’t let any of that fuck you up, you can’t let anything else mess with your head either.”

“Lovely therapy session,” I deadpanned.

“Get your shit together, Amon. You had a goal. *We* have a goal. Let’s focus on that.”

My brother wasn’t wrong.

“Dante?” I headed out of my room, my hand just reaching the doorknob.

“Yes?”

“Next time you break into my apartment, I’m going to break your fingers.”

But he was right, I—we—needed to get back to building our empire.

REINA

It was the day after Christmas.

I moved slowly through the dark castle. Everyone was asleep while ghosts that had nothing to do with this place haunted me.

The castle had been passed down through the Glasgow family for the past seven centuries.

Built in the thirteenth century, the place had gotten an upgrade, but it still had that medieval feel to it. Dark, damp hallways. Scary, dungeon-like basement. In the upper stories, like my bedroom suite, luxury was evident. Down below, whispers of torture and wrongdoing danced in the air.

It made my skin crawl.

And yet, each night I made my way down to it. Maybe it was my masochistic side coming out, or I was a glutton for punishment. Or maybe it just reflected the state of my mind and soul.

Because part of me wanted to lash out at the world. Instead, I kept it all in and released the anxiety and pain by torturing myself, hiding it from everyone. My thighs were proof of it. All the negative emotions—all the pain—seemed to get better when I cut myself. It had started with an accidental graze in the shower after Amon broke up with me, and then it morphed into a need for release. One that only came with pushing the sharp metal into my skin.

Finally, I made my way back to my drafty bedroom. Thick stone walls promised the privacy I craved with my restless, dream-filled nights featuring the man with dark hair and even darker eyes. It also helped that most of the occupied rooms were on the opposite wing of the castle.

I opened the double french doors of my private balcony in this castle

without a prince. The crisp December air swept through the room. Goosebumps rose on my skin, the thin nightgown barely providing any warmth.

Sliding onto the cold stone floor, I pulled my knees to my chest and leaned against the centuries-old walls. I let my thoughts wander and memories torture. I knew I needed to move on, but I couldn't find the will for it.

I told Grandma I needed more time. To heal. To forget. To harden.

The disapproval in her eyes told me she didn't agree with all this wallowing. She even gave me a lecture on how to move on, just like she had from every husband of hers.

“Men are like medieval conquerors, Reina. Always searching for the next thing to drag down. You just have to ensure you're never their conquest. You are the queen, you reign over them.”

Obviously not, since I was used and discarded so easily, but I'd kept the words to myself.

Tilting my face to the night sky, I stared at the darkness, picturing the sparkling stars that hid behind the clouds, reminding me of the man I was fiercely trying to forget.

A deep, throbbing ache spread through my chest. Would it ever go away?
The pain. The memories of him.

I was desperate to forget, but not forgive. I would never forgive.

My whole life had revolved one way or another around Amon. Like a leaf in the wind, I let life lead me to him without questioning its purpose.

Maybe I deserved everything that came my way.

A stupid, naive girl with dreams and hearts in her eyes, I was so easily swept into Amon's arms. In return, I got my heart broken. He smashed it into irreparable pieces, leaving behind destruction and permanent damage.

My body ached when I finally stood up. The bruises from the car accident had faded, but a few scars on my thigh and shoulder blade remained. Grandma suggested cosmetic surgery, but I refused. I needed a reminder.

To never forgive.

Leaving the doors open, I headed to the bathroom. Despite all the upgrades and amenities both the current and previous Duke of Glasgow implemented, the pipes shuddered when I turned on the shower. The water splashed against the Italian tile, and I discarded my nightgown and underwear.

I caught my reflection in the mirror and stilled, staring at my body. *Skin and bone*, Papà had said. He wasn't far off. I'd lost weight. The skin under my eyes looked bruised, the color darker. My lips were cracked and pale. The only unchanged physical trait was my hair.

The image of Amon twisting a curly strand around his finger flashed in my mind and my eyes fell to the scissors sitting in the basket. It took a fraction of a second for me to decide before I reached for them and brought them up to my collarbone. The sharp blades hovered in the air until—

Snip, snip, snip.

By the end of it all, a pile of blonde curls covered the floor and my head felt lighter. But my heart still didn't.

I turned my back to the mirror and stepped into the shower, letting the lukewarm water drip down my body. I washed up quickly, then dressed before heading downstairs. The castle was still dark, but I could hear soft footsteps somewhere in the distance.

Following the smell of coffee, I turned the corner at the end of the hallway. I stepped into the kitchen to find Grandma and Alexander, Livy's husband.

Livy was the Duke of Glasgow's granddaughter. Long story, but she grew up in the States too, and she never knew her family heritage until she got involved with her now husband.

My hip slammed into the counter and I grunted in pain. Two sets of eyes.

"Reina!" A horrified gasp left my grandmother, matching the look in her eyes. "What have you done to your hair?"

Clearly she didn't like my new hairdo. Alexander didn't look remotely as flabbergasted. Although I had yet to see him frazzled at all. Nothing seemed to faze that man.

I brought my hand up to my head, combing my fingers through the strands.

"Haircut," I muttered. Her mouth formed an "O" shape and she slumped back against the chair. Guilt pierced my chest, noticing black circles under her eyes that not even her cosmetic injections could hide. She didn't need extra worries.

I forced a smile on my lips, ignoring how unnatural it felt. I would convince her I was okay so she could get back to her life.

"It was a silly experiment; I'll have a hairdresser fix it when I'm back home."

Alexander stood up, pulling out the chair for me like the perfect gentleman he was. I lowered myself on it, flashing him a grateful smile.

“Thanks,” I murmured.

“How did you sleep?” he asked, although I suspected he knew. He’d caught me roaming the castle in the dark quite a few times. He always helped Livy when the triplets woke in the night.

Averting my eyes, I answered, “Good, thanks.” It was easy to spot the lie, so I decided pivoting the topic away from me might help. “You?”

“Liam’s been up twice so far, rousing his sisters. The crankiness will be astronomical today.” Silence lingered since I knew zero about children, despite almost having one. The familiar anxiety reared its head, tearing through my chest and stealing my breath straight from my lungs.

My throat tightened and panic bit at my veins, leaving nothing but disaster in its wake.

I squeezed my eyes closed, waiting for the knot in my chest to loosen. Breathe in. Breathe out. *Meditate*, for goodness’ sake.

The dark was closing in.

A baby.

If something comes of it, we’ll handle it together, he’d said. Obviously he hadn’t meant it—any of it—because he left me to deal with it all alone. God, I was so stupid. So fucking irresponsible.

My eyes lifted and I found my grandmother staring at me, unspoken tragedy lingering in the air. Maybe our family was wrapped up in it, and it took going through my own to finally understand.

“Shouldn’t the kids be sleeping through the night at this point?” I asked the first thing that came to mind as the kitchen started to spin around me.

He shrugged, seemingly oblivious to the emotions swirling in my chest. “They do when we’re home. They’re convinced this castle is haunted or possessed by an evil spirit, so Liam takes it upon himself to keep his sisters ‘safe.’” He chuckled to himself.

I looked at my grandmother and her eyes softened around the corners. I didn’t want her pity, but it felt nice to know she was there in silent support. As Alexander droned on and on about where his children were at developmentally and how exhausting it all was, I had to remind myself it wasn’t his fault. He couldn’t know that my stay at the hospital had left me with more than just a few stitches. My friends and sister knew about the physical injuries. They didn’t know about the miscarriage—at least I didn’t

think so since they never brought it up—so it left me struggling with all of it alone. Grandma hinted she knew but she never outright brought it up, so it left me wondering.

Alexander was staring at me now as though waiting for a response. I hadn't heard the question. I shook my head and decided to go with humor. "Liam is right, this place is haunted, and you know it. Nobody should live here but the ghosts." His lip curled up in amusement.

"I think you're right," he agreed, and just like that, my pulse settled and I anchored myself to the now.

Grandma scoffed lightly and let out a long exhale. I wonder if she'd seen my world tilting and was happy to move away from talking about the children.

"If I remember, Alexander, you bought your wife a castle in Scotland, and those have even more ghosts." She was being facetious, but the fact remained. She could claim until she was blue in the face that she loved it here, but I knew better. She appreciated modern-style luxury, not this old-money castle.

I scoffed. "Busted."

He just shrugged. "I was trying to win my wife back. And that castle has nothing on this one. This one dates back to the Golden Age."

I rolled my eyes. "If you start a history lesson, I'm going to barf."

"Well, let's fill up your stomach first with some food and coffee," he offered. I really needed to talk with Livy. Her taste in men was questionable.

I turned to my grandmother and steeled my spine.

"Not to change the subject, but I was thinking..." I locked eyes with her, hoping she'd take my next words seriously. "I'm all healed up. I'm ready to go back to Paris. Back to school."

Her shoulders tensed. "No need to rush. There's still another few weeks before you are due back."

I swallowed. Truthfully, I didn't want to be in the same city as Amon, but the odds of crossing paths with him were slim, and I was willing to take my chances.

"It's hardly rushing. I've been here for weeks now."

"So what's another few weeks," she reasoned, and I wondered if she'd picked up on more of my near-panic attack earlier than she'd let on. "You might as well stay here through the second week of January and then go back for the spring semester."

I shook my head. “No. The sooner I’m back, the better it will be.”

By the press of her lips, Grandma clearly disagreed, but said nothing else.

“When?”

“There’s an afternoon trip on the Eurostar leaving from London. I just need a ride to St. Pancras station.”

A heartbeat passed. “Fine. I’ll take you.”



King’s Cross bustled with life in Central London, buses coming and going, people rushing in and out of the station, eager to get to their destinations.

The engine of Grandma’s Rolls-Royce hummed softly as we sat in the back seat, the driver having stepped out to give us privacy.

The silence stretched. I’d rather just get out of the car, but knowing my grandmother, she’d follow me all the way to the train and then hop on it so she could give me a piece of her mind.

I sighed. “My train leaves in forty-five minutes, Grandma.” I turned my head to meet her gaze. “Whatever you have to say, just spill it. I won’t fall apart.”

She took my hand, petting it gently. “I’m worried about you.” I swallowed, unable to drag a deep enough breath to say something. Anything. “Your physical injuries are healing, but the pain still lingers in your eyes. You need to talk about it, Reina. Nothing good comes out of avoidance. Trust me, I’m talking from experience. I saw it in your mamma. Phoenix. And now you.”

I wanted to grab on to her and hold her tight like she was my raft at sea. She had been our support since Mamma’s death, and I knew nothing else. Yet I remained immobile, shadows casting their forms all around us and whispering things I didn’t understand. *Phoenix? Mamma? Even Grandma?* She said we all suffered a tragedy, and yet I kept wallowing in mine. It wasn’t right.

“I’m fine,” I repeated, sounding like a broken record, but I didn’t know what else to say.

“You keep saying that, and it only tells me that you’re not fine,” she countered. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“I don’t,” I rasped. “I want to forget it and move on.”

“I didn’t tell your papà about the pregnancy nor about the boy.” I stiffened. “Your sister and the girls don’t know either.” Tears blurred my vision, burning the backs of my eyes, my heart, and my soul, but I refused to let them fall.

“I’m eighteen. What happened to doctor/patient confidentiality?” Then her words sunk in. She said something about a... “Boy?” The hope in that single word rang like a national anthem.

Another flicker of something soft in her eyes, and tension rolled through me. I didn’t think I could handle talking about him just yet.

“Obviously a boy got you pregnant.”

Relief washed over me and I refused to let him and the memories we shared together haunt me for the rest of my days. So I decided I wouldn’t speak his name. Not to her. Not to my friends. Not to my papà.

“You can tell me,” she said softly, but a hint of vehemence showed through. Grandma was a dragon when it came to protecting my sister and me.

“Well, it could have been an immaculate conception sort of deal,” I muttered under my breath. I should have known this conversation was coming. She’d requested my charts, and I hadn’t been in the right frame of mind to ask the doctors to withhold sensitive information.

“Reina, don’t.” Her tone told me she was at her wit’s end. “Just don’t.” I brought my free hand to my neck and started twisting my necklace nervously. Her eyes fell to it. “Still wearing that thing, huh?”

“Yes,” I mumbled. “It reminds me of Mamma.”

She nodded, but something about the look in her eyes was unsettling.

I opened my mouth to say something, but before I could get a word out, images slammed into my brain. Old, rusty memories.

Sadness squeezed my chest as I stared across the water. It was murky today, the gray sky crying right along with us at the loss of Mamma. Phoenix was in her room, but it didn’t matter. I wanted to be alone anyway. I threw little pebbles in the water and twisted the necklace Grandma clipped around my neck when I was getting dressed earlier.

I told her Mamma gave it to me when she was taking a red bath.

Her eyes turned into blue stones and scared me a little, but then she smiled. The fear evaporated but sadness remained.

My mouth turned down at the corners. There would be no more Mamma. I didn’t want to stay with Papà. I didn’t know why. Maybe Phoenix and I could run away together and be like Shirley Temple in her movies. We’d have

our own adventures.

Shuffling footsteps pulled me out of my thoughts, and I turned around to find Papà towering over me. He was angry. Very angry.

His eyes fell to my necklace and his gold ring caught the light before it connected with my cheek. It burned and I stumbled backward. I trembled like a leaf, my hands cradling my stinging cheek.

“P-Papà—”

He gripped the chain at my throat, yanking on the necklace.

“Where did you get that?” His smile was mean and ugly. It terrified me. “Nosy fucking kids.”

I suddenly didn’t like Papà at all. I wanted to get far, far away from him.

“What are you doing, Tomaso?” Grandma’s voice was like a whip, startling both of us.

My gaze darted her way in a plea for help, but her eyes weren’t on me. They were on Papà, and they were violent.

“Reina took something that doesn’t belong to her.”

Grandma came between us, and I buried my face into her hip. Her hand wrapped around me and patted me gently, just like Mamma used to do.

“Grace gave it to her.” Papà took a step forward, towering over us, but Grandma stood her ground. “The night she died, Reina saw her in the tub as she was bleeding out. Grace gave her the necklace.” His expression paled. “She’s keeping it, Tomaso.”

I was too scared to move. Too scared to breathe.

My eyes widened as my chest tightened. I had never felt such pain, not when I fell from the tree, not when I hit my head and fell in the pool. I brought my hand to my chest and tapped it, hoping to loosen it so I could inhale some air. I needed my lungs to expand and be normal again. Instead, it suffocated me, burning in my throat.

Until the world turned black.

It was my first panic attack. Unfortunately, not the last. But the next morning, Grandma had Phoenix and me packed, ready to move back to California.

I was jolted back to reality at the sound of the car door clicking open and Grandma’s driver’s words as he leaned in to address her. “The train will be departing soon. We will take Reina’s bags ahead and meet you there.”

I gathered my things, still dazed from my flashback. How could I have forgotten all this? My stomach coiled, but I pushed it down. There was no

sense getting upset over it now.

Instead, I intended to get some answers.

“Why did Papà get so upset about this necklace? That day he found me with it?” I questioned, gesturing to the pendants hanging from my neck.

A heartbeat passed.

“The reminder is too painful for him.” I lowered my eyes to it. The weird part was that I never remembered seeing Mamma wearing it. The only time I’d ever seen her with it was the night she died. The familiar dull ache pulsed in my chest.

“Why did he get so mad though? He hit me. I was only six, and he slapped me across my cheek.” My lip quivered, but still, I pushed through. “Just days after watching my mother be buried.”

She shrugged, seemingly nonchalant, but she couldn’t hide the tension in her brow. “He’s sensitive about his things.” Her eyes flickered to the necklace again. “What is the second pendant?”

Her question felt layered. Why couldn’t I get rid of the stupid pendant?

“I thought it would match Mamma’s,” I lied.

She studied me in that unnerving way that could expose all my secrets. I kept my expression blank. If I was to survive this and get my independence back, I would have to learn to hide all my emotions. I just needed to survive this talk first.

“Do I need to have *yet another* talk with you about protection?” Nothing about her question surprised me, and sweat collected at the nape of my neck in response. *Where is that driver of hers? It shouldn’t take that long to drop off my luggage.*

“No.”

She shook her head and tsked. “I just don’t understand. Didn’t I teach you girls to always be safe?”

“You did.” My tone was resigned, knowing there was no escaping this. It has been a long time coming—two months to be exact.

“This boy...” The words *who got you pregnant* lingered unspoken in the air. “Who is he?”

“Nobody important.” *Liar*, my heart whispered. “I made a mistake, Grandma. One I won’t repeat.”

She tilted her head. “I believe you won’t repeat that mistake, but I don’t believe the first part of your answer.” Unsure how to answer that, I remained silent. “Considering you never showed any interest in boys until now, I

suspect he's very important." So important that I let him shatter my heart blindly. Split it open and watch it bleed.

"Not anymore," I breathed, lowering my head. "He's just someone I'll tell my future daughter about when she's crying over a boy. He will be my warning to my kids one day. Just like you warned us about your husbands when they broke your heart."

"Jesus Christ," she muttered. We stared at each other, neither of us willing to say more. Phoenix and I were stubborn, but we didn't get it from Papà. Finally, Grandma shook her head. "You know, Reina, you could give your papà or me his name and we could make him pay."

I released a sound from the back of my throat. This was by far the most scandalous thing my grandmother had ever said. Yes, I wanted to hurt Amon, but not that way. Not in the way that would cost him his life.

So, I just shook my head. "Like I said, it was a fling. It won't happen again."

My grandmother patted my hand, the same one she refused to let go of. "I think your papà will talk to you soon about your future." I stiffened, unsure what she meant by that. "I don't exactly agree with it," she continued, "but I expect he'll want to arrange a marriage for you."

The thought of being married to anyone made my stomach roil.

"What if I want to marry for love?"

My heart ached, knowing that the love I had for Amon was a once-in-a-lifetime love.

"Even after this heartbreak that almost killed you?"

I let out a strangled laugh. "Let's not exaggerate."

She gave me a knowing look, but she didn't call me out on it.

"Bottom line, Reina, you can't be making mistakes like that." A distant look crossed her features. "I promised your mother I'd protect you and keep you out of your papà's world as much as I could. But with this latest... event, I'm out of options. I can't protect you from the men who are after your father."

After my father? "It was a car accident," I pointed out. "It could have happened anywhere, to anyone."

Her hand squeezed mine. "No, it wasn't an accident, Reina. Your papà learned that you were targeted."

I flinched.

"What?" I whispered, shock rolling through me. My heart was beating so

loud I could barely hear my own voice.

“Your papà made a stupid, reckless deal with one of those criminals, and you’ve been on their radar ever since.” My mind was such a mess of emotions, I didn’t know how to take it. “Your papà’s business with the underworld is the worst thing that ever happened to our family.” My shoulders tensed and my stomach churned. “The underworld has been tearing us apart ever since your mamma ran into Angelo Leone and Tomaso Romero.”

REINA

I arrived at the Gare du Nord train station in the heart of Paris two hours later, my ears still ringing with Grandma's words.

Everyone rushed off the train while I waited for the crowd to disperse, then grabbed my own bag and made my way out. My feet barely touched the ground of the platform when I heard my name.

"Reina."

I whirled around, coming face-to-face with my papà. "What are you doing here?"

He shook his head. "Is that any way to greet your old man?"

"Sorry." I leaned over and pecked his cheek while my grandmother's words whirled in my mind. Did she call him? I hadn't told anyone I'd decided to return to Paris, so she must have. "I just didn't expect you."

He grabbed my bag out of my hands and hooked one arm around my shoulder. "I want to talk to you, and this felt like the best way to get you alone."

My steps faltered and I peered at him under my lashes. "What about?"

"The future."

My chest twisted, but I didn't say anything else.

We made our way out of the station and toward Paris Nord Café. The sun was out, but the air in December was bitter and cold, chasing a shiver down my spine. Tightening my French wool waistcoat, we entered the café and asked for a seat by the window.

"Your French is excellent," Papà commended once we were seated.

The corners of my lips barely tipped. "It kind of comes with the territory, living in Paris and all."

He nodded. “You want to stay in Paris?”

I stilled for a moment before answering. “I just came back, so I think that’s your answer.”

Letting out a sigh, he pushed his hand through his rapidly thinning and graying hair. It was probably the result of stress and worry.

“Ever thought about living in Italy?” he questioned. “After all, it’s the epicenter for music and fashion.”

“No.” The answer came without delay or doubt in my mind.

“Why not?”

I met Papà’s gaze head-on. “Well, for starters, neither Phoenix nor I speak a lick of Italian.”

“You could learn.”

I shook my head. “We built a life here with our friends.”

His jaw tightened. “The same ones who left you roaming the streets alone?”

I jutted my chin. “Now that’s not fair. We’ve been living here for two years and we all go places alone. It wasn’t the middle of the night.”

“You’re the youngest in the group, Reina.”

Then why did I feel like the oldest one? Why did I feel so damn tired? The heavy weight pressed against my chest, making it hard to breathe, but I hid my panic and emotions behind a mask.

“I’ve been the youngest since the get-go. It’s never been a problem before.” I paused when we were interrupted by the waiter. We ordered from the menu, and once he left, I continued, “This can’t be the reason you came to pick me up at the station, Papà. Want to tell me what’s going on?”

“Do you remember anything about the accident?”

My eyes darted out the window, watching Parisians rush through the streets, eager to get to their destinations and escape the cold. Even that looked romantic in this city. Except the whole romance angle had kind of lost its charm.

“No. It was raining. One moment I was crossing the street, the next—headlights.” Grandma’s words echoed in my brain. “Did you learn something?”

“What did Grandma tell you?”

I shrugged. “Enough to make me wonder, not enough to know any specifics.”

Let him unpack that.

“I believe some old associates of mine were trying to send a message to me.” A shudder rolled down my spine, ominous thoughts piercing my skull. “I tried finding the driver but he’d died under mysterious circumstances. His body washed up days after you were admitted.”

“Is it dangerous for Phoenix and our friends to remain here?” I wouldn’t be able to forgive myself if anything happened to them on my or Papà’s account.

“I don’t think so, but I’m going to put some extra security in place.” My brows shot up. He knew very well none of us appreciated bodyguards. “No, not bodyguards. But I’ll have some friends from”—he searched for the right word—“my *organization* ensure that none of the men from that organization have a presence in town.”

From the Omertà? The question burned on my tongue, but I knew he’d shut down the moment I uttered the word.

“What organization did you piss off?” I asked calmly.

“Brazilian cartel. And the Yakuza.”

“Wow,” I muttered, surprised that he answered me, and stared at him in shock. “What did you do to piss them off so badly?”

He waved his hand. “Lost their shipment and then tried to arrange a marriage.”

Alert shot through me and I gulped with fear. My grandmother’s words were repeating themselves over and over again.

“Arrange a marriage,” I repeated, my mouth suddenly dry.

“That’s off the table,” he declared. “With them, anyhow.”

I didn’t know whether laughing or crying would be more appropriate here. He discussed the arrangement like the weather. Like it was nothing, just another daily occurrence.

“So you’re still considering it?” I croaked.

His eyes bore into mine. “I have to. For both your and Phoenix’s safety.”

A frustrated breath left me. “Has it ever occurred to you that maybe we would be safe if you weren’t part of that world?”

The atmosphere quickly turned ominous, the silence suffocating and feeding my rebellious spirit.

I watched him take a sip of his cappuccino, the little cup looking ridiculous in his large hands. Then a thought occurred to me. He’d killed people with those hands, or he’d at least made someone else do it for him. When I was a little girl, I thought he was just an enigma, not understanding

enough that he wasn't like other fathers, but now, it was hard to remain ignorant of his profession.

My mind darted back to the party at that dark but magical castle that seemed to have started our doom.

"Papà?" My voice was tentative—cautious—but it was time I started demanding answers. "That summer we spent in Italy with Mamma—" Surprise flickered across his expression. We never talked about the past. "What happened?"

For a long moment, he remained quiet, and just when I was starting to think he would refuse to answer, his voice penetrated the small space between us.

"A lot of things happened that summer, Reina," he answered tiredly. "What exactly are you referring to?"

My fingers curled into fists, but I straightened my spine. I was sick and tired of ghosts lurking in the corners of my mind.

"I never saw you and Mamma argue until then." I pushed a short curl off my forehead. Papà followed the motion, resignation in his eyes. He hadn't commented on my new hairdo—not that I expected him to—but it was probably the latest reminder of all the shit that had gone wrong lately. "Then all you did was fight. Did she hate it in Italy that much?"

"She did hate it there." His throat bobbed, although his expression remained unmoved. "If I could go back, I would have kept you all in California."

"Why?" His eyes darted to the window, but I pressed on. "Is it because you learned one of us isn't yours?"

That got his attention. His eyes narrowed on me and, for the first time in my life, I saw the mobster. Not my father. Not a man. But a mobster who could kill someone.

"Where did you hear that?"

I gulped, my nails digging deeper into my skin. "I heard you and Mamma arguing one night. I didn't understand the words, and then I forgot all about it. Until recently." He didn't speak, but he didn't have to. I could see the truth on his face. "Which one of us is not yours?"

"I don't know." Shock zipped through me and I had to blink several times to clear it. There was no confusion though. I'd heard him right.

"Why don't you know?" I asked.

Fathers should know, right?

“Grace refused to disclose it.” I felt like we were finally getting somewhere, so I held my breath and let him continue. “And when she died, I realized your mamma was right. I love you and your sister equally. You are both mine. I watched you come into this world, and learning whose DNA you shared seemed pointless.” He pushed his hand through his hair again, leaving it more disheveled. “Or maybe I couldn’t handle learning that truth. So I let it go. Either way, I wasn’t going to risk resentment toward either one of you. You’re both my daughters, and I’ll die with that.”

I understood his words, but then I didn’t. It made me appreciate him more knowing that he didn’t want to risk loving one of us less than the other, but burying your head in the sand seemed worse. It festered things inside you, building slowly but surely until it erupted.

“Do you know who—” I couldn’t utter the words, but he understood the meaning behind it.

Papà shook his head. “That I would kill to know,” he admitted. “I’d give anything to slice him to pieces for touching something that wasn’t his.”

“That’s dark,” I muttered. “And scary as shit.”

The silence fell, feeding both of our ghosts. It was clear that he had just as many if not more than me.

My hand trembled as I reached for my cup of coffee, so I opted to just smooth my palm over the tablecloth. I couldn’t risk spilling the liquid all over.

“The Japanese who attacked the villa in Italy...” I leaned back against the chair, bringing both my hands into my lap.

“The Yakuza,” he supplied helpfully. *Jesus Christ*. He was really deep into this gangster shit.

“Why did they attack?”

A dark expression filtered into Papà’s eyes. “You have a lot of questions today, Reina.”

“Considering I almost died because of some deal you made, I deserve the answers.” The mere idea should make me shake with fear. It didn’t. Maybe I was too numb to process it all at this point. “And if you want me to agree to any kind of marriage arrangement, I want to go in with eyes wide open.”

He nodded somberly. “Fair enough.” He reached over, stroking my cheek affectionately. “You are so strong. Much stronger than your mamma was. Probably stronger than me too.”

I let out a bitter laugh. “Somehow I doubt it.”

“You are, Reina. When you were born, your mamma said you’d be a queen one day. It’s the only Italian thing she loved... your name.”

The backs of my eyes burned. “She probably liked Italian fashion too.”

He shook his head, smiling softly. “She even refused to wear that.”

I reached for his hand that still lingered on my cheek and took it between both of mine. “Tell me about that summer. Please, Papà.”

A resigned sigh left him. “I’m afraid there isn’t much to tell. Aside from doing some business with the Yakuza. I even had a—” He paused for a moment before he continued, “I had a mutually beneficial relationship with one of its members. But their demands got crazy and risked more lives. When I met your mother, I cut all ties with that person. That summer, they wanted to make me pay for loving your mother. For having you and Phoenix. For starting a family.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” I blurted out, confusion written all over my face. “Why would they be upset about that?”

“Power and greed are important factors in any decision anyone makes in the underworld.” I frowned at that statement, not understanding fully. “It’s what drives people to kill, lie, and cheat. Remember that, Reina. It could be what keeps you and your sister alive one day.”

Does it apply to you? I rolled the question around on my tongue, but I didn’t want to anger him. I needed answers to understand what happened to Mamma, although so far all I was getting out of our conversation was more questions.

“Why did Mamma kill herself?” It was the first time any of us had brought up her suicide. Reflecting back to that night I saw Mamma bleed out in the tub, I couldn’t help but note the irony. She sliced her wrists to end her life. I was slicing myself in an attempt to release my anxiety and pain. Maybe she was looking for a way out too.

The world was left to believe she died in a tragic way. It was a half-truth. She found a way out and left us all to deal with the ghosts.

I watched in amazement as Papà’s expression hardened, and I knew our conversation was over. I wouldn’t get anything else out of him.

“Her death was a tragedy. Nothing more; nothing less.” The urge to push flared up. Our family would forever remain broken if nobody gave us the truth. “Now back to the arranged marriage—”

I shot to my feet and cut him off. “If it protects Phoenix, I’ll do it. But I want to have a say in it. Agreed?”

“Agreed.”

After all, love was no longer a card in my deck, so did it really matter who I married?

REINA

New Year's Eve.

Five days later, Grandma's and Papà's words seemed like a distant memory, but they lingered in the corners of my mind.

They must have left a bigger impression on me than I was willing to admit because when Phoenix and the girls decided to head out to a party, my skin got clammy and my breathing heavier. The spots swimming in my vision was my final confirmation.

I had to lock myself in our apartment bathroom and resort to breathing exercises and meditation until I pulled myself out of it.

"Reina, are you okay?" Isla's voice came through the closed door.

I opened my mouth to answer, but nothing came out. The unwelcome anxiety had left me speechless. Literally. I found myself fighting the panic—inhaling a deep breath, holding, then slowly exhaling.

I promised Grandma I wouldn't worry Phoenix. I promised Grandma I'd keep my shit together. I couldn't blow it my first week back.

Breathe, Reina.

My eyes fell to the counter, searching for something to focus on. Anything. I yanked open a drawer and curled my fingers around a new razor blade. It was like I was watching myself peel back its plastic cover, detached from the present completely.

A part of me was horrified. The other part—the wrong part—craved the pain. I'd changed since Amon broke my heart. Slowly but surely. The darkness smothered me, craving pain to release this overwhelming ache inside me.

I slid onto the tiled floor, pulling up my loose pajama pants to my upper

thighs, the scars staring back at me accusingly. I pressed the blade against my thigh until a drop of crimson appeared on my milky skin. Another push and I released a hiss at the blade's sharp bite. The physical pain matched the one in my chest, until physical pain overwhelmed the one lingering inside. The pressure on my chest lifted, and my inhaled air came in easier with each flick of the blade.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

I flinched.

"Reina, if you don't answer, I swear I'm breaking down the door."

I shot to my feet, flushed the toilet, then turned to the sink. "Give me a second."

Rinsing off the blade, I opened a drawer and shoved the blade into the little compartment I hid them in. I wiped the blood from my thigh and found a Band-Aid in another drawer, then pulled the leg of my pajama pants down to cover it up.

"Reina, we *all* have to get ready for the party," Athena said softly. "We want to look good too."

I opened the door and came face-to-face with the four of them.

"*Are you okay?*" Phoenix signed. "*You're worrying me.*"

"I thought you were getting ready," Raven grumbled. "You've been in here for an hour."

Had I? My legs shook. The burning sting of my flesh was a fresh reminder of how fucked up I'd become. But despite it all, I forced a cheery smile onto my face. It was easier to hide behind it.

"Umm, I'm not going," I said, stretching my arms up with a yawn. "I'm too tired."

"But—"

"But you should all go," I cut Raven off. "Just promise me you'll stick together and be safe."

"*I can stay,*" Phoenix offered.

I gave her my most stern look. "I don't need a babysitter."

"We're worried about you," Athena muttered.

I rolled my eyes, ignoring the tightness in my chest. "You can't be with me twenty-four seven. Besides, I'll be here when you get back. Just go to the party and have a good time. If you continue to smother me, I'll have to find myself a studio apartment just to get space from you." I nudged Phoenix, my eyes softening. I'd darkened enough holidays in the past few months; they

deserved a night out.



I got the girls out and finally had the apartment to myself. Restlessness itched beneath my skin, so I started scrubbing and cleaning. Even rearranging the furniture.

“So the new year can start off right,” I grunted as I pushed the couch around so it’d face the window and its city view. The screeching of the wood sounded like nails on a chalkboard, but I powered through it, gritting my teeth.

I was nothing if not determined. It took me a few hours, but with an hour to spare before midnight, the apartment was spotless.

I was just about to get in the shower and get some much-needed rest when a knock on the door stopped me. I blew a sweaty curl from my face and wiped my hands on my pajama pants. I hoped it wasn’t my nosy neighbor from the floor below coming up to grumble about the noise I’d been making. Determined to end the year right, I opened the door, smiling brightly. It slipped off my face like ice on a hot summer day when I saw who stood in front of me.

Dark. Towering. Scary.

I stared at the face of Angelo Leone.

I hesitated a second too long before reacting. I went to slam the door in his face but he blocked it with his shiny Italian shoe. Angelo Leone was as terrifying as he’d been twelve years ago.

“Miss Reina, isn’t it?” My back teeth clenched, refusing to answer. “Let’s have a little chat, shall we?”

He shoved the door open with surprising strength, and I stumbled backward at the force of it. The door shut behind him, leaving us both trapped in the small apartment entryway. He was blocking my only way out.

I mentally slapped myself for being so stupid. It was Self-Defense 101.

“My friends will be back soon,” I hissed.

“And I care why?” he demanded as he glared down at me, the whites around his cold blue eyes completely bloodshot. “We have something to discuss. Where is your sister?”

Surprise washed over me at his request. Why would he need my sister?

But then my grandmother's words filtered in. *The underworld has been tearing us apart ever since your mamma ran into Angelo Leone...*

Squaring my shoulders with all the foolish bravery I could muster, I spat, "None of your fucking business." Shit, now what? It was too late to turn back now. "Get lost before I have you thrown out."

The stench of alcohol from his breath invaded my senses.

"You and I *will* talk."

"I have nothing to say to you." I attempted to keep my cool, but my voice trembled. If only I wasn't alone in the apartment. "Now leave, Mr. Leone."

He let out an ugly laugh. "So you know who I am."

It appeared he was too drunk to remember the harsh words he'd spoken to us in his home all those years ago.

"Obviously." My eyes darted around. Maybe I could invite him into the living room and bolt for the door. The man was drunk, so it couldn't be hard to escape him.

"Please"—I pointed to the living room—"let's get comfortable in here. Would you like anything to drink? Water, perhaps?"

I sidestepped his huge frame with the intention of making my way into the kitchen and then running for the door as soon as he sat himself on the couch.

What was that saying about best-laid plans? Well, this one backfired. Big. Fucking. Time.

My heart sank as he trailed behind me. My attempt at keeping my wits sunk with each step I took into the kitchen. My heart pounded in my throat, and I forgot what I was doing.

Ah, yes. Glass of water.

He leaned against the doorframe, watching me retrieve a glass and fill it with water. I handed it to him, hoping he wouldn't notice the tremor in my hands.

"You look like your mother." The offhand remark had my heart tripping over itself.

"So I've been told," I muttered.

When he didn't make any move to take the glass, I lowered it onto the counter. My fingers curled into my palms, noting his bulky figure blocking my exit. How was it possible for someone like him to father someone like Amon? Even Dante.

Cruelty steamed from his every pore.

“Did you know her?” I didn’t know why I asked, but the words were out in the world now and there was no taking them back.

“I did. Very well.” I couldn’t seem to get enough air into my lungs. My stomach lurched, and the memory of my parents’ argument rushed to my mind. “I knew her.”

I blinked, surprise washing over me. I stared at him, waiting for some explanation as a long moment of stretched silence passed. I couldn’t stop the beads of sweat from rolling down my back despite the draft in the apartment.

“How well?” I heard myself ask, although I didn’t think I was ready to hear the answer. The memory of our visit flickered in my mind. I remembered my mother’s lips thinning in displeasure when this man spoke to her. I met his cold dark stare, anger in my chest bubbling over. “How. Well. Did. You. Know. Her?”

He smiled an ugly, vicious smile. It wasn’t a good combination with his intoxicated state.

“Very well,” he said in a detached tone. “I was the one who opened her eyes to who your father really is. She shouldn’t have *married* him.” A snicker left him on the word “married” and it seemed to have significance. Except I couldn’t put my finger on it. “She wanted to use me to get back at him. Well, I used her too.”

My whole body became eerily still. “W-what?” My heart drummed under my ribs, cracking them with each beat as I waited for him to clarify his statement. He never did. “What do you mean?”

“It means she finally understood who’s the boss.” I swallowed, struggling with the information. “She needed an eye-opener, so I gave it to her. She learned what your father is about and the truth about who came before her.”

“W-who?” I stuttered.

“His previous wife.” My mouth parted and shock shot through me. Papà was married before? Why did that feel wrong? He had never mentioned it. Neither did Grandma. My head swam. My stomach lurched. “Don’t you know, girl?” he said, his voice taunting. “We all came into the world screaming and covered in someone’s blood. And we’ll leave the same way.”

I’d heard those words before, only slightly different. Mamma said them when she was dying.

We all came into this world screaming and covered in blood. All we can do is make sure we don’t leave the same way.

Did she hear that from him?

I was too wrapped up in pondering this information that I didn't see the next move. For an intoxicated person, he moved fast. One minute he was casually leaning against the doorway, and the next his body slammed into mine, his sour breath against my bare flesh.

My head hit the cold metal of the fridge, sending a bolt of pain through my skull. The air wheezed out of my lungs and I tasted blood in my mouth.

My lungs burned. Fear rattled the cage of my panic, stealing all my oxygen.

I thrashed against him with all my strength, but it wasn't enough. He backhanded me so hard that stars swam in my vision. He gripped both of my wrists and lifted them above my head. I refused to stop fighting.

Then a vicious slash burned on my arms, the familiar sting of pain as he tried to slit my wrists.

It was at that moment... that very moment... I decided I'd never cut myself again. I wanted to live. I was a survivor, and I'd be damned if I went down without a fight.

His hand wrapped around my throat, squeezing it with all his strength, and slammed my back against the fridge again with such force that my teeth clattered.

"Ah, little girl," he growled. "You're no match for me."

"Let go of me, you bastard," I croaked, miserably aware of my body's weakness. "My family will destroy you."

His grip tightened. I was getting light-headed, dots dancing before my vision. My heart jackhammered in my chest, fear—thick and sticky—filling my mouth.

"Which one of you brats is mine?"

I blinked, the question catching me off guard. "I don't know what you're talking about," I wheezed, my voice barely audible as I desperately scratched at his forearms and kicked my legs.

"You are *lying*," he hissed, squeezing tightly. "It better not be that deaf freak."

Adrenaline and fury zipped through me. I clawed at his hold, attempting to knee him in the balls.

"Don't talk about my sister like that," I croaked, scratching at his hands when he slapped me hard again. My ears rang and my cheek burned. Before I could inhale my next breath, a punch followed. It felt like my head exploded and a single tear rolled down my face. "Neither one of us is yours, you sick

bastard.”

He grinned like an evil maniac. “The timing points to her though. It’s a good thing nobody knows.”

Hopelessness rose up in my chest in the face of this monster. Death was coming for me, I could feel the shadows creeping in, its cold fist knocking against the invisible door.

But I refused to answer.

Instead, I gathered all my remaining strength and rammed my knee between his legs. He bucked, his grip loosening. Letting go of his forearms, I clawed at his stomach, and my fingers wrapped around cold metal. A gun. I didn’t think, didn’t question my next move. I just reacted.

I gripped it and pulled the trigger. At the exact time that fireworks exploded outside our window.

Bang.

I couldn’t distinguish the noise between the fireworks and the gun. But as the sky lit up and hues of blues and reds filtered through to the kitchen, a terrible scream severed the air. I stumbled back and took in the sight before me: Mr. Leone, red eyes popping out of his deathly pale face, mouth gaping open and shut.

His grip on my throat eased slowly, until his hand fell down the length of his body altogether.

With every ounce of strength I had left, I punched him in the stomach, right in the bullet wound.

“Fuck,” he rasped, stumbling away from me, reaching for something to balance himself. Pots and silverware clattered onto the kitchen floor. He hung on to the counter, trembling—like I’d been mere seconds ago.

His face was the picture of disbelief, the blood he was losing evidenced in its pallor.

My hand flew to my mouth and I bit into the tender flesh of my palm as I panted, each breath burning my lungs.

I took a step back. Then another. My heart drummed against my ribs and I watched with horror as he fell sideways onto the floor, blood gushing from his wound.

My mouth moved, but I made no sound. It wasn’t until my back hit the refrigerator that I could finally breathe.

“Did you rape my mother?” My voice was eerily calm, the sound of my breathing mixing with his heavy wheeze.

Blood trickled down the corner of his mouth. “She came willingly. But then she broke it off.” My stomach dropped. “But that last time—” He left the meaning lingering. “I couldn’t let her go. She should have been mine.”

This man was fucking crazy. Mamma would never want someone like that. “You’re lying,” I spat. “She would never come to you willingly. Why would she?” I shouldn’t have asked, but not knowing just wasn’t my thing.

“After she married him,” he panted. “She came willingly. Revenge is best served when angry, not cold. It wreaks havoc and destroys everything in its path.” His voice grew faint with each word. “Although, I must say, I didn’t expect to see him in my home that summer. You and your sister are the spitting image of her that I remember.” His eyes were squeezed tight and the hands covering his wound were stained red now, blood overflowing onto the tiles.

That summer. That dreaded fucking summer when Mamma killed herself. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.

“What?”

He laughed, spurring more blood from his mouth. “He has no idea it was me. I touched his wife. *Fucked* his wife. And he *still* made a deal with me.”

His words pushed me over the edge, and at that moment, my mind was made up. I was already too deep in the underworld.

“Go to hell and stay there.”

My voice was raspy, foreign. I wasn’t a killer, but I’d kill him. With that, I raised my arm and took aim.

“Phoenix... is... mine,” he whispered, and they were the last words he’d ever speak. I pulled the trigger again.

Bang.

The bullet hit his neck, piercing a hole through it. Mr. Leone’s body twitched on the pristine white tile of the kitchen, his fingers trying to staunch the bloody wound at his neck.

A terrible gurgling noise sounded from his throat, blood leaking from his lips.

Until all life vanished from his eyes, leaving them blank and empty.

Just like me.

AMON

We arrived at the port thirty minutes before my shipment from DiMauro was scheduled to hit the dock.

Empty containers sat around, waiting for the product that was due to arrive soon. Everything was already in place.

The chilly breeze whipped at my face and gray clouds thickened above our heads, signaling an impending storm.

Everything seemed to be in order, yet nothing felt right. The maze of containers. Dante arguing with Cesar about some shit they watched on TV yesterday. Like two fucking children! Cesar was a decade older than Dante, which made him look even worse. But he was a good fighter.

Kingston—better known as Ghost—kept his focus on the horizon with narrowed eyes. He wasn't overly social or personable, but there was no one better than him when it came to torture and tracking. He was an excellent fighter and an even better strategist.

I was making my way over to the dock, checking on my men positioned further in the warehouse, when a movement behind me caught my attention. I spun around and saw the hem of a coat before it disappeared behind a container.

I tapped my earpiece. "Eyes open, boys. We have visitors."

No sooner than I uttered those words, someone opened fire. A stream of bullets erupted, the sound deafening.

"A fucking machine gun." Kingston's voice filtered through.

Thankfully, I ducked just in time to avoid a bullet. Behind the container, I let my eyes scan the area to get a read on the situation.

"Three men, ten o'clock," I hissed in my earpiece. "Two at two o'clock."

“Five at eleven,” Dante barked.

Good, at least we weren’t surrounded. Not yet anyhow.

“Don’t let them get behind us,” I said as I aimed and eliminated the first man, then shot the next in the head. I could hear voices speaking in Portuguese. Narrowing my eyes, I surveyed the men, and it didn’t take long to spot the man in charge. “The ugly one at eleven o’clock. Keep him alive.”

“They’re all ugly,” Dante grumbled. “Can you be more specific?”

I gritted my teeth. Dante could be funny as fuck and annoying enough to kill at the same time.

“The one with dark hair and a gash on his face.” Kingston’s eerily calm voice came through. “Is that specific enough?”

“Yes.” By Dante’s snicker, I knew it wasn’t the last of his words. “I don’t want to accidentally shoot the ugly fuckers on our side.”

“There’s only the four of us and three other men,” I deadpanned.

“Exactly.” I was certain he insulted us somewhere in that statement. Dante laughed like a maniac—yes, he was back to his usual self—as he killed everyone in his path, their blood splattering all around him.

Running between the containers, the four of us closed in on the enemy, taking them down systematically. I missed a few times to ensure the main fucker remained alive. I barely missed being shot myself, but I was trained for this; I had more to lose. The thought of my brother on the other side of a bullet spurred the adrenaline out of me.

A car appeared out of nowhere. “Not ours,” Kingston said, confirming my suspicion.

The vehicle revved, spiraling out of control. I watched the head guy climb to the top of the container and then jump onto the trunk.

“Fuck this live capture. Kill the bastard.” Aiming for him, I took a shot but only grazed him. “*Fuck!*”

I shot the tire, causing the car to swerve to the side, but before it could reach me, my dear brother launched a grenade through the air.

“Are you fucking nuts?” Kingston barked, one of the rare occasions his voice reflected his emotions. “The entire French police force will feel that fucking grenade.”

I pulled out my phone and typed a quick message to Luca DiMauro.

Turn the shipment around. Red flag.

He’d understand. With efficiency, we moved, eliminating the rest of the

men I suspected worked for the Cortes cartel. Red blurred my vision, but I refused to let it hinder me.

In the span of five minutes, we eliminated every enemy but two. Dante dragged one by his hair while I got the leader. If he could be called that.

“*Maldito bastardo*,” he spat out.

Dante got into his face. “We. Don’t. Speak. Asshole.”

Kingston shook his head. It was all we fucking did.

“Where is your whore?” the fucker spat out, glaring at me. “It takes a whore’s son to recognize a whore.”

Rage zipped through me but I just smiled. “We’ll discuss that in a bit.”

He could call me a whore’s son until the cows came home, but it was a death sentence to call *her* a whore. I was fairly certain that’s who he meant.

“Let’s get these two somewhere we can teach them a lesson,” I drawled, my smile matching my brother’s.

Years of training taught me to be calm. It trained me to control my emotions, be self-sufficient, self-reliant, and keep anyone from getting into my head. Except *she* happened, the only one who’d ever managed to raise the complex feelings that lingered inside me.

I was cursed to walk this eternal abyss of a life alone.

Mother’s secrets, lies, and betrayal buried deep inside me. Everything that happened tainted each word and moment with her, and I didn’t think there was a way back from it.

Tension descended over me like an iron curtain. I had to move on, but I didn’t know *how*.

The fucking Brazilian cartel thought they could attack our warehouse on the outskirts of Paris and steal our product.

They must have smoked the product, because they were fucking crazy if they thought we owed them anything.

I smoothed my hair and adjusted the buttons on my jacket that had come undone. I watched now as Ghost collected the teeth of each man he killed or injured. At this rate, he could build a house of fucking teeth.

With the two men we kept alive, we arrived at the warehouse ten minutes away. It’d buy us enough time to drag some information out of this sidekick and the main guy, whose name was Raul and would soon be dead. But first, he’d tell me why in the fuck he was on my property.

“You’re starting a war with the cartel,” he said in a heavy accent, then spit at my feet.

“I’m not starting anything,” I said calmly, apathetically. “You started this clusterfuck. I’m simply finishing it.”

He was a bulky man with a buzz cut. Not overly intelligent, judging by how easily we’d taken his entire crew down. And yet, hope lingered in his eyes.

“Now tell me, what does Perez Cortes want with my shit?”

“He wants retribution and payment for the product you cost him,” Raul said behind clenched teeth.

Dante made his way over, dragging a Brazilian by his head, and threw him beside Raul. The rat looked at his leader, his entire body trembling.

“*Por favor,*” he muttered. “*Por favor.*”

“Tell us what you know and we’ll make it quick.” I fetched my knife. “Otherwise, we’ll make this a week-long affair.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Raul instructed.

I grabbed Raul and positioned him on his knees, facing his subordinate. Then to drive my point home, I sliced his ear off in one move.

“This is just the beginning,” I drawled, blood spurting from his wound, staining his clothes and mine. It must’ve been exactly the incentive his man needed though.

“The big boss wanted us to get your product and the girl.” The coward breathed heavily.

I stilled, feeling Dante’s gaze on me, but I ignored him. The dark circles surrounding my eyes portrayed how little I’d been sleeping. Every inch of me revolted at the idea of being anywhere in this world where *she* wasn’t. Even in my dreams. The thought of closing my eyes and drifting off to sleep terrified the fuck out of me. Neither scenario made me feel better—not dreaming about her or dreaming about her.

My brother’s eyes were shining like a madman’s, ready to play and torture. He wasn’t far off the edge, prepared to lose his own shit, although it remained to be seen why.

“What girl?” My jaw tightened, the words coiling up alongside my anger. The fucker actually pissed himself.

“Shut the fuck up,” Raul screamed, panting and jerking against the hold Ghost had on him. “Shut. Up.”

“I don’t know who she is.”

I retrieved my phone, scrolling to the only photo I had of Reina. I’d snapped it while she was staring at the floating lanterns, her eyes sparkling

with happiness.

“This girl?” He stared at the picture and the flicker of recognition in his eyes was answer enough.

His eyes darted to Raul while trying to fight Dante’s grip. I needed him to verbally confirm even though I already knew the answer.

“Don’t fucking look at him.” I clutched his head and made him meet my eyes. “I’ll ask you one last time. Is that the girl?”

“Y-yes.”

I sliced his throat in one swift motion. Blood bathed the floor and my clothing, splattering my freshly polished shoes. Gurgling sounds filled the space but my rage was louder. Next I shoved a knife into Raul’s chest, right where his black heart resided, and twisted it.

“I’m going to send you back to Perez and your family all carved out.” I leaned down and stared at his beady black eyes. “You messed with the wrong girl. I’m going to wipe out every single one of you and ensure none of you ever roam the world again.”

The new year would bring bloodshed.

Reina Romero brought out the best in me. Now the world would see the worst.

REINA

I sat on the kitchen floor with my knees pulled up to my chest and blood pooling all around me for who knew how long.

My eyes drifted down my body, gulping when they reached my blood-stained hands. Who would've thought this was how the night would end. Me, drenched in the blood of our parents' sins.

I knew I'd be okay physically, but the things I'd heard tonight were inked on my soul.

It broke my heart that I couldn't protect Phoenix from this gruesome scene. Yet I was at a loss as to what to do. I couldn't exactly send the body down the garbage disposal. Bile rose in my throat, but I shoved it down.

I clenched my teeth, my heart beating fast as I stared at the man whose blood was now on my hands.

Tonight, I'd killed. The realization hit me full force. Silent tears streamed down my face. Those dead eyes would haunt my nightmares for the foreseeable future. I couldn't look away from his ashen face though. The blood-stained silver hair. Dull blue eyes.

Angelo Leone raped my mother. He deserved to be dead. He destroyed our family. What if Papà learned that Mamma had an affair with Angelo Leone and then broke it off, resulting in her rape? No, no, no. I had to keep this secret, to protect Papà and Phoenix.

Panic filled my lungs and I fought the urge to crawl into the bathroom. I wanted to turn the shower on and let water fall over me while I inflicted physical pain on myself.

Anything was better than this ache inside my chest. God, I was sick and tired of feeling so fucking broken. An invisible hand clawed its fingers

around my throat and dug them in, mocking me.

The tremor started in my hands and spread until my entire body shook. Pressure built inside me and screamed at me to release it. Just one cut and it'd be all better.

I squeezed my eyes tight but the voice became louder, lashing at my skull. Hurting me with bruises that would never heal.

Forcing my eyes open and ignoring the burning, I focused on the dead body. Dead eyes.

I released a shuddering breath and forced myself to replace it, filling my lungs. I watched the whole encounter play on repeat in my mind. Over and over and fucking over again.

I guess I'm a killer now. The realization shook me, but I couldn't find an ounce of regret inside.

He'd hurt my mother, and I wouldn't let him get his hands on Phoenix.

The gun still sat heavy and cold in my hand. Death was too easy. A simple pull of the trigger, and then it was over.

Something awoke inside me. *Dark. Consuming. Vengeful.*

I let it fester as the world moved in slow motion. I remembered my childhood. My mother. Her smiling face. *Had* she been happy? It was a question I needed the answer to now more than ever. Maybe our family's happiness had all been smoke and mirrors. A part of me refused to admit the truth, even to myself. Otherwise, why would my mamma ever have an affair with Angelo Leone of her own free will? I didn't know.

All I was certain of was that Phoenix could never know. I'd make certain of it.

A dark shadow formed inside me, ripping and tearing at my soul, freeing emotions that I'd never entertained before. *Hate.* Blinding and consuming. It tasted like acid and blood. These feelings terrified me.

Even as fear gripped my throat, I knew I'd do it all over again if I had to. If I had to kill a million men, I would do it. For her. For our family.

I didn't know how long I sat there, staring at him, unable to look away, when I heard the soft rustle of the door opening.

Giggles. Whispers.

My eyes strayed to the kitchen entrance, waiting for my sister and friends to appear. It didn't take long. Then... silence. Deafening. Frightening.

"What... the fuck..." I wasn't sure who said it, but even in their intoxicated state, a million emotions passed over their somber-looking faces.

I wanted to crawl into my bed and never wake up, but I couldn't bring myself to move.

"I killed him," I whispered, my eyes finding my sister's. "I'm not sorry."

Nobody moved. Seconds stretched into minutes. It was Athena who finally motioned to the dead corpse.

"Who the fuck is this?" Raven rasped, her eyes glued to the lump on the floor. It seemed the resemblance between Dante and Angelo Leone the corpse wasn't as evident.

"*Did he—*" Phoenix swallowed with an audible gulp. "*Did he touch you?*"

I shook my head as a tremor zipped down my spine. He didn't rape me, but he'd raped my mother.

"How did he get in?" Athena croaked, looking like a deer in headlights.

I wetted my lips, the cut on my lip stinging, before I spoke. "I answered the door. Before I could shut it, he pushed in."

Isla stared at the body with a horrified expression before turning to look at me. "Who is he?" Isla asked again.

"*Angelo Leone,*" Phoenix answered. "*Dante and Amon's father.*" Everyone stared back at me, their eyes wider than when they'd first taken in the scene if that were even possible. "*Do you think he came because he found out about you and Amon?*"

I pulled my knees closer into my chest. "I don't think so. He—" I cut myself off, not wanting to say too much. It was best my sister and friends didn't know about Mamma's history with Angelo Leone. "He seemed drunk," I ended up saying.

"We have to get rid of the body," Athena stated.

"Or we'll go to prison," Raven added. "Have you seen *Les Misérables*? French prisons are no joke."

"Is there a prison that is?" Isla asked wryly.

Their conversation echoed in my head, but it didn't register. My sister stepped over the blood and kneeled beside me, slipping her hand into mine as if she could sense the chaos running rampant.

She squeezed my hand and I slowly lifted my eyes, meeting her expression. The same blue as mine. The same blue as our mother's. Beneath my frozen expression, Angelo Leone's revelation screamed at me.

My hands were stained with the blood of her father. Maybe I'd been tainted all my life—Papà's blood flowing through my veins, waiting for the

darkness to awaken. Waiting to set it free.

Phoenix released my hand and cupped my face. An uneasy, forbidden feeling slithered down my spine as I realized this would be another secret I'd have to keep from my sister.

Finally, she released my face. "*Are you okay?*"

"Yes." *No.*

"He beat the shit out of you," Athena pointed out the obvious, her fingers trembling as she tucked a piece of hair behind her ear.

A shudder rippled down my spine.

"It's not as bad as it looks," I rasped, my voice sounding strange to my ears. Hollow. Lifeless. Then as if a dam broke, all my pent-up emotions from the past few months—ever since Amon broke me—burst forth. I was swept up in a tidal wave of heartache and pain. They washed over me, drowning me, and I let them.

I was pulled under into my pain, sadness, and betrayal as I buried my face into my sister's shoulder and a wail tore from my throat. My eyes burned. My muscles ached from the force of the wretched, soul-racking sobs. My sister kept me moored, stroking my hair. Our friends huddled around us, murmuring soothing sounds.

And all the while a dead body lay not four feet from us.

The girl who met Amon Leone in a castle by the sea was long gone by the time my tears dried.

REINA

“First things first.” Raven seemed to be the only calm, cool, and collected one. She pointed a finger at me. “You need a shower. Then we need to brainstorm ideas about what to do with this body.”

“Why aren’t you freaking out?” Athena muttered.

“Have you killed before?” Isla mumbled, half joking and half serious.

Raven shook her head. “Remember how I told you that I saw a mobster kill and dispose of a body before?” All of us stared at her, our jaws on the kitchen floor. She waved her hand, probably anticipating our questions. “It’s a long story and we don’t have time for it right now. Let’s all change into something black.”

“Why black?” Isla whispered.

“It’s easier to blend into the night,” Raven answered. “I think so, anyhow.”

“You’re scaring me right now,” Athena grumbled.

“*Shouldn’t we be scared of the dead body in the middle of our kitchen?*” Phoenix cut through their nonsense. “*Before the police find themselves at our door.*”

“I’m legit freaked out,” Isla chimed in. “And why is Reina just staring at him?”

I finally tore my eyes from the dead body and met their faces. “You know I’m still here, right?”

My sister hooked her hands around my waist and pulled me to my feet. “*Let’s get you into the bathroom.*”

“We’re coming too,” Athena squealed. “I can’t stomach a dead body.”

“Meh, I don’t mind it now that I’m older,” Raven announced, and all of

us shot her a dumbfounded look. “Okay, okay. I’m freaked out, I just don’t know how to deal with it.”

We all nodded in agreement. It was new territory for all of us.

I took a step out of the kitchen when an idea struck me.

“What if—” I cleared my throat as the gruesome images made bile rise in my throat. “Maybe we should dismember him,” I suggested softly. Four sets of eyes watched me, unblinking. “It’ll be easier to move him.”

Heavy silence fell over the room. A kitchen that looked like a battlefield. A blood-smeared floor. A dead body.

And it was my suggestion that shocked them the most.

“*I don’t know if I should be proud or worried,*” Phoenix finally signed.

“Proud,” Raven answered at the same time Isla said, “Worried.”

I inhaled a shaky breath before exhaling slowly. “There’s no way we can carry him in one piece and not look suspicious,” I reasoned.

“So what?” Isla’s voice was high-pitched. “Do we chop him up with a steak knife?”

“Umm, I think we’ll need a bigger knife than that,” Raven muttered, leading the rest of us to gag.

I rolled my shoulders back, swallowing the excess saliva that warned I was about to puke.

“How big?” I asked.

“Reina, you can’t be serious,” Athena whisper-screamed. “Are we supposed to do it in our sink?”

I swallowed, but my voice shook when I said, “Don’t be silly. We’d never fit his body into our kitchen sink.”

“No, no, no,” Isla whimpered, tugging on her hair. “We only have one bathroom. Anything but our bathtub.”

“*We’ll get it renovated,*” Phoenix signed. “*I’ll use my studio rental money and we’ll renovate the bathroom.*”

“So much for bubble baths,” Athena grumbled. “I guess until then, we’ll just take showers.”

“Okay, so we have the first part figured out,” Raven announced matter-of-factly. “We’ll cut him up.”

“*We should send his balls to his family,*” Phoenix added with a serious expression on her face. “*So they know to stop fucking with us.*”

“Maybe just his dick,” I muttered, feeling tired. Maybe we’d reached a breaking point with the Leone men. It was a good thing there were no more

Leone sons roaming this earth or we'd be doomed.

"I'm in," Raven announced. "I'll deliver it to their door. Disguised as FedEx."

"I don't even want to know why you have a FedEx uniform," Isla grumbled.

"*Forget personal delivery,*" Phoenix stated.

"I agree with Phoenix," Athena chimed in. "We'll just have to package his dick well so it doesn't bleed through the box. Probably need to pack it in ice too, so it doesn't start to stink. Then we ship it from the rural outpost of a post office so there's no surveillance. No technology to be hacked into."

It wasn't a bad idea. Athena either watched too much *CSI* or she was a serial killer in her previous life. More than likely, she was doing research for her own book.

"Where are we going to bury the body parts?" Isla asked.

Everyone's eyes darted to me, like I was some kind of expert. My eyes lowered to my hands, still stained with Leone's blood. My innocence was gone, although I started to wonder if it was ever there in the first place.

My pulse quickened and I squeezed my eyes shut, taking deep breaths. In and out. In and out. It wasn't the time for a panic attack. I had to get my shit together. I had to become tougher. Stronger.

With a final shuddering exhale, my eyes lifted to find my friends and sister studying me.

I shook my head in an attempt to clear it. Isla was right. We needed a place to stash the body away. It definitely couldn't stay here.

"The catacombs," I said on a shaky exhale, the idea coming out of nowhere.

"It's hardly time for sightseeing," Athena croaked.

"It's where we should put the body parts," I clarified, signing at the same time. It was a grotesque picture with my bloody hands. "Tons of bodies there. What's a few more body parts?" I could practically see their wheels turning as they came to the realization that it was actually a good idea. The tunnels stretched for two hundred miles. It would be easy enough, right? "We scatter the parts in the tunnels that are closed to the public. The tunnels that nobody has access to."

"I've visited the catacombs," Athena chimed in. "Only two miles of underground tunnels are open to visitors... out of two hundred. The skulls are unmarked, unnamed. Anonymous."

“Perfect,” we whispered at the same time.

“The gun too,” I murmured. “We have to get rid of it.”

Raven’s eyes met mine. “Good thinking. Gun and body to be stashed in the catacombs.”

“*Okay, so we slice and dice this man. Then carry him in parts to the catacombs,*” Phoenix summarized. “*Whose car are we using?*”

“Like that’s even a question,” Raven grumbled. “I’m the only one with a car.”

Isla rolled her eyes. “If you can call it a car. It gets us stranded more than actually get us places.”

“We’ll have to enter the catacombs through the unofficial tunnels,” I stated. “They’re not guarded like the section open to visitors. We’ll be in and out.” Everyone nodded. “It’s also illegal,” I pointed out. “If we get caught, we’ll probably be arrested.”

“We’re about to mutilate a man’s body. If we get caught, breaching the illegal entrance into the catacombs will be the least of our concerns,” Athena stated exasperatedly.

“God, I wish I’d had more alcohol at the club,” Isla cried. Her eyes flickered to the dead body before she shook her head. “Like a gallon of something hard core so I wouldn’t remember this shit tomorrow.”

“Sissy,” Raven taunted. “I used to be like that.” The haunted look in her eyes was proof of a story that she had seen something that had left a mark on her.

“But then you grew balls?” Athena said, crossing her arms and jutting a hip out. “We’ll see how that goes when we start your butchering career.”

The word was barely out of her mouth when Isla started gagging. Phoenix, Athena, and I weren’t far behind. Raven seemed to have an iron stomach, although that remained to be proven.

“Okay, so let’s get to work,” the brave one in question announced with a clap of her hands.

“If you start cheering, I swear, I’m outta here,” Athena grumbled.

Isla shuffled to the kitchen sink, kneeling to grab something underneath it. She straightened and handed us all cleaning gloves. “Let’s get to work, then.”

I scrubbed my hands clean before sliding my gloves on, trying not to think about all the shit that’d gone wrong in the past six months. Mere hours ago, I put rubber gloves on for a different reason, ready to bring in the new

year with a clean slate. And here I was now, ready to chop up a body.

With my gloves on and looking suspiciously like the female lead in *The Cleaning Lady*, I shifted on my feet, unsure where to start.

“Did you know that the bladder and bowel of a person will empty after death?” Athena’s comment startled me and my eyes traveled to her.

“You’re full of useless and disgusting information,” Raven noted, shaking her head. “Why would you say that?”

Athena shrugged. “So you know what to expect when his bowels dump out.”

I stared at her, disbelief constricting my throat and my mind. My heart twisted with the realization that there was no coming back from this. This whole growing-up business was overrated. The criminal career... even more so.

Letting out a heavy sigh, I pondered how we should handle this body. None of us were medical students. Even passing science was a stretch for us. Maybe cutting off his limbs first was a way to go.

“So what do we cut first?” Isla must have read my mind.

“Do we go all *Saw* on him?” Athena questioned. The five of us stood around the body, looking like we were about to perform a surgery.

“Let’s get him into the bathtub first,” I suggested.

We shuddered, but with clenched jaws and a steel spine, each one of us grabbed a part of him, grunting at his weight. Once in the bathroom, we dropped his body into the porcelain tub.

“Thank fuck it’s deep,” Raven grumbled. “He shouldn’t have more blood than the depth of this tub.”

I shot her a look. I didn’t even want to know why she knew that.

“You’re sick,” Isla hissed. “I never noticed it before, but something is seriously wrong with you.”

Raven just flashed her a grin. “Thanks.”

“I don’t think she meant it as a compliment,” Athena pointed out.

“*Stop playing*,” Phoenix scolded them. “*Let’s chop him up*.”

Her knife slid down Leone’s dead body until she reached the spot between his legs. All of us gasped as she tore the material of his pants, exposing the limp flesh. Then, without warning, Phoenix sliced his dick off.

“What the—”

Isla ran and fell to her knees in front of the toilet. Athena turned to the sink. The sounds of gagging and retching swirled around me, and the bile in

my throat rose and rose until I couldn't hold it in anymore. I turned toward the stand-up shower and threw up what little I had in my stomach.

This would be a long night.



It took us two hours to cut up Angelo Leone into manageable pieces we could stuff into trash bags and carry out of the apartment, and another two to make our way deep into the catacombs where we disposed of the pieces and the gun.

It was past five in the morning when Raven parked her beat-up VW Beetle in front of our apartment. Thankfully, the sunrise wouldn't happen for another few hours and Parisians were safely asleep in their homes.

The crisp cool air smelled earthy as we exited Raven's car and made our way to the building. Flurries started to fall, sticking to the pavement and my hair. It felt like a cleansing. Maybe a new beginning. Or an ending.

I didn't know.

We entered our apartment exhausted, the lack of sleep slowly creeping up on us, but the evidence of my crime awaited.

"Go to sleep," I told them all. "I'll clean up."

They ignored me, rolled up their sleeves, and started cleaning. The clothes Angelo Leone wore were burned in the wooden stove that was lit up for the first time since we moved into this apartment. Probably the last too.

Slowly, we erased the evidence of what we'd done. No, of what *I'd* done. As I scrubbed the kitchen floor, my eyes burned. Not from the bleach but from the realization that my sister and our friends had my back without question.

Tears sprung from my eyes, rolling down my cheeks, and I batted them away angrily. It was time I stopped this crying and self-pity.

"Are you okay?" Isla's whisper startled me, and I quickly wiped my face with the back of my hand.

"Yes."

Phoenix's eyes zeroed in on me. "*You're not okay.*"

"I am," I repeated stubbornly.

"*Then why are you cutting yourself?*" It was instinct to deny it, to lie about it. Instead, I froze, shame filling my every crevice.

“You’re cutting yourself?” Isla hissed. I shook my head, but the lie refused to leave my lips. “What the fuck, Reina!”

“*Promise me you’ll stop,*” Phoenix demanded. She must have seen the question in my eyes because I’d been so careful to hide it. “*I saw your legs when you were changing.*”

I swallowed, realizing that secrets and roommates just didn’t go together. “I promise,” I murmured.

“It might help to talk about it,” Raven suggested, suddenly appearing in the kitchen along with Athena. “Yes, we heard.”

I reached for my necklace, twisting it and hoping for comfort that never came. All I could think about were Angelo Leone’s words about Mamma. About Phoenix.

I took a deep breath in and then exhaled. “I’m sorry. I’ll get it under control.”

“*Please talk to me,*” Phoenix begged. “*Ever since—*” She faltered, reluctant to mention him. “*It’s not good for you to keep it all in.*”

“It’s going to be okay,” I vowed. “Everything will be better.” The stress and anguish from the last six months had caught up to me, as I knew it would. I had to get back to my old self. Yoga. Therapy. Physical exercise. Fashion. “I know the year didn’t end well, but it has to get better.”

“What time did you—”

Phoenix cut her off. “*We shouldn’t talk about it.*”

“When did it all go down?” Isla paraphrased. I gave her a confused look, not understanding the point of her question.

“Before or after midnight?” Athena added softly, as if the question made perfect sense.

“I pulled the trigger just as the fireworks went off.” My voice was rough, but it didn’t tremble. Neither did my hands when I reached for my pendant, seeking the comfort it usually provided.

“Good,” Isla muttered under her breath. “That’s very good. All the bad stuff happened last year. We start the new year fresh.”

A round of murmurs followed, all the girls nodding along in agreement.

Did the logic make sense? No. Was I going to point it out? Fuck no.

It was obvious my sister and friends needed it to get by, so I’d keep my mouth shut and be thankful they didn’t turn me in to the police.

“What time did you get home last night?” Honestly, I didn’t know how long I sat here like a zombie, but it’d felt like a while before they found me in

the kitchen.

“One.” She shot a glance at the clock. “It’s six now.”

The dead body was securely stashed in the Paris catacombs—where no tourists visited—that only the five of us knew the location of. After we cleaned up the mess in the kitchen, I waited for my turn to shower, leaning against the wall.

“If by some long shot the police come to our door,” Raven started, “we should claim we never saw him. We were out. We celebrated New Year’s, got home, and then decided to go back out for some food. We roamed the street looking for an open restaurant. We couldn’t find one, so we came back. Simple.” She had a point, and we’d need to tighten this “alibi” slightly, but it was a start.

The sun was long up when I slid between the sheets of my bed. Phoenix curled in beside me, sniffing silently as she drifted off to sleep.

I stayed awake and thought about everything I had brought onto our doorstep and how it had all gone wrong.

AMON

Furries tumbled from the gray Paris sky.

It had been a week since Father disappeared. This morning, we got a delivery. A dismembered dick matching Father's DNA. It was safe to say he was dead. No clues on who did it though.

Mother didn't seem overly heartbroken, which was understandable all things considered. Dante was uncharacteristically quiet and pensive. Hiroshi was unbothered, and I... well, I didn't give two shits about Angelo Leone's death. Father or not.

He was a cruel motherfucker who enjoyed exercising his power over anyone weaker than himself.

"It's nice you suggested dinner out, Amon," my mother said, her voice tentative. We hadn't exactly seen eye to eye since the big revelation. When I said nothing, she continued, "It's too bad Hiroshi couldn't join us."

I didn't comment.

The moment we entered the restaurant, I regretted coming. Golden curls, happy smiles, and blue eyes full of hearts flashed in my mind. In every corner of this restaurant, I saw flashes of sunlight and heard her laughter.

It was tearing my fucking soul into tiny sharp needles that jabbed at my heart.

The restaurant was almost empty, the cold weather keeping everyone in their warm homes. Holidays and weather rarely held Oba back, and she usually opened come rain or shine. She said it kept her busy and got people out and about.

She wasn't wrong about that; I hadn't left my apartment in days, yet here I was.

The three of us sat around our usual corner table, and I wondered who would be the first to break the silence. There had been tension brewing between my mother and me since she dropped the life-altering news. She claimed I was being unreasonable; I claimed she should have found an earlier point in my life to break this fucked-up connection to me.

“I know it’s not the best timing,” she started, “but we still need to get our hands on Romero’s document.”

I stiffened. I had all but given up looking for it. It seemed fucking pointless.

“Short of breaking into Romero’s mother-in-law’s homes—which we won’t do—you might as well kiss that fucking document goodbye.” My tone was clipped and cold.

Dante’s eyebrows shot up. “I’m up for breaking and entering.”

I narrowed my eyes on him. “We have bigger shit to worry about.”

“Like what?” my mother cut in. “What’s more important than your birthright?”

“Besides, it will be good for the Omertà if you take over the Yakuza,” Dante pointed out. He now had a seat at the table, and it made the way he was pointing out the obvious even more maddening.

A sardonic breath left me. It didn’t fucking matter whether I was Leone’s or Romero’s son. I was still a fucking outsider. That seat at the Omertà table wasn’t mine. I was the illegitimate son.

I gritted my teeth, reining in my temper. “I’ll take over the Yakuza *my* way. I don’t need that document. Discussion over.”

“Fucking sensitive much?” Dante muttered under his breath, but at least he dropped the subject.

Or maybe it was because Oba made her way to our table, her wrinkled face a testament to years of experience and hard work. Sometimes you could just look at someone and know they’d lived a full life.

“My favorite customers.” She beamed at us, her hands folded over the front of her kimono. “Amon and Hana, so nice to see you. I didn’t know you’d be back in Paris so soon.”

“She never left,” Dante grumbled.

“Ah, did you decide to stay for Paris Fashion Week?”

Mamma offered a weak smile. It was hardly appropriate to say she remained because Father—correction, Dante’s father—decided not to return home on New Year’s Eve, and his death would remain out of the press.

It wasn't exactly unusual—he had mistresses all over the fucking continent—so none of us had thought twice about it. Although it worried me that Dante hadn't reacted at all since that sliced dick showed up.

My mother muttered something vague in response, but luckily Oba didn't seem to notice, her attention pulled elsewhere.

She looked in the direction of the entryway door and waved. "Hello, Reina. So nice to see you."

My heart stopped. It fucking came to a screeching halt. I slowly turned my head, following Oba's gaze, and the world faded away.

Reina returned the greeting, her back to all of us as she dusted flurries from her coat. "Hello, Oba."

Fuck, her voice was as soft as I remembered it.

The petite figure wrapped in a flowy pink coat. Her white wool skirt barely reached her knees, her legs hidden under pink tights and white boots.

And her hair—

Fuck, what had she done to her hair? Her golden curls barely reached her slim shoulders.

She turned in our direction and her smile froze on her face. A round of gasps erupted, and through the red haze that filled my brain, it took me a while to realize it was my mother's and Oba's.

Reina's face was black and blue, the bruises stark against her pale skin. And her neck—

Before I knew what I was doing, I was on my feet and prowling through the restaurant, my chair falling to the floor with a thud. The sound of silverware clinking against the ground.

None of it mattered.

Someone hurt her. Someone put their fucking hands on her. *I'm going to murder whoever did this with my bare hands.*

The buzzing in my ears refused to ease. My anger coated her in red, taking over her pink colors.

Reina didn't move, her eyes tracking my every step until I towered over her. She still smelled like cinnamon, still as beautiful as ever. But there were no hearts in her eyes. At least none for me.

My eyes fell to her slim neck, fingerprints on it clear as fucking day. Someone had choked the living daylights out of her.

"Who hurt you?" I growled, my limbs shaking with anger. "Who fucking touched you?"

Something flickered in her eyes. Was it fear? It couldn't be. She knew I'd never hurt her. *Except you did*, my mind whispered.

There was a sharp blade now where my heart used to be.

"I'm going to ask you again, Reina." I could barely keep the leash on my fury. I had to take a breath before I gritted through my clenched teeth, "Who. Hurt. You?"

Fire flared in her eyes and she straightened her shoulders, jutting her chin up. "Fuck off, Amon. You don't have the right to ask me any questions."

Her response had me taken aback.

I took a step closer, she took one back. "Reina—"

"Knock it off," she hissed, the shine in her eyes muted. *I did that*. That knowledge hurt more than anything else.

Goddamn it. All this was so fucked up. I'd burn the entire fucking world to ask for her smiles. It was so fucking wrong, but I didn't know how to fix it. Fix *me*.

"Fine, have it your way," I gritted. "But I will find out who did this and then—"

I didn't have to finish the sentence. She knew exactly what I meant. Choosing to ignore my words, she sidestepped me and headed toward Oba while I stood still, my fists clenching and unclenching. I was itching to let this rage loose, but it was neither the time nor the place.

"Hello, Oba, do you have our order?" Reina's soft voice filled the restaurant, the sound acting like my own personal homing beacon.

I listened to their exchange, every fiber of me on high alert.

"What happened, *hina*?" Oba asked, her voice trembling. I wasn't surprised Oba found a Japanese nickname for her. *Sun*. It suited her with that hair that shone like gold.

"Just an accident." Reina kept her voice light, but there was an undertone of something there that I couldn't exactly pinpoint. "It's much better now."

Oba shook her head, clearly not believing her.

I didn't even know she was back in Paris. Darius hadn't alerted me to it. A week ago, on New Year's Eve, I saw her sister and friends partying, but Reina was nowhere in sight. I'd assumed she was still with her grandmother.

Could it be that the Brazilians had gotten to her? If they did that to her, I'd tear Perez Cortes limb from fucking limb.

Oba bagged her order and handed it over. "Do you want me to have someone carry it out for you?"

Reina's short curls bounced as she shook her head. "No, my friend is right out there. We'll drive back."

"Okay, *hina*." Oba's hand still lingered over Reina's. "Please be careful. I don't want to—"

Reina smiled, patting her wrinkly hand. "I promise, everything is okay. Thank you for the last-minute order."

"Of course. Anything for you."

"I'll see you next time."

Oba brought her palm to Reina's cheek and cupped it gently. From the moment they met, Oba was taken with her.

"You look after yourself, okay?"

Her short curls bobbed again as she nodded. She looked different, but the same. Older somehow. She passed by the table where my mother and Dante still sat, both of them watching her.

She simply tilted her head in acknowledgement while my brother stared at her like it was his job and he was getting millions for it. I had to fight the urge not to throw myself at him and dig his eyeballs out.

Instead, I remained still and waited.

She walked by me like I was a complete stranger.

I couldn't resist. Before I knew what I was doing, my hand shot out and grabbed her wrist.

"Reina—"

She stopped but she didn't turn to face me. She stared ahead, giving me the cold shoulder. Just like the queen she was. The bruises on her neck looked even worse from this angle. Jesus H. Christ.

"What do you want, Amon?" Her voice was colder than the temperature outside, her demeanor even more so.

"Tell me what happened," I demanded, my tone low. "Those bruises... I swear to God—"

This time she turned her head and met my gaze, eyes flashing with cold fury. The same ocean-blue eyes that used to show me my soulmate now only offered a stranger.

"*You* hurt me, Amon," she snapped, her tone hushed. "These bruises are nothing compared to the ones you left behind." A pale vein pulsed in her slim neck, a testament to her fury. "Now, let go of me."

She jerked her hand out of my grip and walked out of the restaurant, never once looking back.

REINA, 21 YEARS OLD

Three Years Later

My sister strolled into my office like it was an impossibly short runway. My iTunes playlist of sad-girl songs played in the background. Sometimes it helped with inspiration. Other times, it helped to remember why I refused to give love a second chance.

Who needed that headache and heartache? I'd rather be eaten by a shark. Slowly.

I dragged my eyes away from the designs I was fixing for my day job at Hermès. It was mostly thanks to my last name and connection to Mamma and Grandma—two of the biggest movie stars of their time—that I landed it. It didn't hurt that Grandma knew someone on the board as well.

I was grateful, and the experience was invaluable, but I wasn't happy working here. An administrative job just wasn't for me. After months of struggling, I'd finally decided to kick off something of my own and had been working at it for weeks.

"Hi there. You're here early." I checked the time to ensure I hadn't lost track of it. It was still only three in the afternoon. "I didn't expect you and Isla until four with the symphony practice."

She shrugged, signing, "*Isla will be here at four.*"

My sister smiled brightly, but the moment I locked eyes with her, I knew something upset her and she was trying to hide it.

"How come?" I asked, suppressing my instinct to demand what or who made her upset.

"*Practice.*"

I frowned. “You don’t have to practice?”

“No.”

I leaned back in my seat, ignoring the work that was piling up, waiting to be finished. I had a broom closet for an office. Well, not exactly, but I called it that because the space was only big enough to fit a desk, a small file cabinet, me, and a single visitor.

Unfortunately, none of it was working for my creative streak. It was the reason I was getting my own designs up and running, starting with hosting a show next week, and then—assuming it went well—I’d be outta here.

I shuddered just thinking about the disaster I still hadn’t dealt with. Was it too much to ask for things to go right for once?

I shook my head, chasing those thoughts away and focusing on Phoenix. “How come you don’t have to practice?”

I let my gaze roam over Phoenix’s slightly disheveled dark curls, black sweater, red leather pants, and black stiletto heels. She definitely didn’t go to symphony practice in that outfit. Maestro Andrea was very conservative. Isla tended to push her buttons with him, but that was never my sister’s style.

“*I just don’t.*” Another vague answer. Phoenix was usually pumped up when she had rehearsals and concerts.

“What happened?” There was no sense beating around the bush—Phoenix was an expert at avoidance. “And don’t tell me ‘nothing’ because I’ll go ask Maestro Andrea.” She huffed and I could practically see her contemplating her next words, evaluating how to best answer without outright lying. “You know what, I think I’ll just ask Maestro,” I said, my methods slightly sneaky.

I’d rather gag myself than call him. He’d nag me about returning to music until he turned blue.

“*He didn’t need me.*” I blinked at her answer. It wasn’t what I had expected. Phoenix was a magnificent pianist, and there weren’t many who possessed her skill. The only downfall in her whole career was when nobody present knew ASL to translate for her. And that was usually where I came in.

“What do you mean?” I asked slowly. I wouldn’t jump to conclusions; it could be that Maestro only needed violinists today.

Phoenix lifted her shoulder and sniffed. “*He picked another pianist. No biggie.*”

I straightened in my chair, indignation shooting through me. “What? I thought he wanted you. He made that clear.” A flicker crossed her expression

and suspicion pooled in the pit of my stomach. “Tell me why he picked someone else, Phoenix.”

My signing was jerky from the red-hot anger flaring inside me.

“*It’s not a big deal.*” Her fluent movements disguised her own frustration, but she couldn’t hide the disappointment lurking in her eyes.

“The hell it isn’t. Why did he pick someone else?” I repeated.

“*When he saw my name, he assumed you’d participate too.*”

A groan escaped my lips. It was so freaking unfair. Phoenix was a far better musician than me, and yet her hearing constantly put her at a disadvantage.

“Why are you so calm?”

She glared at me as though I’d betrayed her. “*I’m not. I want revenge. I want to cut off his dick and blind the motherfucker.*” Okay, well, that was unexpected. “*But it won’t change his mind about me playing for the symphony, so I have to let it go. I’ll get another gig. Make him regret it in the long run.*”

She was right. That was the best revenge she could bestow on any asshole who dismissed or snubbed her.

“And then refuse him whenever he wants you to play in his concerts.” I snickered, picking up my pencil. “I still can’t believe that asshole.”

She leaned against the wall and folded her arms, clearly done with our conversation. I wasn’t quite done with Maestro, and I fully intended to seek him out and make him regret the day he was born, but Phoenix didn’t need to know that.

Her expression burned into me until I couldn’t hold my tongue anymore.

“What?” I sounded too defensive and I didn’t even know why. It wasn’t as if I’d done something wrong. *Yet.* She unfolded her arms and waved her hand dismissively. I narrowed my eyes. “Clearly something’s on your mind, so just spit it out.”

That did it.

“*You don’t look dressed for going out,*” she pointed out, her arm making a gesture at me that made it clear my wardrobe of yoga pants and a crewneck top was inadequate for her standards. “*Nor for work, for that matter.*”

I rolled my eyes. “First, I’m shoved in here where nobody sees me but the guy who keeps giving me this boring crap.” I gestured at the piles of documents on my already messy desk. There were days where I pored over so much paperwork, I contemplated stabbing myself in the eye. “It’s Friday, a

‘dress down’ day.” Her eyebrows rose as if to say “so what,” but she remained quiet. “Most of the company is off today anyway. Some retreat or some shit.”

“*And you didn’t go?*”

“It was optional.” If it was a required event, I would have really stabbed myself in the eyes.

A soft hum vibrated in her chest, calling me out on my bullshit.

“*You can’t keep hiding from the world.*” I scoffed loudly, rolling my eyes and readying myself to protest. She must’ve been reading my thoughts. “*And if you tell me you’re coming to terms with everything, I’m going to drag you out of this building by your hair.*”

I sighed. “I’m not hiding,” I retorted wryly. “I just like this better than constantly going out and partying.”

“*Like what?*” she challenged. “*Listening to sad songs, learning to fight, and hanging out with some ex-special ops dude?*”

She was referring to Darius and our ongoing meet-ups in the local martial arts center. We’d become good friends over the last three years.

I shrugged. “I like it.”

Her eyes narrowed to slits. “*Do you like him?*”

I stared at her for a moment before I burst into a fit of giggles. Sure, Darius was hot, but he wasn’t remotely my type. With his shoulder-length blond hair and bulging muscles, I often wondered if he wasn’t more vain than all my friends combined.

“I like him as a friend,” I answered. “Nothing more; nothing less.”

She must have seen the truth in my eyes because she let it go. “*Come out with us.*”

I shook my head. “I can’t. My venue for the show got canceled. I have to go scout some location options, or I’ll have to cancel my fashion show.”

It was the perfect excuse and the truth. Of course, I *forgot* to mention that I’d be paying Maestro a visit now too.

“*We can go with you,*” she offered.

Isla sauntered in just as Phoenix started signing her answer, her wild red hair pulled up into a slick bun.

“Where exactly are we going with Reina?”

“Nowhere,” I answered quickly. “After I visit a few potential venues, I’m meeting Darius at the training center. So no, you can’t come with me.”

“*Ah, there it is.*” Phoenix’s expression was of annoyance. “*It’s like you’d*

rather hang with him than us.”

When I blew an exasperated breath, Isla shot me a sympathetic look. “You prefer to spend time in that stinking center than have fun.”

“I have fun learning self-defense,” I protested. “It makes me feel stronger. Safer.”

It was the truth. The fact that I survived Angelo Leone was a miracle beyond sheer luck. I’d be ready if there ever came to be a “next time.”

“*Maybe you should start up sessions with your therapist again,*” Phoenix suggested, crossing her arms and staring me down.

I shook my head. “No, I’m fine. And it’s not like I can tell her what happened.” I gave them both a pointed look. “This works and I’m sticking to it. Don’t make Raven and Athena wait. Go have dinner, then have fun out. I’ll be home when you get there.”

“I think you’re lying to yourself, claiming you’re fine,” Isla protested, her tone soft. “Three years is a long time to pine after someone.”

I averted my eyes, having a hard time denying it. I knew everything with Amon was history—long gone, never to be repeated—but it still hurt just as it had the first day he uttered those words.

You and me against the world.

I could deny it, but I was still as much in love with Amon Leone today as I was back then. The boy who destroyed me.

I turned my face to the wall and stared at the empty canvas while my mind replayed images I wanted to forget. The two of us dancing under the lanterns. Swimming in the clear blue sea. I would never love anyone the same, and no amount of rumination about the wrong kind of love worked. I was obsessed with him.

I returned my gaze to the two sets of eyes that watched me warily and I inhaled shakily. “I’m working on it. Self-defense classes are helping. Focusing on my career is helping too.”

The girls didn’t seem happy with my decision, but they accepted it. Twenty minutes later, we exited the Hermès building. Isla and Phoenix went right, and I went left.

Much later in my life, I’d realize it was that day that steered me back into the underworld.

AMON, 26 YEARS OLD

Trieste, Italy.

I watched the city buzz with life as the sea washed against the shoreline. It was picturesque and soothing to everyone but me. This was never my home, despite the fact that I was born here.

My muscles burned and sweat dripped down my forehead, blurring my vision as I continued slamming my fist into the mannequin's face. I unleashed my anger, taking my training to the extreme. It had become my only sanctuary. The smell of sweat perfumed the air as my mind whirled in a hundred different directions.

I wondered where *she* was at this minute, what she was doing, whether she was happy, content. The temptation to look her up was so fucking great that after an hour of pummeling the mannequin, I finally caved.

I towed the perspiration off my face and made my way to my laptop, flipping it open. Throwing the towel into the laundry basket, I grabbed a water bottle and began typing into my surveillance program.

I pressed several buttons until I located her. Yoga class. She still attended regularly. Did she still get panic attacks? She'd also started taking self-defense classes with Darius. I should have demanded Kian watch over her—he was three times her age. Not that blond pretty boy with long hair who took a shine to my... Fuck, she was *my* nothing.

Motherfucker.

It took me a couple of minutes to ease the fire mounting in my chest. It was pointless; I could never manage to extinguish this possessiveness when it came to Reina Romero. I debated hunting down Darius and snapping his neck. It would be one way to end their weekly rendezvous.

I should fucking call Kian and demand Darius be fired. It wouldn't work, but fuck, it would give me a good excuse to go after their company. Darius even refused to collect a fee. I kept sending it, but he returned it each time without fail. We'd been playing this game for the past three years now.

Ironic, really. When my brother was kidnapped by Father's rival, he'd refused to pay the fee.

My mind drifted back to that dark time. I should have been with Dante the day he'd been kidnapped. Instead, I was busy averting my cousin's fucking disaster of a shipment that almost drowned fifty women he was trying to smuggle into Japan for his prostitution ring.

My gut twisted every time I remembered the footage of his kidnapping. Dante was ambushed on his way out of this very nightclub in Trieste. He'd fought like hell but ended up overpowered by a dozen men dressed in combat clothes and black balaclavas.

I watched as he was whacked on the side of his head. He attempted to fight, but his strength failed him, as did his blood-soaked face. They dragged him away and shoved him into a black van. He was gone for two weeks.

I went to pay the ransom myself—because our father refused—in exchange for my brother's life. The brother I got back afterwards wasn't the same. Father laughed it off, calling it the best thing that could have happened to Dante. He claimed it made him stronger.

It'd definitely made him crazier.

I'd tried to get him help and failed. Our mother had remained with him in the castle, ensuring he wouldn't go days without eating. Or inflicting pain on himself. My brother thrived on pain in those days—his own as well as others'. He wanted to be in hell—no, *needed* to be in hell. Mother was the only one who could keep him from spiraling sometimes.

After that, he actually preferred to sleep in the basement. In the dark and cold, away from the world.

I'd visited as much as I could, but I'd rather have gouged my eyes out than sleep in that cursed home. The last time I slept in that fucking place was when I was sixteen.

A doorbell rang, pulling me from the memory of those dark times.

"It's open," I called out. I had a suspicion who it was. Only Dante, Hiroshi, and my mother had access to this building.

"Hello, *musuko*." My mother's soft voice traveled through my penthouse.

Taking a swig of water, I steeled myself and turned around, only to be

greeted by her tension-filled eyes. We had grown distant over the last three years. I couldn't look at her without seeing Reina's shattered face. The way her shoulders had slumped and her soft sobs filled my Paris apartment. The images of her bloodied on the pavement and in the hospital haunted me every night. They were terrible enough without the reminder of who had caused this whole mess.

"Mother."

She hadn't changed. The years had been good to her despite the darkness that seemed to always surround her. The two men—Romero and Leone—who'd twisted her life into what they wanted.

I loved my mother, but I couldn't forgive her for keeping such a big secret from me. Not because I gave a shit who my father was—one was no better than the other—but because it destroyed the little girl with hearts in her eyes.

"Are you here on Omertà business?" She nodded. "Dante said you two have been making progress eliminating human trafficking." Dante had a big mouth. For the past three years, he'd wondered about the riff in our relationship, but my mother kept her promise. Only we knew the truth about my parentage.

"I went to Japan with Hiroshi and got new kimono designs," she continued when I remained silent. She took a hesitant step forward, her face softening.

"I know, he only slacks on his duties when he's with you," I remarked, although there was no bite to my tone.

"I keep telling him maybe he should retire."

I nodded, knowing full well Hiroshi would do whatever he wanted. "Are you two planning on getting married?"

She shook her head. "I'm still legally married to Romero." And there it was. The dark cloud that hovered over us, unresolved and ominous.

"He won't be around much longer," I deadpanned. It didn't matter whether I killed the old man, he would perish on his own. His cancer was eating him up.

Bitter amusement passed through me as silence stretched, masquerading as a calm acceptance, but it couldn't conceal the volatile edge to the tension that bubbled between us.

"If I could go back and change it all, I would," she said.

My mother hadn't changed a bit in recent years. Or the last twenty years

for that matter. Her dark hair was pulled up in two perfect buns on her head, similar to the *odango* style that had become popular in Japanese fashion. But it was the color of her kimono I hated. I had trained myself to ignore the color pink over the last three years. And the scent of cinnamon just about sent me into a fit of rage.

Yes, I had come to earn my fucking nickname.

“Amon, when will you forgive me?” She took another step forward, her posture stiff. “Please, *musuko*. It’s been *years*.”

Forgiveness. If only it were that easy.

“How did you know I was back?” I asked. I’d only arrived late last night.

“Hiroshi mentioned it.” That was precisely the reason I had started to distance Hiroshi from my affairs. His loyalty to me was superseded by his loyalty to my mother. I was happy for her, but it didn’t mean I had to be happy about the man’s constant monitoring of my comings and goings.

All the fucking years of suffering and beatings. She could have stopped it by walking away. Angelo Leone wasn’t even my real father and she let him treat us like shit.

“Is there a reason for your visit?” I asked finally.

She heaved a sigh. “I don’t like this,” she murmured softly. “I want to fix it.”

“Can you turn back time?” I spat out bitterly.

“No, but—”

“Then you can’t fix this.”

Silence stretched, casting shadows and ghosts throughout. It fucking reeked of bitterness, and I didn’t know how to move past it. I’d fucked my half sister. And what was worse... I fucking loved her. The woman who could have stopped it all had held on to her secrets until it was too late.

“You never said she was important to you,” she said quietly. I turned around to stare out the window while silently cursing Marchetti and my brother for asking me to come back to Europe.

Rage clouded my vision and painted the world in crimson like a monster ready to attack, out for blood and murder.

“And you failed to mention—for twenty-three years, might I add—that Tomaso Romero is my biological father,” I said, glancing at her over my shoulder. My words were calm, flat, hiding the razored tension flowing through me.

“How many times can I say it?” she pleaded. “I’m sorry.”

The rage pulsed harder in my gut, expanding and sharpening its claws until it shattered any morals I might've had.

I needed her gone before I said or did anything there would be no coming back from.

“So am I.” For so many fucking things. But most importantly, the fact was that my relationship with my mother was broken and there was no repairing it.

Not in this lifetime.

REINA

On my way to the studio where I knew I'd find Maestro Andrea, I practiced my speech.

Maestro Andrea, stop being an asshole. I shook my head. No, that wouldn't work. *Maestro Andrea, please reconsider your dumb decision in regard to my sister.*

Damn it. It was a good thing I didn't study communications; I was terrible at it. I'd play it by ear, I decided.

Turning the corner, the building appeared in front of me. It was old, but it had been completely renovated and updated with top-notch security. As I made my way up the steps, I steeled my spine.

I just had to get my talk with him over with, and then I'd leave to meet Darius.

My steps echoed through the quiet hallway. Soft murmurs traveled through the air. I could hear another set of footsteps—or two—somewhere in the building, although I couldn't see them.

Maestro Andrea, don't be a dick and give my sister a part in the orchestra. Or else—

I really wanted to say that. Maybe even bring a baseball bat with me to emphasize my seriousness. *French prison, here I come,* I snickered to myself.

"Reina?" A familiar voice pulled me out of thoughts and I lifted my head, coming face-to-face with my father. I stopped. Stared. My papà stood with another man who towered over him.

"Papà, what are you doing here?" My gaze flicked to his friend who watched us curiously, his hands tucked in his pockets. His posture was relaxed, yet I couldn't shake the feeling that it was all for show. He oozed

ruthlessness and danger. “I didn’t know you were in Paris,” I remarked softly.

It didn’t surprise me that he wouldn’t let us know he was in the same city. After all, his underworld activities had always been discreet. Not discreet enough to have saved any of our fates, but this wasn’t the time to dig up old graves.

Papà took a step down, now standing level with me, and pressed a kiss on my cheek. “I had some business in the city but wasn’t planning on staying long. What are you doing here?”

I couldn’t tell him I came to say my piece to Maestro for being a dick to my sister, so I opted for a little white lie. “The venue I lined up for my fashion show fell through. I’m here to check this one out for potential.”

Papà’s brows furrowed. “This building?”

I smiled uncomfortably, meeting Papà’s friend’s gaze. “Yeah, it’s probably not a good spot.” I tilted my head at him. “Hello.”

“Reina, this is a... colleague. Enrico Marchetti.”

“Mr. Marchetti.” I extended my hand and he accepted it. It was only then that his name registered. “Hold on. Like the most prestigious fashion house in Italy? *That* Marchetti?”

“One and the same.” Enrico flashed a smile, and if my heart hadn’t been so utterly broken, I would have probably fallen under this gorgeous man’s spell.

“Wow,” I muttered. “Nice to meet you. I had no idea. I should have pulled on Papà’s connections rather than Grandma’s when looking for a job.”

Mr. Marchetti chuckled deeply. “It’s not too late.”

“Well, unless you have a free venue in the heart of Paris that I could use in four days’ time,” I said with a regretful smile, “I’m afraid it is.”

I was about to address my father when Mr. Marchetti spoke again. “I do, actually. And if it suits your needs, it’s yours to use.”

My eyes widened. “Really?” I breathed, hope blooming in my chest.

The smile he gave me was gorgeous. Unfortunately, my heart didn’t flutter—not even a bit—much to my regret.

“Yes, really. I’d love to see your designs.”

“I’d like to see too,” my papà chimed in, surprising me. “Maybe I’ll stay in Paris for it. I have some business with the Leone brothers anyhow.”

This time, my heart responded. The poor organ stopped pumping, then resumed its beating, fluttering wildly. I immediately squashed it down.

“Thank you, Mr. Marchetti.” It was best that I didn’t acknowledge Papà’s

comment. I just hoped he wouldn't invite the Leone brothers to the event. "About the payment—"

He cut me off. "No payment. When I need a favor, you'll reciprocate."

Alert shot through me. What kind of favor would someone as powerful as Enrico Marchetti need that I could ever help him with? My eyes darted between both men, wondering how to respond. It would seem Papà found nothing out of the ordinary with Marchetti's comment. *How bizarre.*

"Um, as long as it's legal," I muttered, meeting Marchetti's dark eyes.

He chuckled. "Of course." He flicked a look at Papà, then nodded. "I'll work out all the arrangements and give your father the information. Does that sound good?"

I nodded. "Yes, thank you so much."

A few minutes later, I waved goodbye before making my way up the stairs to Maestro Andrea's studio. Could things be looking up?



After my intense discussion—possibly taken as a threat—with Maestro Andrea, I was pumped for my session with Darius.

Dressed in tight black leggings and a pink tank top, I stood in the middle of the mat of the training center that Darius owned. *A dōjō.* The name of the training center wasn't very creative, but it worked. I learned it was the Japanese term for immersive learning and training centers. Even places of meditation.

I'd stretched for the past thirty minutes. I was whirling with ecstatic energy, knowing my fashion show would be happening. Marchetti had come through. Barely two hours after saying goodbye, before I even got to Darius's training center, I had a text message from Papà with an address, date, and time. It was mine for the entire day. Mr. Marchetti was also using his contacts to spread the word about my upcoming show. Still though, I was genuinely concerned about the favor he'd want in return.

"Ready for hand-to-hand combat?" Darius asked, rubbing his hands together, and it worked to pull me from my dwelling thoughts. I groaned. He knew full well I sucked at it and was probably ready to mop the floor with me.

"Can't we stretch some more?"

Darius laughed. The man was ex-Special Forces and could be terrifying when he wanted to be. He was also gorgeous, often drawing appreciative looks from men and women alike. Even now, I could feel them—the French gym fanatics—all gawking at him. To me, he was a piece of home, being that he was a fellow American expat. We shared our love for peanut butter sandwiches, greasy American pizza, and morning cereal.

“And let you off easy?” he retorted wryly. “No chance in hell.”

I rolled my eyes. “I really don’t know why women like you,” I muttered under my breath. “You are borderline sadistic.”

He grinned. “That’s probably *why* they like me.”

“I don’t even want to know what that means.” I shook my head, suppressing a grin. The ladies who came to this center either hoped for an ounce of Darius’s attention or were serious about self-defense. There was no middle ground. I fell in the second group of women. The fact that we got along and Darius had a heart of gold underneath that wide chest was a bonus.

He got in position and I mimicked the movement. Darius had hammered into me that you could tell by looking in your opponent’s eyes what their next move would be. I waited, keeping a keen eye on him.

There it was. Barely a twitch in his forearm muscle, and he attacked. Going on instinct, I sidestepped him.

“Yes!” I exclaimed, only too fucking soon, because he moved again, and before I could blink, he flipped me over. “Ouch,” I grunted, landing on my back.

He chuckled.

“Don’t ever claim your victory before it’s guaranteed.” He extended his hand, and I took it so he could pull me to my feet. “But this wasn’t bad.”

I rubbed my back. “Maybe for you. It was painful for me.”

“You’re getting better.”

I cracked my neck and rolled my shoulders.

“Well, it only took three years.” I kept my eyes on the sparring mats.

“Okay, again,” he commanded. I took a deep breath, slowly exhaling, and brought my focus back to him. “Now, attack me.”

Without another thought, I advanced on him. Just as Darius reached out to grab me, I kicked him between his legs. Unfortunately, he caught my foot, sending me toppling back with a heavy thud, my breath swishing out of my lungs.

“Good job, aim for the balls,” he praised. My eyes locked on the ceiling,

and the flickering and buzzing of the lights managed to ground me. I fucking hated physical activity, but I hated being vulnerable and weak even more.

“I need a smaller man to spar with,” I finally said, finding my voice.

His chuckle filled the air. “You’re stuck with me, whether you like it or not.”

Stifling a wince, I stood up. This training could be brutal, especially when Darius was in a serious kick-ass mood.

“Jesus, I’m dying here and you look like you’re on vacation.”

His lips twitched. “A stinky gym? Not exactly a vacation destination.”

I snickered. “Well, it’s your place.” It wasn’t so bad, and I was sure the sweaty odors couldn’t be helped. There were padded sparring mats everywhere. He also had punching bags in the back two corners, fencing equipment, and then an entire wall covered in knives.

Once in a while, his friends, River and Astor, would come to the gym too. They’d served with Darius in the military and were nowhere near as talkative as their counterpart. At least not to me.

I reached for my phone and checked the time. “It’s not time for a selfie,” he teased.

I rolled my eyes. “I was checking the time, but since you mentioned it—” I grabbed a strand of his blond hair and tugged on it gently, then snapped a picture of us. Grinning wide, I uploaded it onto my Instagram with the caption, “My kind of man. Now let’s see how many women hate me.”

He chuckled, his eyes glimmering. “Or how many men hate me,” he said pointedly. “I’m sure there’ll be one or two who will want to punch me and give me a buzz cut.”

I threw my head back and laughed. “You’d look good even with a smashed face and a buzz cut, Darius.”

“Good to know you approve.”

I was still smiling as I set my phone aside.

“Thanks for doing this, Darius.” Lifting my head, I met his gaze. “I just want you to know I appreciate it.”

“I know.” His eyes were sharp, studying me. For what, I didn’t know. “Although, I can’t take full credit.”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

He tensed slightly before answering. “Someone else hired me to watch over you.”

That caught me completely by surprise. “Who?”

“Amon Leone.” I stilled, having to swallow a few times before I could think straight. It was now the second time today that I heard that last name after three years of silence. The longing in my heart throbbed. The bruises healed, the scars faded, but the ache in my heart remained.

Darius watched me, seeing too much or not enough, I wasn’t certain. “Reina, say something.”

“So you’ve been giving me lessons because he asked you?”

He shook his head. “No. He initially hired our agency to keep you safe.”

“When?”

A muscle twitched in his jaw. “Three years ago.” I wrapped my hands around myself, that familiar ache throbbing in my chest. “He saw the girls bullying you at school and wanted to make sure you’d be safe.”

“Safe?” I felt like a robot going through the motions because I couldn’t let myself feel. It would only spiral into something darker, full of pain. “Those girls were the least of my concerns.”

“He also worried the Brazilian cartel would get to you.”

My grandmother’s warning rang in my ears as I let out a bitter laugh.

“Kind of failed at that, huh?” Before he could say anything else, I forced a smile and gave him a terse nod. “Forget it. Let’s go again. Since you’re getting paid and all.”

I should have known Darius wouldn’t let me off the hook that easily. “Amon’s payments have been rejected for the past thirty months. He’s a persistent motherfucker and insists that we follow his rules. He’s protective of you.” I scoffed at that statement. Amon was the one I needed protection from. “I’m your friend. Heck, I consider myself your big brother.”

Despite the hurt feelings, my lips tugged into a smile. “We could probably pass as siblings,” I noted. “Your hair is as long as mine.”

He let out a sardonic breath. “And as blond as yours.”

My curls had grown out following my impromptu foray into hairdressing all those Christmases ago. I hadn’t let them grow as long as before though. Why? Because it reminded me of the man with galaxies in his eyes. So I kept them shoulder length. I didn’t think I could pull off a buzz cut.

“Does he...” My voice faltered, unsure what I wanted to ask—whether I *should* ask—but curiosity got the best of me. “Does he ask about me?”

Three heartbeats passed before he answered. “No.”

And my still fragile heart broke all over again.

AMON

My fist slammed into my brother's stomach. He grunted at the impact but was quick to return it.

It was his first hit to land out of the three rounds we'd gone so far... and was much needed after my mother's visit.

It was approaching lunchtime, but factoring in the lack of lighting in the basement gym, it might as well have been the middle of the night. No outside light made its way into this hellhole—something we both knew firsthand.

Hit.

I grunted, adrenaline buzzing through me. I paused for a few seconds before shaking it off.

“What's up your ass?” I asked as I countered him with a right hook. He barely dodged it. “Bad day for the Omertà?”

All the leaders of the organization were in an uproar, getting taunted with videos of shit that none of them wanted to share details on. Dante included, since he'd taken the Leone seat at the Omertà table when Father was killed. He even had the tattoo to show for it.

“Something like that.” A hint of amusement shaded his expression despite the direct hit he'd just taken.

“You got another video?”

My brother and the rest of the heads of the Omertà had been getting clipped messages of their worst nightmares and secrets. My brother had received another message with evidence of someone discarding Father's body. Just enough to show they knew who murdered him but not enough to reveal who it was.

The Omertà leaders suspected Tatiana Nikolaev. So did my cousin who

had been trying to get his paws on her. Itsuki was like a spoiled child, always aiming for a way to grab more power, but never succeeding in execution. I'd never let him have it. Firstly, I owed a favor to Illias, and secondly, the world would go down in flames if Itsuki got his filthy hands on it.

Dante took advantage of my distraction, landing a punch. I grunted and let out a low curse. Why in the fuck did I agree to this session? I did enough destruction—to others and myself—at the club.

The boxing gym in Castello del Mare was Dante's latest upgrade to the home we grew up in. By now, he'd transformed every single room in the house. The basement was the last part of the castle to be upgraded.

Understandably so.

"Yes."

I stopped, surprise washing over me. Up until now, Dante had always shared every fucking detail of the videos.

"And?" I urged, sweat dripping down my forehead and coating my back. We'd been working out our frustration in the ring for an hour now.

He just shrugged, his expression blank. "And nothing."

I didn't particularly care for the details of Father's untimely death. The fucker deserved it—we both knew it—but something about my brother was off.

He changed the subject. "How long are you staying?"

"Already eager for me to leave?" I landed another hit with my left fist.

"Fuck, Amon," he wheezed, hunching over with his head between his knees.

I chuckled. "Keep your head in the game, little brother."

"Fuck you." It was nice to finally see him out of breath. "Heard Romero arranged a marriage for Reina. You know anything about that?"

It was the only reason I was back in Europe. The rumor had been circulating for a while that Romero was looking to marry Reina off. That deal would happen only after I ensured her arranged husband deserved her. My chest twisted at the thought of her with anyone else, but I ignored it. I was used to it by now. Three years later and the thought of her falling for someone still filled me with dread.

"Maybe..."

He gave me a knowing look, but there was something else there too. So I punched him again. He let out another grunt when I landed a hit on his lower ribs, but that didn't stop him from laughing at my scowl.

“That heiress will be your downfall, Amon,” he said. “Why don’t you ask Romero to give her to you? He owes you enough.”

There was a long list of reasons, but it started and ended with the fact that we shared a father.

“I’m not interested in marriage,” I grunted.

Another punch. My hardest one yet.

“Then why are you trying to break my ribs?” I ignored his dig and punched him again.

I’d been keeping tabs on Reina since running into her that winter evening at Oba’s. I’d built a whole fucking surveillance company just so I could check on her, ensure she was still alive and unharmed.

If only Dante knew how bad I had it for the girl.

Was it healthy? No. Did it change our blood relations? Fuck no.

But it kept my head screwed on right and allowed me to function each day. So here I was, checking on her as part of my daily routine. The thought of her alone calmed the erratic beat of my heart.

I couldn’t believe how fucking wrong shit had gone for us. Bitterness tasted like acid and ash, consuming me wholly and turning my heart into a black hole.

I blocked his attempted punch.

“Don’t worry.” He gave me that crazy grin of his. “I’m taking care of it.”

“And how is that?”

His nostrils flared and the glint of something diabolical rippled across his eyes. “It’s a secret.”

“I don’t have the patience for your shit, Dante,” I said.

“You need therapy, Amon.”

Who needed therapy when you could join a run-down, asbestos-filled club that allowed you to fight other unhinged assholes? Dante was one to talk, anyway. I couldn’t even tell him about what I did most nights; I knew he’d be a liability and take it too far, getting me kicked out in the process.

“You’re getting too crazy for my liking,” I countered.

“You have no idea,” he said, laughing. “The world is about to go up in flames.”

“Funny.”

My fist connected with his jaw and his laugh faded. He reciprocated with a punch that knocked the air from my lungs.

Our conversation tapered off, replaced by grunts and curses as we

pummeled the hell out of each other.

From the time we were children, Father had us sparring and competing against each other. Our skill set was well-matched in fighting, except when using martial arts. I was good at the latter, Dante was not. When it came to boxing, however, he was better at it than I was. So as we grew older, boxing became our go-to for blowing off steam.

Cross. Slip. Uppercut. Slip. Repeat.

Once we'd both worked the edge off our anger, we took stock of our injuries: a slightly swollen lip for him and bruised ribs for me.

We'd suffered through worse.

"I've missed this," he admitted, and the vulnerability in his tone just about made me spill my guts and tell him why I'd kept my distance from anyone who reminded me of Reina.



Ten minutes later, we were both dressed. He was in his dark blue three-piece suit. For me, it was a head-to-toe black three-piece suit. Although I regularly preferred a button-down, blazer, and jeans. All traces of the unhinged glimmer in his eyes had vanished, replaced by the epitome of the Italian gentleman.

I raised an eyebrow at his cufflinks. Gold lions with sapphire eyes—the Leone family crest.

"Upping your style, I see," I remarked wryly. I wouldn't be caught dead wearing that shit. It reminded me of our fucked-up childhood. It was what'd stuck in my mind as Father whipped our backs until they were raw.

We crossed the gleaming white-and-black marble foyer. "I have to keep up with you. Don't want women eyeing your Japanese-Italian ass while you're in my vicinity."

I ignored his half-baked compliment. Or, knowing Dante, the insult.

"Why the fuck is Marchetti hosting a fashion show?" I questioned instead.

We were taking a private plane to Paris to attend a show. Coincidentally, Reina was supposed to be hosting a fashion show of her own today, but some real estate dickwad canceled the venue at the last minute. Naturally, I had his fortune lightened by several hundred million.

I'd thrown a few opportunities her way in terms of venues, but it was almost as if she knew they'd come from me. She rejected every single one of them.

"It might have to do with his legitimate businesses," he drawled. "Or maybe he wants to stare at the models. How the fuck should I know?"

"And here I thought you knew everything," I deadpanned.

"You pack a mean punch, brother." He rubbed a hand over his jaw. "And yes, I do know everything."

I snorted. "Except what you don't know, which is a shit ton." He flipped me off. "Yours isn't so bad either. My ribs are on fire like Father beat the fucking shit out of me."

There it was. That look again. The shadows in Dante's eyes disappeared as quickly as they'd surfaced.

We exited the castello. "By the way, where's Mother?" he asked.

"With Hiroshi."

He cocked an eyebrow. "Are those two going to get married?" I shrugged. "Good, maybe we'll have a double-wedding thing going on."

God help me with Dante and his cryptic fucking messages.

REINA

M *y chest feels tight.*
My heart is heavy.
My pieces keep moving as a new person is made.
But even the new me insists on loving you,
While convincing myself that I hate you.

I read through my journal for what felt like the millionth time. For comfort. To remind myself why I needed to hate him. To remember how much I loved him.

My eyes lingered on the bracelet I hadn't worn in such a long time. It sat safely tucked within pages colored with pain. Out of sight; out of mind. Except, it didn't exactly work out that way. Yin and yang. Him and me. It started like a perfect love story; it ended like an imperfect tragedy.

I regretted giving him my heart forever. It could have been a love story made for the movie screens, but then so was our tragedy. Grandma always said it was the tragic endings that left a mark.

I'd kept my promise and hadn't cut myself since I killed Leone.

A tremor started in my hands each time I thought about that day, worried it would catch up with me. Black spots swam in my vision as I closed my tattered journal and sat by the window of our little apartment.

The girls claimed I was a fighter, but I wasn't. Not even close.

Clear blue skies stretched over the city of love, but all I saw was my faded reflection in the glass. It stared back, mocking my fake smile. My stupid heart still cried a river of tears, refusing to forget the boy I fell in love with.

Three years had gone by and I still dreamt of him. I still heard him in my

sleep, whispering words of affection, tender musings I couldn't make myself forget no matter how hard I tried.

Tears blurred my vision, sending the lights dancing across the city sky, sparkling like diamonds.

The knot in my chest tightened, and I feared there'd be no untying it, that I'd be left to die with it. Never to feel free and light again.

I let my favorite memory rush in—a guilty pleasure, no matter how painful—as it tended to do when I was feeling particularly sorrowful.

Soft tunes played over the speakers. Amon Leone didn't dance, but he danced with me. Not once but three times now. Under the floating lanterns, on his yacht, and now in his apartment. I loved swaying to the music with his arms around me.

The fact he only danced with me made me feel cherished.

"I like being with you," I whispered, drowning in his dark eyes.

The corner of his lips curved up. "I love being with you." I grinned, feeling like I was floating on the soft cloud. "You and me against the world," he whispered softly.

None of the lights were on in his penthouse, the glow of the moon alone throwing shadows across his handsome face. Despite our disparity in size, we fit perfectly together. At least I thought so. He towered over me, but our bodies molded together like we'd spent our entire lives dancing.

"I have something new for my bucket list," I murmured, watching him.

"Let's hear it." I could hear the smile in his voice and it made my heart do funny things.

"Midnight swim." He studied me in a way that was difficult to read. "Just you and me, the moon and the stars."

It was cheesy, but I didn't care. Besides, it made him smile.

"On one condition," he said.

I grinned. "Name it."

"Tell me why you always talk about galaxies."

My cheeks flamed despite the A/C in his apartment and wearing only his T-shirt.

I tangled my fingers in a fistful of his hair. "From the moment I saw you," I murmured, lifting up on my toes and bringing my lips closer to his, "I saw stars and galaxies in your eyes. I wanted them—you—all for myself."

He let out an amused breath. "Galaxies, huh?"

My heart danced along with our swaying bodies. "Yes," I whispered. "I

was so upset Papà didn't bring you along. I was only six, but I was used to getting what I wanted."

His eyes were stormy with emotion despite his flat voice. "My father would have been upset to lose his punching bags."

My heart squeezed at the hint of abuse he and his brother had been on the receiving end of.

Before I could question him, his eyes glanced above my head, darting to the far right wall. I followed his gaze to the grandfather clock. The one he said his mother gifted him when he moved out on his own.

"We have thirty minutes to get changed into bathing suits," Amon drawled. "Let's cross another item off your bucket list. Swimming at midnight."

Laughing and tripping over our own feet, we rushed to get changed into our bathing suits. "Do I need a cover-up?"

He shook his head, grabbing my hand. "Nobody will see us."

I followed him out of his penthouse. We took the steps two at a time until we ended up on the rooftop.

"Maybe I should have been more specific," I teased. "No kiddie pool."

He laughed, the sound beautiful and perfect. Pushing a wide door with a "Private" sign, we exited onto the rooftop and I gasped. A large infinity pool took up half the penthouse roof while Paris's glimmering lights danced on our mostly bare skin.

"Is it big enough?"

My heart jumped. "Oh, it'll have to do," I said nonchalantly, admiring the view.

Paris in the middle of July was usually hot as Hades, but right now, it was perfect.

I tugged him along, swaying my hips and grinning like a happy fool. Standing on the edge, I said, "On three."

"One—"

I cannonballed into the pool, making a large splash. I came up for air to find him watching me with a smile the size of my grandmother's Malibu estate.

"Three." I slicked my hair back and blinked the water out of my eyes. "The water's perfect. Come in before the clock strikes midnight, my prince."

Broad shoulders. Bronze skin. Sculpted muscles. Amon Leone was absolute perfection in a man, and he was all mine.

He dove headfirst with minimal splash, and when he came up for air, he swam toward me. His powerful, athletic body sliced through the water until he was beside me, a strand of dark hair falling over his forehead.

I reached for it and pushed it out of his face. The water rippled around us, bringing us closer, separating us.

He yanked me to him and I hooked my hands around his neck. He dipped his head, his lips finding mine for a heartbreaking kiss—soft and so gentle.

“I think I’ve been waiting for you my whole life,” I murmured onto his lips.

He went still, his dark gaze consuming me. Then in an aching soft voice, he said, “Me too.”

He fisted his hand in my hair, crushing our mouths together. The warmth I always felt around him erupted into a full-blown volcano, lighting me on fire. Amon plundered my mouth, sending my pulse ricocheting in my throat, the sensitive spot between my legs, my heart.

It was the first time he’d ever kissed me so roughly. Hard. Explosive.

I loved it. I thrived under his control.

My legs hooked around his waist, pressing against him until I wasn’t sure where I ended and he began. A small moan bubbled in my throat when Amon shifted his hips, his hardness rubbing against my core.

My body was pliant under his expert touch. He tasted like green apples and citrus, now my favorite flavor.

He pushed me against the side of the pool, his grip on my hair tightening and his mouth devouring me. His tongue tangled with mine, my moans filling the quiet midnight air.

He pinched my nipple through my bikini top and I arched into his touch. “More, Amon. Please.”

He groaned. “I fucking love when you beg. And my name on your lips—”

A small shiver rippled through my body. “Touch me,” I pleaded.

His fingers trailed down my spine, catching on the back of my bikini and tugging until the material slackened in front of me. My breasts fell free, my nipples now rock hard. I shivered as I locked eyes with him and parted my lips.

He lifted his brow, stilling his touch as if waiting for my permission.

“Don’t stop,” I murmured. He lifted me higher around his torso before taking my nipple in his mouth. I watched him, consumed with the sensation of his muscles maneuvering me and the heat emanating from him. I gasped out

in pleasure as Amon licked my nipple, then bit it gently. I exhaled, pleasure blazing a path to my core.

The friction from our wet bodies caused me to writhe, pushing and pulling for more, more, more. Tiny explosions pulsated throughout me. Releasing my nipple, he thrust a hand into my hair, kissing me deep, his tongue stroking mine. He explored my mouth, tasting and probing. I moaned, and he swallowed it with another kiss.

Sliding down his slick body, I rubbed myself along his swollen cock. My clit pulsed, the throbbing unbearable, the constant hum of my body demanding release.

Amon broke our kiss and, as the newly wanton woman I was, a whimpery protest escaped me. He carried us to the shallow end and sat on the ledge, pulling me into his lap. I straddled him, the water lapping at our waists, and we locked eyes. My breasts grazed against his muscled chest, and he claimed my mouth again.

This time, we kissed desperately. Hungrily. Our breaths mingled. Our tongues tangled. Our hands explored each other in a frenzy.

I rubbed myself against his hardened length.

My hands roamed his body and my lips peppered his golden skin, the taste of him shooting straight to my core. I squealed when I felt his grip on my hips, lifting so I was on all fours. His hand cupped my breast, his thumb brushing my nipple. I closed my eyes, relishing in the sensations traveling through my veins.

His hands ventured lower and he untied my bikini bottoms and pulled them off, leaving me naked in the moonlight. He trailed his gaze down my body, his eyes caressing me, admiring me. It set me ablaze with desire.

He slid between my spread thighs, the water rippling around us, and pulled me down to sit on his face. He thrust his hot tongue into me and I bucked shamelessly, rocking against him as my pleasure built. It took no time to feel my orgasm zip up my spine. Amon spread me wider, licking me furiously.

“You’re perfect,” he whispered hoarsely against my core. “Mine.”

He sucked on my clit hard and the orgasm slammed into me. I cried out as he lapped up my pleasure, thrusting his fingers inside me. My orgasm ripped through me like a tidal wave while I rode it, rocking myself against his mouth. His movements slowed, then completely subsided before he gripped me back onto his lap.

In seconds, he had his cock lined at my entrance. Eyes locked together, he carefully lowered me onto his rock-hard cock. When he pushed against my heat, we dropped our eyes in tandem, watching his length disappear all the way inside me, inch by inch.

Amon gripped my thighs as my pussy pulsed around his cock, chasing the fullness. I went to rock myself against him, but he stopped me.

“Not yet,” he rasped into my ear.

I studied his face—hooded eyes, dark lashes, the tightness of his jaw, the tension in his neck, the muscles rippling his chest.

He was beautiful, and I craved him with a desperation that clawed at my chest.

“Amon,” I moaned. “Please, I need more of you.”

His eyes shot to mine, and then without a warning, he thrust up, filling me to the hilt. My breath hitched and my fingers dug into his shoulders, holding on to him. He repeated the motion, fusing our bodies together and sending my eyes to the back of my head.

His grip on my hips rocked me into motion, grinding me against him. His thrusts filled me completely. He drove in deep, consuming me as he fucked me like there was no tomorrow. Maybe he needed me—craved me—like I needed him.

“You take it so good,” he praised, his mouth wet against my ear. “So fucking right.”

“Amon.” His name was a throaty moan on my lips. “Oh my God.”

“Not God, cinnamon girl.” His raspy voice made me crazy. I was nothing but heat, flame, and pleasure—all for him. “Your pussy was made for me.”

His filthy words. My complete surrender. Our need.

It all felt like making love.

His pelvis ground against mine, spreading molten heat from my clit outward. Every thrust pushed another moan from my lips.

His eyes were feral. “Fucking made for me,” he grunted, pounding into me.

His eyes were full of awe, locked on my bouncing breasts. He moved his hands all over my naked body, stroking, kneading, pinching. His thrusts quickened, my heart pounding out of control. My body started to convulse, my walls clenching around his cock. He thrust in once, twice, and then he groaned his release at the same time I cried out mine, his cock jerking inside me.

I fell against him, my forehead resting against his broad shoulder, our breathing heavy. He was still inside me, his cum dripping down my thighs. I was spent, unable to move or say anything.

The “he fucked my brains out” sentiment finally made sense.

Amon’s strong biceps wrapped around me and he peppered kisses over my skin. Then he cupped my face and kissed me with reverence.

“I would burn down this world for you, cinnamon girl,” he whispered against my lips.

He’d lied that day on the rooftop, the Eiffel Tower in the distance bearing witness to it all. He didn’t burn the world down for me. He burned me and then left me.

He broke his word. He broke *me*. I wouldn’t make the same mistake twice. No man would ever be let into my heart again.

The line between love and hate was thin. I’d heard that my entire life, but I hadn’t understood it. Not until he gifted me heaven and then left me in hell.



The room, music, chatter... everything faded away the moment I spotted him, and my heart skipped. Amon Leone. Although the underworld knew him as Amon Takahashi-Leone, emphasizing his connection to the Yakuza.

What is he doing here?

I would recognize him in total darkness. In every lifetime. Maybe even in a different body. And I would love him until the very last star in the sky burned out into oblivion.

He was my beginning and end.

The truth was that I couldn’t remember a time when I didn’t feel this way. That little girl unknowingly gave her heart to the boy with galaxies in his eyes. If only that girl had been smarter. If only she’d kept her heart locked up.

He was leaning against the wall, even more handsome than the last time I saw him. Three years had gone by, but it took only a glimpse of him to know I hadn’t moved on.

Not that I would admit it to anyone. These feelings for Amon were my curse.

I paused for a minute, taking him in. His dark hair with hues of blue. That

sharp jaw. Those lips that rarely smiled. Those dark eyes that could—

Stop it, Reina.

I didn't need this shit. If it weren't for Enrico Marchetti and Papà—along with some other important Omertà members in attendance—I'd ask security to see him out.

Fuck Amon and his gorgeous ass.

Be that as it may, I couldn't afford to piss off Enrico Marchetti. He'd already done me this massive favor.

Turning my back to Amon—and our past—I made my way over to Mr. Marchetti, wiping my palms on my skirt. It'd be rude not to welcome him and thank him personally.

The man was handsome with jet-black hair sprinkled with silver, a light stubble, and a suave, confident aura. Even his age seemed to work for him.

Inhaling a deep breath into my lungs, I listened to the soft click of my heels against the black marble as I forced each step forward, closing the distance where he and my papà stood.

“Hello, Papà,” I greeted him. It was unusual to see him attend any of my events, but it made sense if one of the Italian kings of the Omertà was here. I pecked his cheek, then turned to Marchetti. “Mr. Marchetti, thank you again for letting me use your venue.”

He tilted his head in acknowledgement. “Of course, happy to help.”

I pushed a curl out of my face, then cleared my throat. “Well, you saved the day.” I smiled, my hand twisting my necklace nervously. Marchetti's eyes darted to it, something dark flickering in their shadows. Papà's face, however, portrayed outright displeasure.

He hated the necklace with a passion, but I refused to let it go.

“Are you having a good visit in Paris?” I asked politely, knowing enough that he usually resided in Italy. Mr. Marchetti nodded. “Do you usually fly from Italy or drive?”

“Fly.” His answer was curt.

He'd probably never taken a commercial flight in his life. That was where these men differed from Papà. He'd never been as loaded as the other men in the Omertà when we were growing up. From what little I knew, Papà's business didn't appear to be as successful.

“Have you talked to Grandma?” I asked. He grunted something in Italian that I didn't understand. He never bothered teaching us and I never bothered learning. “She's been trying to reach you. She said it's urgent.”

“Okay.” The tone of his voice told me he knew and didn’t give a shit. “That woman sure has a knack for nagging.”

I was going to offer a retort, but I paused and took him in. He didn’t look too good. He looked tired, almost sickly. His condition seemed to have worsened from three years ago. Maybe he worked too much or wasn’t taking good care of himself. Although the latter would surprise me, knowing Maria, his housekeeper, always fussed over him.

I sighed. “Doesn’t that come with the territory?”

Grandma might be excellent at nagging, but she was family. Everything she did was for us—Phoenix and me. She might not have his best interest at heart, but she had ours.

I returned my attention to Mr. Marchetti. “Your fashion brand in Italy is amazing,” I commended. “I wrote a paper on it in college. Very impressive how you expanded your fashion house to include luxury goods, making it an internationally recognized name.”

“Did you? Well, now I’m the one impressed,” he said with a smile, and I suspected he was trying to lighten the mood. He didn’t seem like the sort of man who offered genuine smiles to just anyone.

The first sounds of Isla’s violin strings drifted through the air and it was my cue that the show was about to start. “Anyhow, thanks again. I have to get backstage.”

Heck, the man was intense. I turned to go when Papà’s voice stopped me. “Reina, after your show, can you find me? We need to talk.”

I studied him curiously, waiting for him to explain. When he didn’t, I just nodded and rushed away.

For the next hour, I watched with excitement as my designs came to life. Models strutted up and down the catwalk, Phoenix played the piano, the crowd was engaged. My friends even modeled a few pieces before getting back to their instruments. The evening was perfect.

With one small exception.

I sensed his eyes on me the entire time while the words he’d once spoken mocked me silently, testing my resolve.

You and me against the world.

AMON

P icking an empty corner, I leaned against the wall and slid my hands into my pockets while I imagined a world in which we could have a happy ending. One where we weren't related and we could have it all. Together.

You and me against the world. That should have been our motto in life.

The room buzzed with guests, music, and fashion designs. My brother was across the room speaking to Romero and Marchetti. I had no interest in hearing what the fucker had to say.

Instead, my eyes were glued to the catwalk, more specifically the woman who was off-limits to me. She walked across the stage in her favorite color, holding the hand of a little boy who seemed to be upset that he was wearing a suit. The child looked vaguely familiar, but I couldn't focus. All my attention was on her.

She offered him one of those soft, encouraging smiles and murmured something that seemed to soothe the little boy. After they twirled left and right, letting the audience applaud them, she descended the steps, bringing the show to a close.

The moon and stars had nothing on Reina's sparkle. It had been one thousand one hundred and sixty-nine nights since I last held her in my arms and kissed her, and still I thought of her every single time I rested my head on my pillow.

I had come to peace with the truth: I belonged to her. She was the only good thing in my world, and forgetting her was impossible.

As the small orchestra began their set, I watched as Reina made her way to an older woman in the audience, the two chatting and laughing. It took me

a while to realize who the other woman was.

Oba.

The women laughed, exchanged a few words, then Reina ruffled the boy's dark hair and scurried away, unaware of my presence.

A sense of loss washed over me, but I shoved it into a corner where it belonged.

I watched her talking to everyone with a smile on her face. It was easy to spot her in the crowd, what with her pink dress and all those curls. She belonged among the elite.

I found the corners of my lips curving up for the first time in years, seeing my cinnamon girl in that color. Some things never changed.

Pulling out my phone, I typed a quick message to my business manager and instructed him to purchase all of Reina's designs and distribute them among the boutiques in my hotels. They'd add to the collection I'd amassed nicely; my patrons were quite taken with her garments.

"Amon."

I forced a smile on my face as I turned toward Aiden Callahan. Luca DiMauro's brother-in-law who acted as his go-between to the Omertà.

"Callahan."

"I'm surprised to see you here," he remarked with a bored expression, but his eyes were watching everyone intently.

"Likewise."

He shrugged. "Luca called this a shitshow, so of course he thought I'd want to see it."

"And did you?"

His eyes landed on Reina's friends and something flashed in his blue eyes. There was one way a person was able to spot a Callahan: their blue eyes were electric. His sister had them and so did his crazy twin brothers.

"Maybe," he retorted wryly, and I watched him with bemusement. I'd say he was too old for any of Reina's friends, but I spotted Isla ogling Enrico Marchetti earlier, so it was safe to assume the girls knew no bounds. "I'm actually glad I caught you alone."

I cocked a brow. "And why's that?"

I hadn't spent much time in Europe over the last three years. Apparently I needed a whole continent between Reina and myself to get over her. *And look what good that did.*

"Margaret told me you helped her find Luca when Marchetti took him

in.” Wryness touched his words. It was obviously still a sore subject among the Callahans and DiMauros. Luca’s wife, Margaret, was Aiden’s sister. “I won’t forget it.”

I kept my face impassive. “I’d rather you did forget it.” Marchetti wouldn’t be overly pleased if he knew.

His gaze told me he didn’t give a shit what I cared about. It lingered on me for a beat before he shifted it back to the musicians and models on stage.

“Why did you do it?”

My favor to Margaret DiMauro ensured all DiMauro’s shipments were routed to my own ports. It increased my fortune, but that wasn’t the main reason I helped her. It was to ensure I had DiMauro’s family on my side when the time came. And for what I had planned in this life, the time *would* come.

I’d earned favors from many powerful families over the last three years. Having people indebted to you meant power.

“Where are your brothers?” I asked instead. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you without them by your side.”

“Probably stirring up trouble somewhere.”

The Callahan twins should be called the tornado twins. They were a few years older than Dante and me, but the fuckers were so reckless that not even Dante could compete with them.

“You know the Romero girls?” The question caught me off guard. He tilted his head at the stage, where Phoenix played the piano and Isla, Raven, and Athena strummed on their own instruments.

And then there was Reina, working the crowd, glowing like an angel. The eyes of every man in this space gravitated to her.

My jaw clenched as I returned my attention to Aiden. “Not really.”

It was a half-truth. She wasn’t the same person; neither was I. But one thing was true, I’d lived up to my title and become the bitter prince, through and through.

The movement of pink from the corner of my eye caught my attention. I turned my head to find Dante’s hand wrapped around Reina’s wrist.

“Excuse me,” I told Aiden and made my way across the room.

“Your father wants to talk to us,” I heard Dante say.

My jaw locked involuntarily, anger curling my hands into fists.

“I’ll see him later.” She was smiling brightly, her eyes scanning the crowd as though nothing was wrong, but the tension in her shoulders was unmistakable. She hated my brother as much as she hated me.

“Now.” I tensed at the demand in his voice.

“Dante,” I said, a hint of warning in my voice.

Reina’s eyes met mine, and for a moment, I let my mask slip. Her eyes sparkled crystal blue and her cinnamon scent engulfed me. Her golden curls were longer than the last time I saw her, shining brightly. Then as if she remembered her distaste, her eyes became colder than Arctic ice waters, and she turned her head.

My brother tipped his chin and the familiar glimmer in his eyes that spoke of trouble flared. It didn’t escape me that Reina didn’t acknowledge me.

“There you are, brother,” Dante drawled. “You can join in too. We have big news to announce.”

What the fuck was he talking about?

She yanked her wrist out of Dante’s hold. “It’s really not a good time for me, Dante,” she muttered, but before she could take a step, her father appeared.

“Ah, there you are, Reina.”

She let out a small sigh but kept her smile on. Somehow I had a feeling she’d gotten good at hiding behind it. “Hello, Papà.”

Romero’s gaze flickered to my brother and then me. “Dante. Amon. I’m assuming you two have already spoken.” I didn’t like this at all. “Let’s step to the side, shall we?”

“I’ll see you later—” My voice was cold but my insides warmed in her proximity. I couldn’t remain around her for too long without losing my mind. This was the exact reason why I needed continents between us.

“Stay.” Romero’s eyes flashed as he sucked his teeth.

Irritation unfurled in my chest and my hand twitched at his tone, but I didn’t react. I fucking hated being told what to do.

He nudged a hesitant Reina to the left, urging her forward until we weren’t in the middle of all the commotion. Music still played and chatter filled the air.

“What’s this about, Papà?” Frustration flickered across her expression while she kept her back to me. “This event is extremely important. My career hinges on making a good impression.”

Her anger was palpable, multiplying by the second, and it was aimed at all of us, it seemed.

“You aren’t too busy to hear this.” His tone was sharp.

I fucking hated seeing Romero at all, but hearing him talk to *her* like *that*

made me fucking go bananas. I fixed my mask of indifference and crossed my arms, moving to lean against the wall. I couldn't risk killing him now.

Dante let out an amused breath, but the harsh flicker in his eyes didn't escape me.

"Okay, what's this about?" Reina faced her father, her spine so straight it could snap.

"You and Dante are to be married."

Shock. Surprise. Fury.

It all slammed into me at the same time. I had to take a second to swallow my burning rage. It sizzled in my blood and distorted their voices, the furious rush in my ears making it hard to hear. Red crept into my vision until everyone was covered in it. My knuckles turned white from the force of my fists.

My brother could have anything and anyone. Except her.

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, then released it slowly. Reina's voice registered.

"Papà, c-can we please talk about this?" The turmoil in her expression didn't escape me. For a flicker of a second, her blue eyes met mine and pierced me right in the middle of my chest. "Alone."

A corner of Dante's lips lifted, and I wanted nothing more than to punch him, effectively wiping it off his face.

"As your future husband," Dante drawled, "you can say anything in front of me."

My back teeth gritted as I clenched my jaw.

She frowned at Dante before turning her attention back to her father, choosing to ignore us.

"Papà, please. Grandma will never approve."

"She has no say in the matter." Her eyes flashed.

Dante reached out and I grabbed his wrist, pinning him with a touch-her-and-I-will-kill-you look. Brother or no brother. Dante being Dante just grinned, while Reina glared at both of us.

"No." Reina squared her shoulders. The scar on the back of her right shoulder blade caught my eye and my insides coiled at the memory. "I'm not doing it."

That's my girl.

"Reina—"

"Papà, I really need to talk to you," she hissed under her breath. "Alone."

As the two of them walked away, she glanced over her shoulder and flipped us both off.

REINA

My heart was beating so fast I thought it was going to explode from my chest.

Ten lifetimes of separation wouldn't be enough for me to agree to marry Dante Leone.

The thought of shackling myself to him for the rest of my life was as appealing as being dropped into the ocean with concrete blocks tied to my feet.

The moment we were out of the Leones' earshot, I hissed, "Papà, please. Don't make me marry him."

His hands gripped my shoulders as he forced me to face him. "Reina, I've spared you this talk at your grandmother's insistence. But I'm sick." My eyes widened. I'd attributed his weakened and rough shape to the stress from his work. "I'm not going to live much longer. I need you and Phoenix protected, and your marriage to Dante Leone will ensure that protection."

I swallowed and whispered, "You're dying?"

"The doctors gave me another few months at best."

Silence filled the space between us—dark and ominous. The impending death should shake me. Somehow it didn't. I wasn't sure whether it was due to the strain on our relationship over time or because I was reeling from the idea of marrying a Leone.

The freaking brother of the man I loved.

"Is there anything they can do?"

"No."

With one hand in his pants pocket and the other hanging loosely at his side, he looked like he didn't have a care in the world. However, apathy

rolled off him in waves. Whether at me or at life in general, I didn't know.

"I'm sorry, Papà." I took his free hand in mine. He had lost weight and was miles away from the man he'd been when I was a little girl. I used to think of him as larger than life, but that had all changed when Mamma died.

"You have to marry Dante Leone," he insisted, his voice firm. His face was gaunt and his eyes looked like they had sunken into sockets, but still they grew heated. This was important to him. "It's a matter of life and death."

I shook my head.

"I'm so sorry. I want to do what you ask, but I can't. Not like this. Not *him*." My heart was already crushed beneath Amon's heel. Dante would destroy me if he learned I killed their father, no matter how much Amon had let slip about the way he'd treated them growing up. There was no safety in marrying Dante Leone, only utter ruin. I let out a shaky breath, hoping to get through to him one last time. "Please don't make me."

Something flickered across his expression. Regret? I wasn't sure. It was hard to read the man who never had a hand in raising me.

When he said nothing, I whispered, "What about Phoenix?"

She couldn't marry him, but I couldn't hurt her like this. Or leave her alone. I wanted her to find happiness. The two of us should stick together.

Papà misunderstood my comment and answered, "Dante won't marry Phoenix. He finds her lacking." He scoffed, clearly pissed off. "You're our only option, Reina."

How *dare* that fucker? I wanted to storm back over to him and punch him in the face. Maybe choke the living shit out of him while I was at it.

Rather than plot the murder of another Leone, I took a calming breath. "You shouldn't let him talk about her like that." He broke into a coughing fit, and I waited for it to pass before I continued. "I hope you broke his nose for speaking like that about my sister."

The look he gave me told me he didn't. He might've let it slide, but I would be sure to deal with it. Later.

"Papà, me marrying Dante Leone is a mistake," I said softly, locking eyes with him. "A big one." *Because I killed his father. Because I've been with his brother.* It wasn't like I could admit to any of it. "Phoenix and I are safe. We're not part of your world and we don't want to be. Besides, did you forget?"

"Forget what, Reina?"

I let out a frustrated breath. "I agreed to an arranged marriage only so

long as I had the final say in the matter. Dante Leone is a definite ‘no’ from me.”

His eyes locked on me, full of turmoil.

“You’re getting married to him, and that’s final.” I opened my mouth, but before I could say something, he cut me off. “I said *final*, Reina.”

A cold sensation scratched my throat and filled my lungs. Something tasted bitter about marrying Dante, the wrong brother.

I wasn’t ready to accept this.

“No.” My voice was firm and stubborn. *Final*. Two could play in this game.

“If you don’t do it, Phoenix will have to take your place. Considering his high opinion of her”—he gave me a pointed look—“she will be unhappy. He’ll make her life hell.”

His words pierced my chest. He knew I would always protect Phoenix, but even more, I couldn’t allow her to take my place because she was Dante’s half sister. The words from that despicable man, Angelo Leone, trickled into my thoughts. *Phoenix is mine*.

Resigned and overwhelmed, I made my way back to the Leone brothers. One had broken my heart and the other would break my body.

I found them both still leaning against the wall, their positions almost identical and their hands in their pockets. There was no sense hiding my distaste at my current situation. I’d known for a few years that it’d come down to an arranged marriage, but I could’ve never predicted he’d give me to Dante Leone.

He was one of the few men who knew Amon and I were... I didn’t know what to call it. A fling, I guess.

Why would Dante even want me, knowing that? It wasn’t as if I could ask him. I’d agree to this charade for now, but I’d be damned if I let another Leone brother screw me—no, Phoenix *and* me—over.

I had a feeling Dante was playing another angle here, but I couldn’t pinpoint why or what. I gave my head a shake. I’d have to buy time to get to the bottom of it.

“You came to your senses,” Dante said in a deep, sarcastic voice.

A frustrated sound traveled up my throat, but I kept it locked in. Thankfully, Papà answered for me because I couldn’t find the words. At least not the kind that he and Papà wanted to hear.

“She did, Dante.” A spark flickered through Amon’s dark eyes. “We’ll

discuss the plans tomorrow.”

I avoided looking at Amon, but his gaze burned a hole in my cheek.

Dante’s eyes, on the other hand, studied me with an unreadable expression. The only person who knew him enough to decipher it had butchered my heart and left it to rot.

“We should probably set aside some time to get to know each other better, Reina.”

I bit the inside of my cheek to stop the words burning my throat from coming out. Judging by the look in his eyes, he knew exactly how I felt about the idea.

“Sure,” I gritted. “I’ll give you my assistant’s number.”

I didn’t have an assistant, but he didn’t know that. He could call and be unsuccessful in reaching her every time. The joke would be on him.

Papà rubbed his hands together, satisfied with my response and oblivious to my lie.

“Excellent, you two work it out. I’ll let Marchetti know and we’ll set the date.”

I watched him weave through the crowd, catching a slight limp in his gait. Guilt flickered in my chest. In the grand scheme of things, I knew he was trying to protect us in the only way he knew how. He just couldn’t grasp that Phoenix and I didn’t need that kind of protection.

Turning back to face my past and my future, I narrowed my eyes on both of them.

“Now, let’s drop the pretense,” I hissed under my breath. “What the hell do you want, Dante?”

“You, obviously.” His eyes flickered above my head and I followed his gaze to Phoenix. “We’ll be a big happy family.”

“The Leone family’s idea of what qualifies as ‘happy’ is vastly different to ours.”

“We can meet in the middle,” he drawled, ignoring my passive-aggressive jab. “Who knows? Maybe we’ll even fall in love.”

My gaze darted to Amon without my permission, but I quickly averted it and met Dante’s darkness.

“Falling in love is overrated. Not that I’m talking from experience or anything.”

The lie on my tongue was bitter, because even as I spoke those words, I knew my time on this earth would be spent loving only one man.

The one who didn't love me back.

I turned to leave but then changed my mind. There was no time like the present to set boundaries.

My hand flew across the air and connected with his cheek. "Call my sister 'lacking' again and it will be the last word you ever speak. *Capisce?*"

Thank fuck for the *Godfather* movies I watched with my girlfriends, although judging by my fiancé's expression, he didn't appreciate it at all. A muscle in Dante's neck twitched, my handprint already forming on his cheek.

Amon didn't move, and I didn't dare look at him.

Instead, I walked away from the two of them without looking back.

AMON

I watched her walk away while fury and bitterness burned my tongue.

It was the first time in my entire life that I wanted to truly fucking murder Dante. For taking something that should have never been his to look at, never mind touch.

I turned to look at my brother, Reina's handprint visible on his cheek, and even that pissed me off. Because it meant she'd touched him and not me. Jesus fucking Christ. I was losing my goddamn mind.

Maybe I should follow Reina's lead and punch my brother too. I was certainly tempted.

"Is this the reason you asked me to be here?" My voice dripped with tension and unveiled anger.

"I need your help taming her," Dante drawled, but the calculating gleam in his eyes told me there was something I was missing. Whatever the fuck that was.

"I might help her murder you," I gritted.

That only made him grin wider. "I'm looking forward to our match."

I always—fucking always—protected my brother when I could, but at this very moment, I decided I would end his existence on this earth if he touched her. I'd make a corpse out of him. My mind began conjuring all the creative ways I could make him suffer.

Did I want to start with a punch? Would that wipe the damn smirk off his face? I could go back to the old Bratva ways and bury his body in the concrete pad of one of my hotels.

So many violent choices plagued my mind.

"You don't look very happy." Dante was a master of pointing out the

fucking obvious.

I narrowed my eyes. “If you don’t want all your limbs broken, Dante, you will put an end to this.”

He rolled his eyes like I was a nuisance, not the least perturbed. “You know, I believe you, but I honestly don’t give a shit.”

Typical. We both learned apathy too well. Although usually I could tell when Dante was purposely doing something to piss me off. This time I couldn’t.

I faced him. “Why her?”

“Because she’s been part of my videos,” he answered cryptically. So he was using her? “And you have to admit, the girl is gorgeous.”

I ignored his last comment for both our sakes.

“So what, you’re taking suggestions from some fucker who’s sending you videos now?” A few voices reached us, but neither one of us paid them any attention. “Has it ever occurred to you he—or she—might be fucking with you?”

“You can hardly argue evidence,” he deadpanned. “Besides, I talked to Mother and she agreed it might be best to take Reina off the market. To help you move on.”

My body tightened and my knuckles burned, urging me to punch my brother in the middle of the venue.

The knowledge that my mother gave Dante her blessing to marry Reina made me want to do all kinds of shit and none of it would bode well. For any of us.

“Call it off, Dante,” I gritted, my pent-up anger seeping like toxic fumes. “Or I’ll make you regret ever laying eyes on her.”

Instead of heeding the warning, Dante grinned like a maniac. It was the kind of smile he gave the men he was about to kill.

“You’d burn the entire fucking world to ash for a single smile from her, wouldn’t you?”

Was he taunting me?

“I don’t fucking know what you’re playing at,” I growled, “but I suggest you watch yourself, Dante.”

He rubbed a hand across his mouth, almost as if he were fighting off another grin.

As if he read my thoughts, his eyes flashed in challenge.

“You said you’re not interested in marrying Reina,” he deadpanned,

probably eager to start a goddamned scene. “Someone will eventually marry her. So it might as well be me.”

Was this his way of trying to tell me something? Fuck if I could decipher it. I took a few moments to compose myself. This night was important to Reina, and I wasn’t going to be the one to ruin it any more than it already had been.

“*You* can’t have her.”

It made no sense what I was saying, but I was past reason. He wouldn’t have her. I wouldn’t allow it. If I had to, I’d murder him in the church before the priest pronounced them husband and wife.

“And here I thought I was doing you a favor.”

My voice was cold but I let it drip suggestively when I said, “Maybe I’ll do you a solid and see if Phoenix is available for a marriage arrangement?”

Anger flashed in his eyes and his jaw clenched. “You know, you’re lucky you’re my brother. I’ve killed for less. Anyone else—” he gritted, unable to finish the sentence. His expression was dark and unhinged. His temper always flared when it came to Phoenix Romero. He was unwilling to admit it, even to himself, but he was pining for her. “My engagement with Reina isn’t exactly off to the best start, but fuck with me, Amon, and you’ll see how crazy I can get.”

I was getting tired of Dante saying her name if the red spots in my vision were any indication.

A dark smile pulled on the corners of my lips. “Dante, I’ve seen your crazy.” I gave my head a shake so the red mist wouldn’t drench my vision. “But you haven’t seen mine.” Nothing fucked with your brain as much as losing the only thing that mattered. “End. This. Now.”

I moved to leave, but Dante had to have the last word.

“I’ll discuss this with my fiancée.”

I turned on my heel and braced myself, then punched him straight in the face, making him just a little less pretty. Gasps and horrified shrieks traveled through the air but neither one of us paid it any mind, our gazes locked. Blood dripped from his nose and lip, and tomorrow, he’d have one hell of a shiner.

“Cancel this engagement, or you’ll see exactly how the world burns when *I* go fucking crazy,” I bit out.

REINA

I stared after the last model as she made her way out of the building. “Most of the designs I showcased sold out,” I said, though all enthusiasm was missing from my voice. “I only have a few left.”

A round of squeals and congratulations followed, my friends and sister gushing over the night’s success.

“*We should celebrate,*” Phoenix exclaimed.

“Yes, let’s go dancing,” Isla agreed.

I wasn’t in the mood. Not after the news I had gotten from Papà. It ruined my entire evening and dampened my success.

“If you say no, I’m going to scream,” Raven announced, her tone exasperated. “I have to get laid tonight.”

Athena sighed. “Please tell me it has nothing to do with those men who were walking, talking sex—hmm, I mean, red flags.”

Raven just rolled her eyes. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Sure you don’t,” she snickered. “I could literally see you shopping for your next man meal as you strutted around.”

“Oh, and you weren’t?” Isla said, calling Athena out.

She cocked an eyebrow. “I’m a romantic, not a saint.”

“She’s a hopeless romantic with a dirty mind,” Raven drawled.

“*And a pretty sarcastic mouth,*” Phoenix added.

“Dirty mouth too,” Isla added.

“It must be exhausting being a hopeless romantic with a dirty mind and sarcastic mouth,” I pointed out, smiling while my mind whirled in a hundred different directions. Did Grandma know all those years ago that it was Dante Leone who Papà arranged my marriage to? She’d told me of his plans, but

could she have known it was him? Did she agree with this? It seemed unlikely, but it was difficult to say with certainty.

“So are we on or not?” Athena asked.

I blinked, confused. “On for what?”

All of them rolled their eyes. “A night out. Dancing.”

I rolled my shoulders, trying to relieve the stress. “Yes, let’s do it. You go ahead. I’m going to clean up the last few things, then I’ll join you. Marchetti did me a solid, so I want to leave the venue in the same condition as I found it.”

A round of cheers and “attagirl” followed as the girls slipped on their shawls and left the venue. Phoenix stayed behind.

“*What’s bothering you?*” Leave it to my sister to read me like a book. “*I saw you talking with him.*”

I assumed she meant Amon, not Dante.

“It was unexpected,” I murmured, signing. “Seeing him.” She nodded in understanding. “Is that how you feel every time you see Dante?”

Something flickered in her eyes and I dreaded telling her what Papà had done or what I had agreed to. At least for the time being.

“*I’m over him.*” She wasn’t. I knew it because the pain I felt was staring back at me. “*What did Papà have to say to those assholes?*”

My heart drummed painfully against my rib cage, knowing my next words would hurt her. I’d give anything to bear her pain. It was unfair that the two of us had to suffer through this stupid ordeal constructed by a man who was supposed to protect us.

“He arranged a marriage.” Her eyes widened and her whole body stilled. She knew who my intended was even before I added, “To Dante.” I watched as a range of emotions flashed across her expression. Hurt. Disappointment. Anger. Back to pain. “I don’t want to do it,” I whispered. “I’ll find a way out of it, I promise.”

Tears glimmered in her eyes, clawing at my chest and making it bleed all over again.

I wrapped my arms around her, hugging her tightly. Her body trembled, and I squeezed her tighter.

“I’ll fix this somehow,” I whispered, although she couldn’t hear me. Maybe I was making a vow to the universe. It wasn’t fair that we were just pawns to these men. It was like a game of yo-yo when it came to two Leone brothers. They wanted us; they didn’t want us.

Well, we no longer wanted them.

Phoenix took a step back and I signed, “I promise it will be okay. I’ll think of something.”

She pushed a strand of hair out of her face with a trembling hand.

“It doesn’t matter. Even if you do find a way out of it, he still won’t want me.”

“Phoenix...” My hands moved hesitantly. I didn’t know how to warn her about Dante. She had to stay away from him. She was in love with her half-sibling and didn’t even know it. “I think it’s best you keep your distance from Dante Leone.” I realized it sounded harsh, almost as if I was claiming him for myself, so I quickly added, “Our last resort will be to run away. Together.”

“Because you don’t want him?”

“Because marrying him would destroy us both,” I signed. For different reasons, but destroy us nonetheless.

Without another word, she turned around and left.

I stared after her for what seemed like forever when the buzz of my phone startled me.

I reached for it. It was Phoenix.

I slid the message open, my own hands shaking.

I love you, sister.

The phone buzzed again and another message came in.

Strong people break too. Stop trying to carry the weight of the world on your shoulders.

And then my heart broke for an entirely different reason.

I made my way out of the venue, my eyes still burning with unshed tears. For Phoenix. For this fucked-up life. For Papà. Every goddamned thing that I couldn’t fix.

Outside, the cool October air soothed my heated skin. The sounds of the city were strangely calming as I made my way to the club where the girls waited for me. Turning a corner at the end of the street, I collided with something solid and warm.

A breath whooshed out of me and I stumbled back a step.

Green apples and citrus. I didn’t even have to look up to know who stood before me, but when I did, the bustling Paris street melted away.

We stared at each other as a thick, almost suffocating tension surrounded

us.

“Lost, Amon?”

His lips curved up slightly before they flattened into a stern line. I didn’t like the way it set the butterflies fluttering in my stomach free.

“On your way to celebrate?” he countered, glancing at my thigh-high pink boots and pink fitted long-sleeved minidress. It was a perk of hosting fashion shows; there were plenty of clothes at my disposal.

I looked up to see his gaze trail from my heels to the sliver of exposed skin at my thigh. When it finally met mine, darkness sparkled in his eyes.

I let out a sharp, angry huff. “On my way to get as far from you and your brother as possible.”

Taking another step away from him, I went to leave when he grabbed my wrist. “Reina—”

My heart twisted in my chest, stealing my breath. I hated the effect he had on me, the way it felt like I’d been punched in the stomach, but most of all, I hated this longing. I was still attracted to him, despite the shit he’d done. Despite the answers I didn’t have.

Why? What happened to make him change his mind about us?

I wanted to ask him about *that* summer. But how could I bring it up without looking like some pathetic woman who couldn’t move on?

So I stared at him, waiting for him to say something, while he looked at the car beside us like it was the most interesting hunk of metal in the world.

“Will you at least look at me?”

Slipping his hands in his pockets, his gaze found mine. Heavy. Dark. Bottomless. But deep in those dark depths, there was a fire that burned. I could almost feel the heat of it licking my skin. Or maybe it was just my mind playing tricks on me, remembering his touch.

I could hardly breathe around the memories swarming me.

His grip tightened around my wrist. “You look beautiful. So fucking beautiful that it hurts to look at you.”

I blinked, surprise washing over me. I couldn’t do this again. *Wouldn’t* do this again. He’d stepped on my heart, smashed it to pieces.

A bitter laugh tore from my throat. He stood there, less than a foot away in his three-piece suit, looking like a man who promised even more heartache.

I’d suspected I would see him again; we always seemed to find each other. I’d prepared for it, even practiced what I would say. Yet being so close

to him today was too much. It was too overwhelming. My chest tightened as images of us from three years ago flashed through my mind—from our encounter in the garage to the night I went to see him to tell him I was pregnant. When he'd kissed another woman in front of me.

I sobered. It was all the reminder I needed. I pushed the feelings I had for him deep into a dark corner where I hoped they would disappear.

“What do you want, Amon?” Despite the pain and bitterness, my tone was cold. Flat. I should be proud of myself, but I wasn't. I hated this version of myself. “Haven't you done enough?”

Darkness consumed us, snuffing out what was left of my light. I hadn't felt truly alive since the last time he kissed me.

A cool breeze rushed through the street, sweeping me back into the present. Sometimes it was too much work to keep it in the past.

“I'd rather not see you,” I said flatly, “for the rest of my years on this earth.”

I yanked my wrist out of his grip and wrapped my arms around myself for warmth. My dress wasn't thick enough for this October night.

He slid his blazer off his broad shoulders and hooked it over mine. I shrugged, signaling I didn't want it, but the brief contact seared my skin.

“I'm sorry.”

“For what?” I spat out. “For trying to ruin my night even more? It's easily remedied. Get out of my way.”

I went to sidestep him but he blocked my way.

“I'm sorry I hurt you.” Regret and something else flickered in his gaze.

“Hurt me?” I repeated.

I wanted to *scream*. I wanted to claw his heart out. Make him feel this horrible, dark hole he left behind.

“You're three years too late.” My breath came out steady despite the pain pulsing in my chest. “Goodbye, Amon.”

I walked away from him, but the knot in my chest remained.

AMON

I arrived at the warehouse where this week's fight was happening. The club had become my solace, and I'd never been more grateful for it.

Similar ones were scattered around the world, but I usually stuck to the ones in Asia and the States, not wanting to chance running into anyone familiar. My last fight was in New Orleans after I'd gotten Tatiana Nikolaev to safety, and it should've been enough to blow off steam to last me a few months at least.

The events from the past few days had set me on edge though, and I was itching to smash someone's skull in and make them suffer.

The steel doors opened to grant me access. I could already hear the roaring of the crowd and knew tonight would be big. I'd earned myself a reputation over the years, and word traveled fast about each fight.

I stuck to the shadows as I made my way inside, a heady stillness lingering in the air. It was a place of depravity, death, and violence. The pits had been swept out, but they wouldn't remain vacant for long.

"Amon." Kian Cortes's voice traveled through the hollow tunnel. "Nice to see you."

I turned around to find him waiting with arms crossed and brows raised. I wasn't exactly surprised to see him here. Kian had been fighting in the underground circuit for the longest time. We'd run into each other before but had never gone head-to-head. I respected him for the fighter he was, even though his brother was a piece of shit. I didn't hold that against him though; no one knew better than me that you didn't get to pick your family. He cut off all ties with him a long time ago anyway.

"Blowing off some steam?" I inquired. His silver-gray beard hinted at his

age.

“Something like that.”

Kian Cortes, unlike his brother, had a conscience and blamed himself for his baby sister’s disappearance that happened during one of his deployments. This was his way of repenting, and he’d yet to lose a fight. We all carried our crosses in some shape or form.

“Who are you fighting today?”

“Not you,” I said and almost caught a smile on his stoic face.

I started walking toward the back of the warehouse where the bigger fights usually happened.

“Scared?” he said as he fell in step beside me.

“Hardly. Have a death wish?”

He chuckled. “Not today. I’m here for work.” I flicked him a curious glance. “And it involves you.” His eyes met mine, sharp and keen. “Don’t you want to know what it is?”

“Considering you’re here, I’m guessing you’re going to tell me regardless.”

“Smart kid.” My jaw tightened. He might be almost double my age, but I was hardly a kid. I’d lived through enough shit to last me two lifetimes. “Your cousin and my brother are making moves again.”

I stilled, not exactly surprised with that revelation. Lately, Itsuki’d gotten brave, encouraged by his dealings with that lunatic Sofia Volkov. Apparently Perez Cortes belonged in that circle of delusional criminals.

“Thanks for the tip,” I finally told him, eyes scanning for the pit I’d be fighting in.

It didn’t take long for the warehouse to fill up. The sounds of fists hitting flesh filled the air. Sweat and blood stench up the place. People either made money or fought demons here. I’d started in the former group at the age of fourteen and had since graduated to the latter.

What a fucking joke!

Angelo Leone was dead and I was still fighting the devil.

Each pit was filled with fighters. Bare knuckles, no weapons, and no fucking pussies in the rings. The seats in the makeshift arena swelled with spectators, like Romans looking down on their gladiators. The biggest moneymakers were the pits where the only way out was in a coffin.

A blaring sound echoed through the air, signaling it was my turn. I stripped out of my jacket and my shirt, leaving my torso bare, then jumped

down into the pit. A buzz of adrenaline swam through my veins. The fire in my blood simmered, whispering to end my opponent slowly. To make him suffer. To quench this thirst for pain.

The other fighter eyed me warily. I didn't recognize him, but I knew he was a human trafficker. The men who were forced to fight were always branded, this one was no exception. I had no qualms about killing them. In fact, I enjoyed doing so. So I taunted him, waiting for him to make his move.

The stench of blood. Cigarettes. Dimmed lights. It all fed my addiction.

The fucker charged at me, a glint of metal appearing in his hands. I remained in my spot, waiting for him to draw closer, then stepped out of the way at the last minute, swinging my hand against his back and cracking his ribs.

He dropped to the ground with a groan, then rolled around on the floor.

"We're not done," I drawled. "Get up."

He scrambled to his feet, his eyes darting left and right. "Looking for this?" I kicked the knife his way. "Go ahead, pick it up."

His eyes widened, suspicious of my intentions. I stood stoic, letting him grab it. After he picked it up, he whirled around. I stood completely fucking still as he charged. He plunged the knife into my shoulder, but I didn't even flinch.

After all, I'd been trained to push through the pain. I turned, the throbbing in my shoulder stoking the flames of my bitterness.

Straightening, I let the anger frothing inside me burst free.

"My turn," I said, then slammed my fist into his face. *Crack*. Broken jaw. My foot connected with his stomach next, leaving him heaving and clutching his throat. He dropped to his knees, coughing up blood.

Standing right in front of his face, I reached down and wrapped my hand around his neck. His face turned red as I squeezed tighter. He clawed at me, then without a warning, I picked him up and threw him across the pit.

He landed with a thud.

My dick got hard at the mild ache in my muscles, at the fact that blood was about to be spilled at my feet.

He crawled like a bitch, trying to get away, as I made my way over to him. "No, no, no."

I didn't feel an ounce of remorse as I stepped on his hand, breaking his wrist.

I spent the next ten minutes creating a canvas of bruises and broken

bones, ensuring the fucker would bleed out at my feet.

People screamed and shouted. And still, everything in my life remained unresolved.

As the doctor on the fight club's payroll bandaged me up, I couldn't help but find the irony in life. My brother and I were nothing but an investment to Angelo Leone, a man who'd "trained" us with his brutality and cruelty to be his assets. I learned that probably at the same time I learned how to talk. Father invested in us, and he expected a return on his investment. His words; not mine. I never understood what they meant, but when he uttered them, Dante and I knew to nod our heads.

And here I was, right back in another cage.

My mind flickered back to the first time my brother and I talked about running away.

Dante and I sat in the courtyard of our castello after the driver dropped us off from school. Neither one of us was ready to go inside. With the beautiful blue sea on one end, mountains on the other, and colorful gardens in between, the place looked like paradise.

It wasn't.

This home was our personal hell. The Gulf of Trieste sparkled under the bright rays, and the image of a girl with blonde curls and blue eyes danced in my head.

The way she'd laughed—carefree and full of joy—as she slid through the castello with her sister. I often wondered how it would feel. To be so cheerful. To be so normal.

"We should take Mamma and run," I blurted out. "Get the fuck away from him. We'd have our own fortunes, be powerful and independent, and Father can go to hell."

I knew enough to understand my brother and I didn't have a normal childhood. Our father made sure we were all isolated. He was good at reminding us that we were on this planet only to serve him, and that he could get rid of us as easily as he'd given us life.

Dante turned his head to look at me. "Why don't we just kill him? That way we can keep our home."

I glanced around to ensure there was nobody around. If we were overheard and Father learned of our conversation, we'd be beaten black and blue.

"Don't say that shit," I ordered him. "Not yet. Not until we're strong"

enough to seize power.”

Dante’s shoulders slumped and regret instantly inched its way into my chest.

We were being molded into his protégées—yet another form of control. We resisted at every turn. When he felt us slipping from his reins, he’d work at turning us against each other. But he failed at every attempt. Dante and I made a promise long ago that we’d always have each other’s back.

We were brothers and best friends. Nobody and nothing came between us. I jutted my chin in the direction of the place we called home.

“We’ll have to go in eventually.” Dante’s eyes dropped to my forearm, which was still black and blue from Father’s last beating. He wasn’t in much better shape himself. Father hired a professional to teach us how to fight—more accurately, how to beat us up and call it “training.”

Unease slithered down my spine. If our mother weren’t around, we’d have already run. But as it was... our options were limited. She refused to leave him.

I faced him fully and studied his expression. He was Father’s spitting image, but I knew he couldn’t be more different underneath it all. As I stared at my brother’s bruise lurking underneath the collar of his shirt, I could only hope he stayed that way. I didn’t want Father infecting him with his brand of evil.

“Are you really in a rush to get another beating?” I winced at his words. At this point, there wasn’t an area on my body that had been left untouched. Except for my face. Father didn’t like the world to know how deep his cruelty ran. “If you’re so eager, we could have a match here.”

He flipped me off and turned his attention to the sea. Sometimes its beauty was the only thing we had. “At least it’ll be a fair fight between us,” he grumbled. “Father doesn’t fight fair.”

He didn’t. Never had and never would.

“It won’t always be like this.” He nodded wordlessly.

My eyes traveled over the water’s sapphire surface. “We can’t wait until we’re eighteen, we need to start laying the groundwork now. He’s been beating us anyway, so we might as well use him to kickstart our own empires. He’s been busy chasing his mistresses and sampling women in his brothels, he wouldn’t notice a few thousand going missing here and there.”

Dante looked skeptical, but he didn’t disagree with me. He understood it was about survival. Control. Power. I would just need to come up with a plan

he'd get on board with.

“All fixed up.” The doctor’s voice jolted me out of the memory. “Congratulations on the win.”

The win. What a fucking joke. I’d made ten million euros in blood money trying to forget my fucked-up upbringing and the ghosts that haunted me. Was I any better than those human traffickers?

I glanced over my shoulder to ensure the knife didn’t cut into my tattoo. My yin and yang. It matched the one on my bracelet, wrapped around my wrist.

I met the old man’s dark eyes under his bushy gray brows. “Thank you.”

Without further ado, I got out of there.

Twenty minutes later, I entered my darkened penthouse. *This fucking place.*

My feet were heavy as the door shut behind me, leaving me alone with the one ghost I never bothered to chase away. The woman with golden curls haunted me, and I invited the pain it caused.

A gasp reached my ears before I had the chance to whirl around. Standing with a hand over her mouth stood my mother, and for once, she wasn’t in a pink kimono. Instead, she sported black slacks and a crimson blouse.

“Are you okay? Why are you bloody?”

I lowered my eyes robotically to find my shirt stained with blood. The bandage needed changing.

“I’m fine.” I looked her over again. “What’s with your shit? No kimono?”

There were only a handful of times I’d seen my mother not wearing one. Western clothes were never her first choice.

“No kimono.”

Whatever. I didn’t have the patience for her tonight. Hiroshi would alert me if some shit was going on.

“How did you get in?” I’d had all my locks changed. I didn’t want anyone—family or not—entering my space without my permission.

“I picked the lock.” She chewed on her bottom lip, every breath she took pushing me toward annoyance and anger. The earlier fight should have offset these feelings a bit longer, but seeing my mother here—remembering how she gave Dante her blessing to marry Reina—had red drenching my vision.

“It’s not a good idea for you to be here.”

“Dante’s getting married.” Her voice turned brittle. “You have to be there for him. It’s time to make a move on your cousin.”

I started to sidestep her, but she blocked me, her next words piercing an invisible knife into my chest. “She’s not yours to have, Amon.”

“You need to go.” There was an edge of warning in my voice that my mother clearly missed because she grabbed my hand and squeezed it. “Unless you’re ready to tell me the truth, I want you out of my home.”

I should feel regret. Sorrow. Yet I felt absolutely nothing. My mother kept way too many secrets from me, and I was tired of her manipulations.

She held my gaze with a harshness I hadn’t noticed before. “What truth? I told you everything.”

My jaw clenched and my next words were uttered with an unnatural calmness. “You can start with the document you are so desperate for Dante and me to find, and end with telling me why Diana Glasgow accused us of destroying her family.”

My mother’s eyes hardened. “I’m assuming she’s talking about the fact that I sought her daughter out and told her the truth about Romero. She killed herself shortly after.”

I reached out, wrapping my hands around her neck and nearly crushing it in my hand. Her eyes widened, a flicker of fear entering them.

“You did what?”

She swallowed, the movement shifting under my palm. “I told her the truth about Romero.”

“Which is what?” I gritted.

“That he breaks promises.” Another vague comment. No surprise there. “I told her that Angelo would marry Dante to one of her daughters.”

The fucking agreement went that far back? Motherfucker.

“Get out of my home before I say or do something I will regret.” I leveled my voice when I spoke the next words.

REINA

I was a mess.

I'd been up most of the night going crazy with thoughts about how to divert this catastrophe my father had orchestrated.

What the heck was he thinking, arranging a marriage to Dante Leone? Did he think so little of me that he wouldn't even ask for my input?

The success of the fashion show was a distant memory, although it happened less than a day ago. The nightclub outing was short-lived. After I returned home, I'd spent six hours on a cleaning spree, leaving the apartment spotless in time for my friends and sister to stroll in from their walks of shame. Of course, after my berating and their tasteless jokes, they'd all gone to sleep, leaving me alone with my thoughts again.

I flickered a worried look to Phoenix's closed door. She hadn't said much, but the redness around her eyes didn't escape me. I didn't know how to fix any of this.

I couldn't admit to her that Angelo Leone was her father. It would destroy her.

Protect her.

My mother's words were clear as day. She'd known it'd come to this, and it was up to me to fulfill my promise.

My feet silent against the hardwood, I made my way down the hall, passing the single bathroom in our cozy apartment. It looked completely different, but I still saw the body... and what we'd done to it. The other girls had apparently gotten over it after it was completely renovated, but my mind refused to forget the image of bloodied, dismembered limbs.

My hand trembled as it reached the doorknob of Phoenix's bedroom.

Ignoring the way the door creaked because she couldn't hear it, I poked my head in and found my sister curled into a ball, her shoulders shaking with soundless tears.

My heart twisted with pain and I rushed to her bedside, falling down to my knees and wrapping my arms around her. Startled by my presence, she stiffened and met my eyes.

"I'm sorry." My throat squeezed, unable to utter a single word, so I stuck to signing. Just like when we were little girls and we didn't want anyone to know we were awake. *"I'll find a way to fix it all."*

The pain staring back at me was gut-wrenching. It tore at my soul and left it weeping.

"I told you, it won't matter. He doesn't want me."

I wanted to throttle both Leone brothers and make them pay for the pain they'd put us through.

"But you still want him," I pointed out softly. *"You still love him."*

She balled her fists and I imagined the crescent moons she was digging into her palms. *"There is so much I haven't told you."*

I waited for her to continue, but she remained silent.

"You can tell me anything." She was there for me when I needed her. I'd be there for her when she needed me. *"I won't judge, and I won't tell anyone."*

God knew I was the last person on this earth who could judge anyone. Well, anyone but the Leone family.

Her hands trembled visibly as she signed her next words. *"I can't tell you. It breaks me to even think of it, saying it out loud will destroy me."*

I believed her. There was such force behind her words that it hit me straight in my chest and rattled me.

"Tell me how I can help you." I cradled her face, mouthing the words slowly so she could read them. *"Tell me what to do."*

"Don't ask me to come to your wedding," she pleaded. *"I cannot watch you marry him. Seeing you with him will destroy whatever is left of me."*

Whichever path I took, whichever decision I made, I knew that at the end of it all, I would lose her.

Phoenix *would* remain safe no matter what though. Even if it meant I had to kill again.

REINA

My gaze darted to the clock on the wall for the hundredth time. *Five o'clock*. I huffed and pulled at the seam of my skirt, feeling totally out of place. I thought back to my conversation with Phoenix yesterday, to her tearstained face. *I can't tell you*. I'd never felt more disconnected from my big sister, more helpless. Nor could I figure out what she was keeping from me.

Frustration welled in my stomach and I shook the thoughts from my head.

What was *wrong* with this man? The least Dante could do was be punctual. He'd been the one to suggest we get to know each other, yet he was nowhere to be found.

He suggested we grab drinks at the Red Dog. To be exact, his message stated,

You and me. Red Dog. Drinks. Time to get to know me.

I hadn't even bothered questioning. Big mistake.

My reply wasn't extremely heartwarming.

I'm ok not knowing you. I'll meet your cheap ass at Red Dog.

His reply was instant.

No need to be thinking about my ass.

As fucking if.

Firstly, disgusting. Secondly, I wish you'd lose my number.

I guessed my papà gave it to him. I really wished he wouldn't have. Dante's reply didn't take long.

Just be there.

So here I was. This place was a bar fight waiting to happen. It was clear nothing good came from a seedy-looking establishment with "red" in its title. Double red flags when half the patrons were drunk before the lunch service was even over. I should've known better, yet here I was, sitting alone, drinking my hideously expensive Casamara Club.

What had compelled me to agree to this stupid idea?

I wanted to be somewhat tolerant, considering I'd sliced his father to pieces and all. Not exactly a romantic reason, but whatever.

And the freaking bastard was standing me up.

I ignored the curious eyes burning into me when suddenly a body slid onto the barstool next to mine.

My eyes met a set of dark blues.

Dante Leone.

Sculpted cheekbones. Blue eyes. Dark hair. And I felt nothing except irritation. His bad-boy persona might have attracted looks from women—sober and drunk alike—in his sinfully wrapped package, but it had zero impact on me.

"You're half an hour late," I gritted out, barely holding on to my temper.

"I said quarter to five." Dante's casual response was at odds with his tight voice. "I'm right on time."

What. An. Asshole.

"Quarter to five is *four* forty-five," I hissed.

He ignored me, shifting over on his stool and waving the bartender over. "*Bière Brune.*" A dark beer.

"Coming right up."

She batted her lashes, completely ignoring the fact that I was sitting next to him. I should have worn my signature color instead of this black pencil skirt and white blouse. It seemed appropriate considering this was a business arrangement.

"Americans and their weird ways of telling time," he drawled.

A stool screeched along the grimy floor to my right. Glass shattered in the corner where what looked like a group of tourists were enjoying day-drinking *far* too much. Laughter, cursing, and teasing filled the space to the brim.

And all it did was make the tension between Dante and me even more palpable. Was silence always this unbearable, or was it only this way around broody Italians?

The bartender leaned across and handed Dante his drink, giving him a full view of her cleavage.

He sat casually slouched against the bar, a glass dangling from his fingers. His eyes raked over her with a bored expression.

I finished the rest of my drink with a loud gulp, then cleared my throat to gain the attention of Dante's groupie. "Can I get another, please?"

He'd just shown up but I already couldn't wait to be curled up at home with a good book.

"Don't go getting drunk on me, fiancée." Phoenix was in love with Dante, that much was true, but I honestly didn't know what she saw in him. Maybe the bad-boy appeal?

"It's non-alcoholic," I deadpanned just as my phone buzzed. I reached for my purse—at least that was in my favorite color—and dug it out. Just as I did, it lit up with a new text. Eager for a distraction, I read the messages that our group had going on.

My lips tugged up, realizing they were at Oba's. It was the one thing I didn't regret in the whole clusterfuck with Amon. The girls and I frequented Oba's restaurant almost every week, and by the looks of it, Raven was making her karaoke debut.

"So what made you agree to meet me?" he asked, apparently skipping the small talk altogether.

I shrugged. "You asked."

"I bet you'd rather someone else was in my spot."

A lump of emotion clogged my throat, but I ignored the jab and said instead, "You're right. I'd rather have my sister and friends here."

His eyebrows shot up. "At least you're honest about that."

"If you prefer I lie, just say the word. It's not exactly like you're an open book."

I was *awful* company right now.

He flashed a sardonic smile.

"But I bet you and your family have some dirty laundry." I hid behind a frozen smile and guarded expression. In the distance, I heard the door open, and a prickle of awareness settled at the base of my spine. "I bet you, Reina Romero, are full of secrets."

“Don’t give me *too much* credit now,” I muttered dryly.

I lifted my head and shock shot through me when I saw the familiar pools of darkness staring back at me through the bar’s mirrored wall. It was hard to distinguish his features in the dimmed bar and grimy mirror.

How long had he been there?

Instead of looking away, Amon held my gaze, his eyes unreadable and his jaw lined with tension. The air crackled with electricity, lighting up my nerves.

“Your drink.” A loud thud startled me, and I turned to find Dante and our new big-busted friend watching me curiously. I felt like a little kid caught red-handed in a cookie jar.

“Thanks,” I muttered, chancing a glance in my periphery.

But he was gone.

Did my mind conjure the entire scene? No, it couldn’t be. I saw him.

Dante’s laugh pulled my attention and I knew his next words would be fighting ones. “Something catch your fancy?” His tone was drier than the bottom-shelf gin they served in this dive.

Heat warmed my cheeks while my gut churned. Was I being played? Was this all a joke to the Leone brothers?

“I’m hungry,” I grumbled. The sooner we ate, the sooner this evening would be over. “Can we get a menu, please?”

For some reason the bartender seemed surprised. “You plan on eating here?”

Dante leaned his elbows against the bar. “We will. Bring us menus.”

“Please,” I added. Clearly Dante had no manners.

She flicked him an annoyed look. “A server will be right with you.”

And just like that, she lost interest in Dante’s charm—or lack thereof.

It took less than a minute for her to flag down a waiter and send him our way. She tilted her head and a preppy-looking twenty-something blond guy dragged his feet over.

“What can I get you?”

I grinned and raised my glass to my lips, curious to hear what Dante considered “first date” fodder.

“Filet de boeuf with steamed green beans.” I mentally face-palmed myself. The scrawny waiter just stared at him, and I interpreted the look as *Is this guy for real?* “Fine. Burger.” I was getting immense satisfaction at watching Dante’s plan to bring me here backfire. I couldn’t imagine a Red

Dog burger being all that appetizing.

The waiter nodded, then turned to me. “And you?”

“Do you have a menu?” I inquired, and he pointed at the wall behind me. My eyes landed on the chalkboard menu. It looked like it hadn’t been updated since 2008. None of it was tempting.

“Maybe just some french fries,” I murmured.

Noting my lack of enthusiasm, the waiter took a step closer and added, “Would you like to hear the specials?” I smiled politely. “Let’s start with drinks. Sex on the beach is this evening’s—”

He didn’t get to finish the sentence before Dante slammed the guy against the bar, sending a shelf of glasses shattering to the ground. I gasped, blinking vigorously and hoping I was seeing things. Dante pulled a knife out of his holster and shoved it under his chin, pricking the skin just enough to send a drop of blood trickling down his neck.

“Your specials?” he growled, his mouth curved into a feral grin. “You mean the one in your pants?”

“Are you crazy?” I whispered harshly, clutching his forearm and pulling him away. “Let go of him before the cops show up.”

He flicked me a look and I reared back. Something unhinged and demonic stared at me from those dark blue depths. A charged silence crackled between us, and not in a good way. It was about to electrocute me, or him. *Preferably him.*

He put his knife away, but before I could breathe a sigh of relief, the idiot who was supposed to be my fiancé started beating the poor guy with his fists.

I slid off my stool and met the bartender’s stunned expression. “Call the police. This lunatic is all yours.”

Then, gritting my teeth, I looped my bag over my shoulder and whirled around with quick steps, getting out of there like a bat out of hell.

Because one thing was for certain: Dante Leone was the devil reincarnate. There was no way in hell I’d marry him.

REINA

My heels clicked against the pavement as I neared the entrance to my apartment, five shopping bags hanging from my arm.

I dreaded going back.

Phoenix avoided me. Isla was off with her hook-up man. Raven apparently ran into her old flame and was busy extinguishing it. No idea what that meant. Athena remained tight-lipped about whatever the hell she was doing.

And I... I'd spent the morning on a shopping spree attempting to forget about yesterday's disaster date.

I entered the lobby of our building and stepped into the elevator. The doors began to close when an expensive-looking boot shot out. My eyes slowly rose from the boot wedged between the metal doors, then traveled up the long, muscular, jeans-wearing leg attached. That intoxicating citrusy scent reached my nostrils and I squeezed my eyes shut. I knew who that boot belonged to.

Amon fucking Leone.

I raised my head and met a slightly battered face. A muscle pulsed in his jaw and an angry flush branded his thick neck. *Welp. This is new.*

"Good date last night?" His voice was deep, his gaze caressing mine.

Oh, so this was about his brother and me.

"It was," I quipped, flashing him a sweet smile. "I can't wait for a repeat." *Fucking not.* I let my gaze travel over the length of him. "Although it looks like *you* had a rough night yourself."

A slow smile—the kind that prickled the hair on my neck—pulled at the corners of his mouth. My heart sped up into a breathless rhythm and heat

rushed beneath my skin, all the way down to my toes. He turned to face the elevator doors, and before I could think about what I was doing, my gaze traveled down his body. Broad shoulders. Smooth muscles. A sculpted ass no man had any right to have.

I swallowed. God help me. Only he seemed able to ignite this lust.

“You won’t be going on any more dates with my brother,” he commanded, his tone sharp and self-righteous. My spine hardened into a stiff board.

“Actually, I will,” I gritted, glaring at him. “In case it escaped you, I’m marrying him.”

Sure, I was working out how to get out of the arrangement, but I wouldn’t be sharing that detail with this man. Regardless of the fucked-up sibling status between Phoenix and Dante, I couldn’t bear to be the one to hurt Phoenix.

“You. Will. Not.” Amon turned and took a step toward me. A small one, just enough to make me crane my neck to meet his gaze and for the tips of his shoes to kiss mine. It could barely be called a touch, but it stoked the embers burning through my veins.

“I will.” I tilted my chin in defiance, probably looking like a spoiled brat, but I didn’t care. Instead, I focused on those endless midnight eyes drawing me in. “Don’t come around if you don’t like it. In fact, I’m telling you it’s best you don’t come around—period. I’m marrying your brother.” Years of pent-up anger, sorrow, and animosity rose up, and the broken part of me wanted to hurt him. Just like he’d hurt me. I almost died while he held and kissed another woman. After he promised me forever. “We’ll be busy having sex, lots and lots of it.”

Fucking disgusting.

The thought of sex and Dante in the same sentence made me want to barf, but I focused on the exhilaration of revenge. No matter how small or insignificant it was. Amon didn’t need to know that I’d rather slice my own throat than ever be intimate with his crazy brother.

“In fact, now that I’m more experienced,” I taunted sweetly, “I’m pretty sure it’ll be a lot more enjoyable.”

Fury carved savage lines into his beautiful face, and the kindled heat in my lower belly warned I was too close to temptation.

“Careful, Reina,” he said dryly, his tone dark and smoky. There was also the hint of a threat lying beneath the surface that didn’t escape me. “Push me

too far and we might cross a line beyond the point of return.”

It was a warning, not a proclamation of love. It wasn't even a seduction. Then why oh why did it set an inferno raging through me?

I shrugged, feigning indifference. “We crossed that line three years ago,” I reminded him coldly. “Move on, Amon. I did.”

The elevator dinged open and I stepped out, walking backward.

He took a small step forward. I took one back. He took another step, and my back hit the door to my apartment.

“It's up to you what you do,” he drawled, his darkness swirling around us. “But I won't hesitate to resort to drastic measures if you don't break it off with Dante.”

We stared at each other, distinct longing hanging in the air. At least in my soul. My heart drummed in my chest. I couldn't breathe while the threat snuffed out all the oxygen in this hallway.

“Is that the reason you're here?” I raised a brow in challenge. “Or is there something else you want?”

I applauded my courage, recognizing at the same time how stupid it was. There were so many layers of animosity between us that one wrong move would cause it to detonate.

“Marry him and I'll make you a widow before you can say ‘I do,’ so help me God.”

He turned around, leaving me dumbfounded.

It occurred to me then that maybe the old Amon was gone, and a true bitter prince had taken his place.



After my little incident with Amon, I went into turbo cleaning and redecorating mode. Again. It was my stress reliever, even more so since I promised myself I would stop cutting.

I started with my room, then moved on to the bathroom and kitchen, until I found myself rearranging the living room. Again.

You and me against the world.

Why did those words haunt me? I could feel the breeze, smell his scent and feel his touch when he promised me forever. It ate at me.

The noise buzzed in my ears. Images flashed in my mind. Rustled sheets.

Tangled bodies, his covering mine. So heavy. So perfect.

The doorbell rang, ripping me from my X-rated thoughts.

I finished wiping the kitchen counter, quickly washed my hands, and went to open the door.

My heart dropped to my toes. *Oh. My. Freaking. God.*

This couldn't be happening. Not today.

"Hello, fiancée." I groaned. I couldn't deal with seeing both Leone brothers on the same day, so on instinct I tried to shut the door on him, but he kept it open with a flat palm.

It reminded me of a similar situation three years ago, and my pulse leapt as memories invaded.

"Don't be like that, Reina," he drawled, a gleam in his eyes setting me on edge. Dante stood in the hallway, donning his three-piece suit and an attitude that could easily destroy a girl with an open heart. "I thought we could give our date another try."

He leaned against the doorway and brought a bouquet of red roses forward. I still didn't understand what Phoenix saw in him, but somehow it didn't surprise me that she had fallen for him, but I wouldn't easily forget what he'd done.

"What?" I muttered. "Beating a waiter for offering me a list of specials last night wasn't good enough?"

It was exactly what happened. We never even made it to the main course. I did *not* want a repeat of that.

His gaze flashed with something sardonic. "I don't like people looking at what's mine."

I scoffed. "I'm not yours. Never have been; never will be."

I took a step back as he entered my apartment. The door shut behind him with a soft click and the situation had beads of sweat gathering at my temples. Dante was a younger version of his father, and something about it had never sat well with me.

He followed me as I retreated and I felt the backs of my calves brush up against the couch as I kept my eyes on him.

"Not yet." Every fiber of my being revolted at the idea of being tied to Dante Leone. While it had felt natural—right—with Amon, it wasn't that way with his brother. My back hit the hallway wall. "Does it scare you?"

"What?" I rasped.

"Belonging to me."

I nodded. "Yes."

"Why?" *Because it feels wrong. Because my sister loves you. Because my sister is your half sister.*

"I don't know," I said, quieting my racing thoughts.

He pressed his hands against the wall on either side of me. "By the time we're done, Reina Romero, I'll dig up every secret you're keeping from me."

I shivered as his words called to mind the one secret that would surely get me killed.

"I don't want another date with you, Dante," I said with a measured tone, hoping he couldn't see the fear in my eyes.

I remained still, waiting for him to do or say something, but then he suddenly stepped away and I drew a deep breath into my lungs.

He strode into the living room, his gaze taking the apartment in.

"Just you home?" I nodded, wiping the sweat from my brow. "Where's your sister?"

I stiffened but kept my face impassive. "Out."

This whole thing was beyond messed up. Amon and I had a thing. Dante and Phoenix had a thing. And now... what? We'd play swapsies?

"Why are you here, Dante?" I asked, shifting around the living room and standing next to a vase. If he tried something, I'd shatter it against his skull.

God, somehow it always seemed to come back to a vase, didn't it?

He studied me coldly. It was clinical, almost as if he were observing an animal, careful not to make any sudden movements.

"Maybe my brother was all wrong for you," Dante drawled with a smirk that I guessed he thought was sexy. Or maybe he was purposely irritating me, I couldn't tell. "There could be another true love waiting for you."

My mouth parted in shock. I had to be hallucinating. "Excuse me?"

"I could be better than him. I could be your true love, doll face." *Huh?* Then, as if he slipped, he added, "No, doll face isn't right. Maybe I should call you sunshine?"

This whole conversation was bizarre and random. Almost as if he was testing me.

"How about you don't call me anything at all?" I said incredulously. Both nicknames were hideous. The Leone brothers had my head spinning today. "What are you saying, Dante?"

"Do you want to kiss me, sunshine?"

"No, I don't want to kiss you," I snapped. Ugh, the thought of his lips on

mine made me want to puke. Disgusting.

He slipped his hands into his pockets. “You don’t sound too sure about it.”

His confidence would be his downfall. “I am,” I deadpanned. “Please stop being delusional. It will never be my desire to kiss you.”

Good God, and this guy was related to Phoenix? At least she got all the good genes from our mamma. Dante was clearly batshit crazy.

“You might not like me, but I bet you’d enjoy it.”

He stepped forward and my hand shot out, my palm landing on his chest, keeping him at bay. “Don’t even think about it,” I gritted. “We don’t even know each other.”

“Exactly.”

“Take another step, Dante, and I swear I’ll smash something upside your head.”

He let out a dark chuckle. “I believe you would. No matter, I didn’t want to kiss you anyway.”

God help me. How in the hell would I get out of this mess?

AMON

Weeks had gone by since I'd seen her. Three and a half since the wedding announcement. A week and a half since I threatened to make her a widow. I was willing to tolerate anything but her marrying my brother.

It would happen over my goddamned dead body.

Did I understand that the woman was my sister? Abso-fucking-lutely. That didn't stop me from seeing her as the sole subject of my fucked-up desire. I abandoned all efforts of searching for another woman to fuck. My pent-up frustration had officially reached new heights.

So naturally, I'd been sabotaging the wedding plans from every angle. Venue canceled. Announcements butchered. Invitations intercepted. The wedding dress—fucking torched.

The complex feelings I had for her refused to be erased. Now, I was on another fucking continent, so I wouldn't risk doing anything stupid. Hopefully the shit I had to take care of for the Yakuza in Japan would clear my mind, however briefly. After a grueling few days of inspecting my warehouses and shipments coming from Canada and Colombia, I stopped at one of my luxury hotels in Tokyo.

I stood in the small boutique and stared at Reina's designs hanging off the racks, imagining her beaming like a ray of sunshine at all the customers who passed through. I watched as one admired them, suppressing my smile. Her clothes were the fastest-selling products in every one of my stores—not the Patek Phillippe watches, not the Tiffany jewelry, not the Berluti leather goods.

They were a reflection of her, an extension of her. Her creativity shined through the cheerful colors and intricate patterns that made up her designs.

Every hotel I owned carried her brand. It was my small way of helping her kick-start her career in Asia.

My phone beeped and I lowered my gaze to it. I frowned, seeing that the message was from Illias Konstantin, requesting a meeting.

I wasn't in the mood for anyone's shit, including the Pakhan who now owed me several favors for protecting his new bride, Tatiana Nikolaev.

As if the universe were deciding to fuck with me, I noticed some commotion by the lobby. There stood my cousin and his entourage, wobbling down the luxurious quartz floors of my hotel.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" was my greeting to Itsuki.

My outburst was something he was unused to seeing from me, particularly in one of my legitimate establishments. He and his men froze for a moment before they got themselves together.

"It's about the cartels—" Itsuki started.

I growled, effectively cutting him off. "It better not be the Brazilians." I took a step forward, towering over him. "And you better not be making any deals with them."

My relationship with my cousin had evolved in recent years. Yes, theoretically I was his right-hand man, but the power had shifted between us. He had even less of it now that he continuously failed to deliver results to the Yakuza—something I may have had a direct influence on.

Bottom line, his own organization had started to see him as a problem, so I swooped in at the perfect time. When he was most vulnerable.

"Don't worry, boss. We didn't meet with them." This came from Itsuki's fifth man in command. Or was it sixth? No matter, based on the glare my cousin just shot him, he'd soon be history too.

"He's not the boss," my cousin snapped. Color me surprised to hear my cousin had been stirring shit again. It was the only thing he was good at. "I hear Romero's daughter and your brother are to be married."

He attempted to stand straighter, legs shoulder width apart. I truly believed he practiced various stances in front of the mirror. It was obvious his eyes didn't work well though, because he failed to see how stupid he looked.

"Is there an actual reason you are here, Itsuki, or are you just wasting my time?" I said while making a mental note to check Perez Cortes and his men's movements. He rarely left Brazil, usually sending his minions to do his bidding. He'd been mostly quiet over the last three years, although that could have been strategic.

The Yakuza still dealt in flesh peddling—much to my and Dante’s dismay—but there were also weapon and drug dealings. Human trafficking and drugs were the only thing he had in common with the cartel. I limited my illegal business to weapons and drugs, and laundering that income through my legal venues like casinos and hotels.

“I need to know why your brother would want your leftovers.” Itsuki was clearly in a pissy mood. “She and her sister are sought after by the cartels. The only reason I supported the ‘hands off’ rule was because you claimed she was yours.”

So my gut was right, the fucker wanted open season on Romero’s daughters.

“Don’t worry about Romero’s daughters,” I deadpanned. “Or it might be the last thing you do on this earth.”

“They’re worth millions!” *Nothing new*. Except, something nagged at me. The cartel was never focused on a single person as much as they were on Reina. I’d always had a feeling there was more than met the eye when it came to Romero and his girls. I just couldn’t figure out what.

I made a mental note to open that file back up with my security team when I was back in Europe. Until then, I’d have to keep my poker face.

“Excuse me. I have more real work to do than gossiping with you.” I narrowed my eyes on him in warning. “Don’t. Touch. Them. If I hear you’re working a deal that involves them, you won’t like what’s coming next.”

As I turned my back to him and strode away, my phone buzzed again with another message from Konstantin. I checked it and it didn’t surprise me he was cashing in on his debt.

You’ll want to hear what I have to say.

I typed a message back. There was no way in hell I’d meet him in Russia. He’d have to meet me on my turf.

Meet me at my place in the Philippines.

I was certain that through his extensive resources, Illias knew exactly where to find me.



The crystal blue waters shimmered under the horizon. This island was my slice of heaven.

I stood on the front landing of my manor, watching the car make its way toward me. It no doubt housed the Pakhan and his trusted second, Boris.

The car came to a stop and two figures exited. Just as I guessed, Boris was at Illias's back, ready to pounce. Why? I had no fucking idea since it was Konstantin who asked to see me, not the other way around. We'd been more or less friends, as friendly as possible in the criminal world.

The two of them stepped forward. "Just you," I told the Pakhan.

Boris immediately objected. "I'm coming too."

"No."

I didn't react when Boris reached for his weapon. He'd be dead before ever touching it if my highly trained snipers securing the property had anything to do with it, but Konstantin stopped him before it could escalate. "Stay here."

Turning around, I headed inside. Illias needed something from me, so I trusted him not to shoot me in the back.

"If I wanted you dead, I'd have seized your weapon," I told him when I sensed his hesitation. "And you wouldn't be standing behind me."

Besides, there were days where I wondered whether death wouldn't be a welcome reprieve. The war would start the moment Dante slipped a ring on Reina's finger. Fuck all relations on every fucking side.

"Good to know," he replied wryly. "Although I don't have a habit of shooting people in the back."

I glanced up, registering the men stationed along my roof following Konstantin's steps like shadows.

Once we made it to the opposite side of the house, we exited onto the terrace. The ocean surrounded the property from all three sides, and the temperatures were warm but not unbearable. You could forget about the Yakuza, Omertà, and every other fucking affliction when here.

"You have yourself a slice of paradise."

"Yet you hate it," I noted dryly.

He shrugged. "What can I say? I prefer snow and Siberian temperatures."

I extended my hand, signaling for him to sit down. Silence stretched while golden curls and blue eyes played in my mind. I was given intel on Dante's visit to Reina's apartment a few weeks ago. He'd spent a good half hour there, and my head hadn't been playing nice ever since, taunting me

with nauseating images.

I didn't know why life had to play such a fucked-up game with us.

I sat back, my hands clutching the armrest. I had to get this meeting with Illias over so I could check on Reina. I wouldn't put it past Dante's fucking crazy ass to elope with her.

"I can't help you with the Yakuza," I said, my voice cold.

It didn't escape me that his eyes flicked to my hands. "Maybe we can help each other."

Our eyes locked, my lips curving into a cold smile. Nobody could help me. Not unless they absolved me of my blood ties.

"And how do you figure that?"

"How about we cut the bullshit?"

I didn't blink.

"Be my guest," I drawled, slightly annoyed.

I refused to play anyone's game anymore. For all I cared, the world could burn and I'd only move a finger to save the girl with golden locks.

"I got my hands on the agreement Leone and Romero drafted, tying your families together." If a person could die from a glare, Illias Konstantin would be a corpse. "I found a loophole, and I have a plan B that will ensure Reina never marries your brother."

"Really?" I said, letting out a sardonic breath. "And let me guess, in the midst of it all, you'll get me killed. If not by Marchetti, then by my cousin."

"I'll kill your cousin. You'll take over as head of the Yakuza. You're aiming for it anyhow. I'm probably speeding it up by a few months." I kept my expression a mask. "Romero is dying. I'll make his passing more bearable and expeditious. You'll take his seat at the table."

"If Marchetti hears this, you'll be dead before you get back to Russia," I drawled, not letting myself take the bait.

If it were that easy, I would have done it three years ago. Kill the enemy. Kill Romero. And yet, I *still* wouldn't get Reina.

"He's never going to get wind of it because thanks to me, Reina Romero will marry you, not your brother." He pulled out an envelope and slid it across the table. "And this is the evidence that will make Marchetti change his mind."

I reached for the envelope and opened it, under Konstantin's watchful eye.

My eyes skimmed over the pages. The agreement between the Leone and

Romero families wasn't signed by Angelo Leone. The signature was forged by Dante. We'd done it so many times I was able to spot it straight away.

"Are you sure this is right?" I questioned Illias.

"Of course, I'm sure." Illias's confidence was unmistakable and I was about five seconds away from losing my shit. Dante made this agreement with Romero. It had to be, otherwise why would his forged signature stare back at me. "Check the next document."

I choked on my fury, but I shoved it into a deep, dark corner. For now.

I started reading the next document. Reina's birth certificate and it was then that my heart fucking stopped. Anger burned in my throat. I read it twice, three times. The paper became impossible to read with how hard my hands had begun to shake.

Reina Romero was Angelo Leone's daughter. The illegitimate daughter. Most importantly, she wasn't my half sister. We weren't related.

Red spots swam in my vision. Fire burned in my blood as I stared at the paper far longer than necessary in an attempt to gather my bearings. After a long stretch of silence, I raised my head to meet Illias's eyes.

"Who knows about this?" I bit out, anger burning my throat.

The corner of his lips lifted. "Romero knows one of the girls isn't his. I suspect he doesn't know there was something between Grace and Angelo Leone, otherwise he wouldn't have agreed to Reina's marriage to Dante, considering they're half-siblings. I suspect Angelo knew, although I don't understand why he agreed to make a contract arrangement with either of Romero's kids. Unless for some reason he suspected Phoenix to be his." His eyes hardened. "It's hard to tell without questioning the dead man."

Indeed. But even I had to believe Angelo Leone, for all his cruelty, wouldn't have tied Dante to his half sister. Although if that signature was anything to go by, Angelo wasn't the one to arrange the marriage in the first place.

Damn it, Dante! What the fuck are you up to?

I moved on to the next document. The marriage certificate between my mother and Romero, along with my own birth certificate.

It meant I was the legitimate son and Reina—

Fuck, Reina and her sister were the illegitimate daughters. Romero and my mother had gotten married and never divorced.

Was this the document my mother was after? She must have known it all this time. We always assumed it was Angelo Leone who didn't want to marry

Hana Takahashi, when in fact, it was the other way around. My mother *couldn't* get married because she already was.

No wonder she and Hiroshi hadn't made their relationship official.

"Do we have a deal?" Illias drawled, probably smug with himself despite having no clue how valuable this information was to me, on so many levels. I didn't give a shit though. Cinnamon girl would be mine, and this time, I would never let go.

"We have a deal." I would take my kingdom back. "But we do it my way."

He nodded.

There was only one thing left to do. Kidnap my queen.

REINA

Days stretched. Nights tortured.

The weeks since the engagement was announced had slipped by in a whirlwind until there were no more days and nights left. Christmas was a few weeks away, although the holiday spirit was nowhere to be found.

Isla had gotten married and moved to Italy, Raven and Athena seemed to be distracted with their own issues, and Phoenix had been busy with holiday concerts. It turned out my conversation with Maestro Andrea was beneficial. Although it only disguised the tension between us.

My rehearsal dinner was mere days away, followed then by the wedding that I still hadn't found a way out of.

Grandma had no way of stopping this disaster train. We'd encountered a few roadblocks with invitations getting lost in the mail, my wedding dress disappearing, and everything seeming to go astray. No complaints from me though. Many from Dante. The guy was doing everything to expedite it.

But that was neither here nor there. We had a different—more important—problem on our hands. Getting rid of Angelo Leone's remains by burning them—apparently.

"I'm telling you," Isla protested weakly, all of us piled in our apartment's living room. Athena had her laptop open, getting her words in before her editor could hound her any more. Raven and I had our sketchbooks open in our laps. Isla and Phoenix were the only ones focused on the topic. "Sasha Nikolaev and his brother said only burning a body will eliminate any traces of DNA."

Isla looked good, albeit tired and healing. She was back in Paris with her husband, none other than Enrico Marchetti, her mystery man. At least

someone was lucky in love. After a few obstacles, Enrico Marchetti turned out to be her fairy-tale man.

“Isn’t it sort of a moot point?” Athena whispered, although it was just the five of us inside the apartment. Isla’s husband dropped her off, then stationed two men in the hallway and another four in front of the building to ensure her safety. “We shipped his dick to his family.”

“So they knew not to search for him,” Raven said exasperatedly. “No dick, no life.”

In hindsight, it was a dumb thing to do.

“Well, technically, I think you can live without a dick,” Athena said, taking a big gulp of her mojito and refilling the glass. “I researched it for one of my books.” When we stared blankly at her, she added defensively, “What? I had a scenario where a woman cut off her husband’s penis. I needed to know.”

“Jesus, should we call you Lorena Bobbitt?” Raven muttered.

Athena just waved her hand, unconcerned with her comment. If anyone was to cut a man’s dick off, Raven fit the personality. Athena definitely didn’t.

I took a gulp of my beer, then returned my attention to my ball gown design. It was the only thing that seemed to be going well lately. Every one of my designs seemed to sell the moment my distributors put it up. I had to take a separate order on the side for Tatiana Nikolaev.

What was that saying? The moment one area of your life went well, another went to shit?

And that was exactly what was happening. Isla thought we should go snatch up that damn body and burn it. She even refused alcohol, she was that serious. The rest of the girls had been sipping on mojitos all day. It was one of those days—possibly weeks—that only rum could fix.

“Did you move away from romance to start writing murder mysteries?” I questioned, my tone slightly sarcastic.

She rolled her eyes. “No.”

“I want to know how that guy lived with no penis and two balls,” Raven muttered.

“That’s really something I don’t need to know,” Isla said.

“*One less man to fuck around,*” Phoenix signed, her shoulders vibrating with a snicker. “*Every man should have his cock cut off.*”

My sister kept a brave face, but I knew she was hurting, and it was killing

me that I had no solution to our predicament.

“Hmm, I have to google that,” Raven said, reaching for her cell.

Isla waved her hand. “Forget penises and balls. Let’s get back to the main point here.”

Grunts echoed through our apartment. Nobody wanted to go back to the catacombs; they were creepy as hell.

“*How are we going to do it?*” Phoenix asked. “*Your husband has bodyguards, and you’re still on the mend.*”

A month ago Isla was kidnapped by Sofia Volkov while in Italy. The crazy wannabe Pakhan really did a number on her, leaving scars behind that she was busy healing. It made her husband over-the-top protective, not that I could blame him.

“I’ll just have to do it alone,” I stated matter-of-factly. Even without guards, Isla didn’t look capable of trenching through Paris’s underground. In retrospect, I wished we hadn’t shoved his body in the world’s largest historic gravesite. Even though it *had* seemed like a genius idea at the time—put the dead body with all the other dead bodies, may the bastard *not* rest in peace—it was now proving to be a logistical nightmare.

The joke was on us.

“Nobody has found it,” I murmured and signed at the same time. “Isn’t it just smarter to let it rot? You’re being paranoid.”

Four sets of eyes landed on me.

“If we burn him, there’ll be no evidence,” Isla claimed stubbornly.

“*We should leave it,*” my sister agreed with me. “*You want that asshole to be the reason we get caught and sent to prison? Nobody checks the DNA of the bones buried in those catacombs.*”

Phoenix had a valid point. The tunnels and catacombs were used in the late seventeenth century and an estimated six million dead bodies were placed throughout its tunnels. What was one more?

“I just don’t know about going back there,” I grumbled. The chances of being caught were greater if we all went together. I rubbed my arms, noticing how the usually soft material of my Lou & Grey sweater now felt rough and itchy against my skin. “And where will we burn the body? Inside the catacombs?”

There was only one section of the catacombs opened to visitors. The tunnels beyond that were next to impossible to access. It didn’t stop us last time, but we’d been lucky in our recklessness, and it helped that the city was

a ghost town in the early morning hours of New Year's Day.

Athena didn't seem happy about our plan either. "The air is thin down there. I'd never felt so queasy." She visibly shivered and scrunched her nose.

"Must've been all the dead people," Raven reasoned, although she looked slightly pale too.

I twisted my necklace. "I should go alone."

"Absolutely not," Raven protested.

"Fuck no," Isla hissed. "Are you fucking nuts?"

"Don't even think about it."

"We go together or we let that body rot there," Athena said. It was useless to point out that bodies in the catacombs were rotting already. She was in her drama mode. "Isla's the exception since her husband is a grade-A stalker." We all snickered at that. Enrico Marchetti was obsessed with his wife, and none of it seemed to bother her. "On second thought, let's just drop the dead body topic and discuss Isla's sex life?"

Raven shrugged. "Nah, my sex life is better."

Heads turned to look at her. "What sex life?" we asked in unison.

Raven just smiled smugly. "I don't kiss and tell."

"That won't last," Phoenix signed. *"Should we take bets?"*

That got all the girls riled up until Isla brought the voice of reason. "Get serious, ladies. We have to get rid of the evidence. Especially now."

Especially now that I would marry the son of the man I murdered.

"I cannot believe you're getting married," Athena muttered. "What if we kill him too?"

It didn't escape me how Phoenix flinched. She hated Dante as much as she loved him. It must be our family's curse. Loving the wrong men. Except, Dante was *really* wrong for her, considering he was her half-sibling.

"We're not killing anyone," I said. "Now hear me out on this whole catacomb thing."

"Oh, this ought to be good," Raven exclaimed. "Hold on, let's refill our drinks before Reina lays it on us."

She stood up from her spot on the couch and refilled our drinks, even handing me another beer. I placed it on the coffee table. I'd need my wits about me to reason with my sister and friends. Alcohol could come after.

"Okay, we're ready," Raven announced, taking her seat again. "Tell us why we should let the youngest member of our gang handle this alone."

"I don't mind dead people," I said, causing Athena to choke and cough.

My eyes darted to the window, only seeing the endless darkness. Sometimes it felt like I was a living, breathing catacomb.

“You don’t mind dead people?” Athena repeated, drawing out every word for effect. “Or having a bonfire with a dead man’s bones?”

I shrugged, meeting her eyes. “No, I don’t. It’s better if only I get caught than all of us.”

“*That literally makes no sense,*” Phoenix claimed.

“It makes perfect sense,” I countered. “If I get caught, you guys get me out. Seduce a detective or something.”

Everyone’s eyes were glued on me.

“Why does it feel like you’re keeping something from us?” Isla stated. I took a swig of my drink, buying myself a few seconds. It felt like secrets were piling up, fast and heavy, starting with Mamma’s death and ending with Angelo Leone’s final words. I couldn’t tell them the truth, because they wouldn’t know what to do with it. I hid my secrets like I did my panic attacks.

I waved my hand. “I’m not keeping anything from you.”

“What if you get attacked?” Raven countered.

“I can handle myself.” Then, just to remind them, I added, “I took a baseball bat to Steve Jones when he refused to stop harassing me in high school. *And* I kicked Melanie’s ass in college when she bullied Phoenix. Anyone remember that?”

Murmurs and acknowledgements followed.

I clapped my hands. “Wonderful. So we all agree.”

Needless to say, nobody agreed.

“*We all go, and that’s final,*” Phoenix concluded.

I let out an exasperated breath. “Actually, isn’t it more risky to go back into the catacombs and mess with the body?” I pointed out. “The likelihood of anyone finding all the parts is slim to none.” I pushed my hand through my hair and tugged on the strands. “Those body parts have been decomposing for almost three years now. What could there be left to burn?” I questioned, annoyed at their protectiveness. “Not to mention that it’ll be hard to find every piece since we scattered his parts.”

They meant well, but it was time they stopped babying me. I was strong enough to protect myself and pay for my own mistakes.

“Sasha Nikolaev said the only way to remove DNA is by burning the body,” Isla muttered, anguish filling her expression.

“Why are you suddenly worried about it?” I questioned. For three years, we avoided the topic of that night like a plague. Suddenly, everything seemed to revolve around it.

“I don’t want Enrico to find out.”

“Do you think he’ll kill you?” Athena blurted out.

She let out a strangled laugh. “No, but I’d rather we didn’t rock the boat. I want us all to be safe from the Omertà and the rest of the underworld. It seems to be that’s how the criminals get rid of the evidence.”

“I’m sure Sasha knows what he’s talking about,” I reasoned. After all, he was a Russian mobster. “But these body parts are in the catacombs where the general public don’t have access. It’s probably a rattle of bones by now, right along with thousands of others.”

“Probably,” she agreed reluctantly.

“So why do it?” I insisted, my eyes traveling over my friends. “Why risk exposure?”

“*She makes a good point,*” Phoenix said. “*Now that Isla’s married to Marchetti and Papà has an extra eye on us, someone’s always watching.*” My eyebrows met my hairline in surprise. It was news to me that she knew Papà had an extra eye on us. “*It’s likely that we cannot slip into the catacombs, have a bonfire, and remain undetected.*”

“Excusez-moi,” I chimed in. “You meant to say *bone*-fire.”

“Let’s forget this whole plan,” Raven suggested. “It’s bound to fail.”

I hated to admit it, but she was right.

“Fine, fine,” Isla relented, clearly seeing reason. “No *bone*-fire. We’ll take our chances, and if someone learns our secret, I have an ace up my sleeve.” We shot her a curious look. “Enrico.”

I frowned. The head of the Marchetti family was known for his ruthlessness, so killing one of the members of his organization wouldn’t be taken lightly.

Enrico Marchetti might be Isla’s ace, but he’d be our doom.

AMON

I nstead of going straight from the Philippines to Paris, I had to talk to my mother and line everything up so I could set my plan to marry my cinnamon girl into action.

So here I was in Trieste, Italy, in front of Miramare Castle.

This fucking place had never been home.

I had never felt safe or comfortable in this hellhole. Not only because it was meant to be a fucking museum but because my supposed father made it hell on earth for Dante and me. My mother didn't have it easy here either, which made me question her motive for staying here even after his death.

Sitting on the edge of a seaside cliff, Miramare Castle was built in the nineteenth century on the Gulf of Trieste. It was surrounded by lush gardens on three sides, and the grounds were a national gem, revered by experts around the world through what limited access they'd had to the property over the years.

Not me.

All I saw when I looked at this place was years of sadistic torture and confinement at the hand of the man who called himself our father.

Though here I was. At the doorstep of the castle that shouldn't even belong to the Leone family. It should have remained a museum, for people to visit, enjoy, and then leave.

I made my way into the castle foyer—the lion's den—with ghosts at my back. The tension-filled atmosphere still lingered in this hellhole. The Chinese and Japanese drawing room with oriental furnishing was where I found my mother. It was her favorite room in the whole castle.

Her eyes lifted from her sewing work and met mine with surprise.

“Amon!” She shot to her feet and rushed my way, her feet shuffling along the thick rugs. “I wasn’t expecting you.”

She was wearing one of her pink kimonos with embroidered yellow flowers. I was shocked at how the color didn’t piss me off. Illias Konstantin had given me reason to hope, to snatch what I wanted and hold on to it this time.

“Is it true, Mother?” I asked with a cool façade while my insides fumed with coiled anger.

Her smile faltered and she watched me hesitantly. “Is what true, *musuko*?”

I reached inside my suit jacket for the copy of the marriage certificate and my birth certificate, then handed it to her.

“This,” I gritted, clutching the documents with white knuckles.

Her eyes flickered to them but she didn’t move. Instead, she lifted her eyes and met my gaze. “You found them?”

A sardonic breath left me. “Something like that.”

“You must be angry,” she finally said, emotion heavy in her voice. I didn’t comment, holding her gaze. The woman I’d protected my whole life had kept life-altering secrets from me. “You must have questions.”

I hadn’t seen her since the day I demanded she left my place. I was still furious, although somehow it didn’t surprise me that she kept another secret from me. I suspected she probably had even more.

“Something like that,” I repeated, this time with a scoff. I pushed my balled fist into my pocket. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I had no evidence to show we were married,” she finally said, twisting her hands.

“I wouldn’t have asked for any,” I deadpanned.

“It had to remain a secret until I had proof.” Her tone was colored with desperation. Excuses. “To protect us. To protect you.”

“Illegitimate son was a worse position to be in than a legitimate son,” I announced. “Although I must question your taste in men.”

“Don’t be insolent,” she spat out. “I’m still your mother.”

A snicker left me. “Are you?” I questioned. “At this point I wouldn’t be surprised if that changes too.”

Pain flashed in her eyes, and I instantly regretted my words. I hated seeing her hurt. But she had made so many bad fucking decisions. She’d left me in the dark.

“I had to let Angelo believe you were his son to protect you.” Her tone was soft but unapologetic. “Tomaso expedited an annulment, but he didn’t know that I had put a hit on his lawyer and falsified the paperwork to make it seem like it went through. To protect the two of us.”

A hit. Falsified papers. Did I know this woman at all?

I studied the woman who gave birth to me. She had been there for Dante and me our whole lives. This anger I felt toward her might be justified, but it didn’t erase the years of pain she had to endure. The years of humiliation knowing she made the wrong move.

“How did you end up with Angelo Leone?”

“I sought him out,” she murmured. “Angelo always wanted what Tomaso had. It helped that his wife was sickly and unable to get pregnant. I worked it all out.”

The whole thing made me fucking sick. “I’m guessing Hiroshi helped you.”

She nodded. He had loved her a long time and would always help her, even at great personal cost.

“If Angelo knew you were Romero’s son, he would have had us killed.”

“You could have gone back to Ojisan,” I pointed out. “You could have raised me in Japan.”

She shook her head. “My brother would have found a way to eliminate you the moment his son was born.”

She had an answer for everything. “And Romero?”

A long silence stretched between us, creeping its icy fingers through the air. Each tick of the clock made it feel like hours. I watched as my mother’s hands trembled.

“If he’d known about you, he would have taken you from me,” she whispered. “I couldn’t lose you too.”

She’d lost him. She wanted to keep me. Even at the cost of Angelo Leone’s torture. I should hate her, yet I couldn’t, because despite all the fucked-up shit, I loved my brother. We might not be related by blood and the little shit might be attempting to steal my woman, but I still loved him.

It was hard to erase our history with a simple birth certificate.

“Did you know about Reina?” I guarded my expression while studying hers.

“What about her?” Her features remained blank. Did she really not know? It was difficult to trust her, and my sixth sense warned me to keep my cards

close to my heart.

I decided to change the subject. “Why Leone? He put us all through hell.”

“So you’d learn about the Omertà.” She made her way back to her seat and lowered herself into it, her back straight and tense. “So you could be close to it and take your rightful place one day.”

I sneered. “I thought it was all about the Yakuza and taking my rightful place there too.”

“You were born to rule both, Amon,” she announced, her tone high-pitched. “You deserve both.”

I had never seen this power-hungry side of my mother. Not truly. Not until now. Yes, she always called me her prince, but I’d known it to be a term of endearment. Now, I wasn’t so sure.

I started to suspect she was—had always been—power hungry and saw me as a way to get to the throne. Both Dante and I had been her puppets. She sat in her chair like a queen ready to be crowned. The only downfall? Most of the underworld would never allow a woman to rule. Not the Yakuza, not the Omertà.

Maybe it was her endgame to rule all along, to play me like a pawn in her game. Except she lost her connection to me when she spilled the beans that I was Romero’s son. Twenty years too late.

“After Angelo died, why didn’t you tell me you married Romero?” I questioned. “I was strong enough to protect all of us. Both Dante and I are.”

After a moment of silence, she looked at me, her eyes harsh and filled with secrets.

“I couldn’t be sure.”

“You’re paranoid.” She looked the other way, avoiding my gaze. “And you’re hiding more secrets,” I stated calmly. I was certain of it.

She lifted a hand. “Let’s leave that topic for another time. I don’t have the energy to argue with you today.”

Unintentionally, my mother just confirmed my suspicion. I intended to dig up every single one of her secrets and tear through them like a hurricane. But she didn’t know I had my own secrets now, and that I no longer trusted her enough to share them with her.

“If you don’t have the energy for it, we have nothing left to say.”

“You need to focus on the Yakuza throne,” she snapped. “On taking your seat at the Omertà table. It will make you the most powerful man in the world.”

“What if I don’t want it?” I smirked. “It’s clear you’ve had a plan for a long time. But be warned, *Mother*.” She hadn’t been Mamma for a very long time. “I’m going to tear your plan to shreds, piece by piece. Only *my* plans matter from now on.”

And the main one included my woman.

AMON

The following day, I was in Paris, standing outside a creepy warehouse draped in the night's cloak.

The agreement we made years ago continued. He'd been helping us put a stop to human trafficking while feigning his involvement and support for it. It was the best way to get insider information and contacts. We were slowly but surely ending the human trafficking ring.

According to Tomaso Romero, this place belonged to the Brazilians, and they were moving flesh. Perez Cortes was a persistent motherfucker. It was too bad Kian didn't kill his brother and save us all some grief.

Romero coughed, choking on his own spit. His round belly shook and his dark eyes shone with agony. I fucking hated sharing a continent with this man, never mind a bloodline.

Though that concept was still too hard to grasp. The only saving grace was that Reina wasn't his biological daughter.

"This is the last tip you're getting through me," Romero said. "You'll have to work through other avenues going forward."

Dante and I had been dismantling human trafficking cells for years now, but we knew our professional relationship with the man who'd been instrumental in our efforts was coming to an end. He was at the end of the line. Literally.

"What's going on with the wedding plans?" he heaved, his eyes narrowed on Dante.

Distaste curled through me, although I couldn't deny the lightness I'd felt since reading the words on that document. Now I had a secret advantage, and I intended to leverage it when the time was right.

“You should talk to your daughter,” Dante hissed. “She keeps coming up with new excuses to stall.”

“Then take matters into your own hands,” Romero commanded as another coughing fit hit him. “I don’t have time for this shit.”

I was close to losing it.

“Fine, old man,” Dante hissed. “I’ve set the date for a rehearsal dinner and the wedding. You make sure your daughter shows up.”

Beating them both to a pulp sounded perfect right about now.

“Maybe you should learn how to make the idea of marrying you a bit more appealing so she’ll want to show up, Leone.”

Dante snickered. “Oh, trust me, I’ll have her under my spell in no time.”

I wrapped my fingers around my gun and imagined it was Dante’s neck. Or maybe Romero’s. Fuck it, make it both men. The fury I felt every time I thought of Dante and Reina together reddened my vision. Her smiles and affection played in slow motion in the dark corners of my mind.

“Would you two shut the fuck up and pay attention,” I hissed, fighting the urge to kill my own brother so Reina would never want him.

“So fucking sensitive,” Dante muttered, though he was eyeing me like I was a ticking bomb. He wasn’t far off.

I could feel the heat of Romero’s glare hitting the back of my neck. “What’s wrong with your brother?” he questioned Dante.

“Don’t know, I’m not his therapist.” I checked the magazine on my gun and clicked it into place. “Ask him.”

“If you don’t have your shit together, Amon, is it wise we do this tonight?” We were outside what should’ve been an abandoned warehouse. The body heat sensors indicated our intel was bad.

I faced him, staring him in the eye. “God forbid you’re inconvenienced.” I hoped he’d sense my rage and hate toward him. Except the fucker only believed in self-preservation. “You give no fucks about anyone but yourself.”

“I just thought—”

“You just thought you could get out of it.” Pathetic fucking ass. My upper lip curled into a snarl, disgusted with this sperm donor. “Maybe we should put you in there and see how you like it.”

“What the fuck is your problem?”

“You, Romero. You are my problem. Now shut the fuck up and do your job.”

I returned my attention to the building, the tension vehement and

palpable. My mood was about to go from bad to terrible.

“Is something the matter?” Dante whispered, appearing beside me. “And no, I’m not fucking talking about Romero.”

Dante gave zero shits about Tomaso Romero. He’d actually hated his guts for a while now, so it was shocking to me that Romero couldn’t sense the resentment rolling off him too.

“No,” I said. He narrowed his eyes as if he knew something I didn’t. “Spit it out, Dante.”

“I’m just surprised you haven’t brought up Reina.” As long as there was air left in my lungs, Reina would never be his. “Considering your past and all that. Although I’m sure she wants to put a bullet in you.” Was he purposely trying to piss me off? “Dates with her are fun,” he drawled in a lazy tone.

The fact that he’d had dates with her filled my vision red.

“I swear to God, Dante, if you don’t shut the fuck up, I’m going to shoot you and leave you to bleed out on the grass.”

He stared at me, his jaw tightening, but he said nothing else. We’d grown distant over the last three years, but I still loved him. Blood or no blood.

“Good to know,” he finally said. “But I feel the need to point something out.”

“What?” I snapped.

“You’re behaving like a man obsessed.”

With her, remained unspoken. Not too long ago, it was blasphemous to have these feelings for Reina, but not anymore. Now, I was eager to make her mine.

“Stay focused on this mission,” I said in a half-assed attempt to divert his attention. I tilted my head toward the building. “Something’s off.”

“Like what?” he said, turning to face the building again.

“Guards.”

He picked up on my line of thought. “There are none.”

I nodded. We didn’t have sensors picking up the area outside the building, but we knew from experience. “They’re concealed, but they’re here. It’s like they were expecting us.”

Dante’s head whipped in Romero’s direction. “Did you fucking tell someone?”

He shook his head once. “No. Why the fuck would I do that?”

Heavy silence fell over the space. Ignoring the two of them, I surveyed the area, my fingers firmly on the gun. Leaving wasn’t an option, but neither

was dying. I barely had time to ponder my options when a loud boom echoed in the air, shaking the ground.

The three of us fell to the ground, and for a moment, we didn't move. Time stopped, my ears buzzed. Silence.

Then the commotion started. The guards surrounded us. It was a fucking ambush.

"It's a trap," Dante called out, echoing my thoughts.

The warehouse was on fire as debris rained from the smoke-filled building. Screams and wails tore through the night air. Body parts—limbs—scattered.

"Look for survivors. Kill anyone else," I bit out, then started to crawl toward the warehouse. If there was a single woman still alive, we had to get her out.

My head was clear, my body moving on instinct. Ignoring the noise from the explosion and gunfire—*boom, boom, boom*—I made my way to the nearest tree that wasn't burning. I spotted the first guard dressed in a uniform. I didn't stop to think. Pulling the trigger, I aimed to shoot. Bullseye, right between the eyes.

Then I spotted the next one.

Click. Aim. Shoot.

I repeated it. Over and over again.

The whole time shots sounded all around me, taking aim at us, I cursed—in Italian, Japanese, English, even French. The fucking fuckers.

Crouching, I glanced over my shoulder to ensure Dante was still unscathed. He was flat to the ground, his focus on the warehouse.

I usually always followed my instincts; it'd saved me more than a few times. And at this moment, my instinct warned we should get the fuck out of here.

I ignored it.

Because I fucking hated the Cortes cartel for having Reina in their sights, and I hated flesh trading. Therefore, letting them get away with anything wasn't on the table. There were criminals, and then there was the Cortes cartel right in the same bucket as my cousin.

Two peas in a pod.

I aimed at the fucker lurking in the shadows by the doors of the warehouse. Click.

Damn it, my magazine was empty. Out of bullets, I unsheathed my knife

and ran toward one of the men. I was at his back in a blink of an eye, slicing his neck. Then I used his gun and started shooting at the rest of the men wearing black masks.

It didn't take long before Dante appeared behind me. We fought them together, our movements synchronized. We moved in the direction of the entrance while Romero took some of the men down with his gun.

I killed a man on the spot when we reached the entrance. The moment I entered the warehouse, the smoke and the stench and the whimpers slammed into me. I held my breath as I fell to my knees, sensing our mission to save these women had failed.

Still, we advanced further into the building. If I could locate even one survivor, it would be worth the sacrifice.

My movements jerked to a halt in the middle of the singed warehouse, flames and smoke licking what was left of the walls. Piles of bodies—young, old, middle-aged women—lay soaked in pools of blood.

I rushed to them, checking their pulses, one by one. Some had eyes rolled back, others staring at nothing, completely devoid of life. Some had blue eyes, others brown. The seconds ticked by, and with each absent pulse, my stomach sank further. There was one thing they all had in common.

“What the fuck?” Dante rasped, coughing wildly from the smoke. “They almost look like—”

Like Reina.

Each of the women sprawled out on the ground had curly, golden-blond hair.

Something was fucking wrong. Very, very wrong.

REINA

I slammed my fist into the boxing dummy's face, imagining it was Dante's and reveling in the sharp burst of pain that jolted up my arm. Every muscle in my body ached and sweat dripped down my temple.

I was back at Darius's training center, except this time I was here to blow off steam, not to train with him. The center was closed on Thursdays, so I had the place to myself while Darius was holed up in his office.

Each punch was strengthening my resolve further. The only way out of this clusterfuck was to pack up and disappear with Phoenix.

Isla was married and safe under Enrico Marchetti's protection. Raven and Athena would be okay. Nobody would tie them to Angelo Leone's murder. I had paid up the rent for the next twelve months for both Phoenix's and my portion so they'd have a roof over their heads. In a year's time, I would figure out how to help them out.

Assuming Phoenix and I managed to survive on our own. No Grandma. No Papà. No friends.

By the time I finished punching the poor piece of training equipment, I was a mess of aches and sweat.

"That's some frustration you're working off there." Darius's dry voice came from behind me and I whirled around to find him holding out a towel and water bottle. "Who stinks of sweat now, huh?"

I tugged on the piece of cloth, then towed the perspiration off my face. "You sure know how to make a girl feel special."

He chuckled, clearly not concerned. He was the special one that girls ran after.

An eye roll followed. I was rubbing off on him. "I don't need words to

make someone feel special.”

“Okay, Casanova. If your ego grows any bigger, it might explode.”

“Hey, Reina.” Another voice came from behind me, startling me. My hand flew to my chest.

“Jesus, River! You scared the shit out of me.”

He grinned. “I was watching Darius make an ass out of himself.”

I took a swig of water, eyeing him. Tall and stocky, he had a powerful build, but somehow I thought deep down, he was a teddy bear. Protective. Sweet. And sexy as fuck. I could tolerate an arranged marriage to him.

Dante, on the other hand, I could not.

“How are you, River?”

“Good, Reina.” His eyes traveled the length of me. “You’re getting stronger.”

I grinned. “Practicing killing my future husband,” I said half-jokingly.

“You will more than likely succeed,” Darius observed, which earned him a smile. “So when is the wedding?”

Fucking never.

I shrugged. “Soon. Do either of you want to come to my rehearsal dinner?”

“When is it?” River asked, surprising me by even entertaining the idea.

“In two days.”

River offered an apologetic smile. “I’m flying out tomorrow morning.”

“I’m available,” Darius answered. “I thought you would’ve hit the road before then though.”

He wasn’t far off, but rather than confirm his suspicion, I smiled tightly. “I’ll text you the name of the place. Better be there, Darius—”

My words were cut off when a wheezing sound screeched through the air. Suddenly, my body was slammed against the ground, the mannequin falling on top of me.

A shot was fired and I watched in horror as a bullet lodged itself in River’s arm. My mouth opened to scream but a hand muffled me.

“Don’t make a sound.” It was Darius’s voice. “We’re under attack.”

Bullets started to fly all around us. Darius and River produced guns out of somewhere and faced the men who were shooting at us. They took aim and pulled the trigger, almost moving as one. I had never seen anything like it.

I stared at the scene before me in shock. We were outnumbered—by a long shot—but neither of them seemed fazed. They sandwiched me between

them, yanking me off the floor to run for cover. We were sitting ducks in the middle of the gym.

The situation was dire.

We took cover in the back office, its dividing wall already shattered, glass shards covering the ground. With a battle cry, River whirled around and started shooting. Darius joined him, but all I could do was stare dumbly.

It took me three heartbeats to finally get my shit together.

“I can help,” I finally said.

Neither one of them questioned my offer as Darius threw me a gun. The palpable emotion—fear, anxiety, and anger—rang in my head, but I ignored it all. Instead, I shifted and started shooting.

Drowning out Darius’s and River’s voices, I zeroed in on the two men in the far right corner. I aimed, then pulled the trigger, hitting one. Then I repeated the motion, but only injured the other.

“Fuck,” I muttered.

Darius’s eyes found mine. “You good?”

I nodded. “I hit him in the shoulder.”

“That’s good. We’ll be able to question him.”

Everything that came next happened in slow motion. River and Darius left our cover and charged forward. One aiming left, the other right. Bodies fell like dominoes. My breathing hitched and my pulse thundered in my ear until deafening silence enclosed the space.

Bu-bum. Bu-bum.

My heartbeat was too loud I feared someone would hear it. I took in the gym that now looked like a war zone as I stood stiffly, keeping myself out of sight. I didn’t know if silence meant we were safe.

“You okay?” someone asked. A squeal escaped me, my hand shooting up to aim. “Whoa, whoa. It’s me.”

Darius stood with his hands up, muttering that it was all over. “We’re safe?”

He nodded. “Yes. We kept one alive. River’s questioning him.”

“Oh, okay.”

“You want to come?”

My mouth was dry. My heart still raced.

“I don’t think so. Do you know who... what...” My hands shook and he reached for the gun, peeling my stiff fingers from it. “You know something,” I finally said with a calm I didn’t feel.

“It’s the Cortes cartel,” he finally said. “They were here for you.”

I fell to my knees, his words ringing in my ears.

I knew—fucking knew—this was the deal that Papà was talking about. This was the deal that went wrong. This was why he needed to marry me off.

REINA

Burn evidence: Check.
Shower: Check.

Plan to disappear: Half-check. Need to run it again by Phoenix.

Rehearsal dinner sabotaged: Unchecked.

“Damn it,” I muttered under my breath as I adjusted my pigtail buns in the shop window. “How do I look?”

“Like a hot-pink candy wrapped in pink ruffles,” Athena remarked teasingly. “There’s a lot of pink going on, even for you.” She wasn’t off. “Although I love the back design.”

“Thanks,” I beamed. “I adjusted that myself.”

Showing up to this party in a sleeveless hot-pink ruffled tulle dress was not going to make my father very happy.

“The slits are super sexy,” Raven remarked. “And those six-inch Valentino heels probably make you look more like an expensive escort than a bride-to-be.”

I grinned. “It’s exactly what I was going for.” If I could have found anything more atrocious in my closet, I would have worn it.

I turned to look at my sister who was giving our friends’ outfits a quick check in the same mirror. We opted for the most ridiculous colors, and I knew we looked like a ’70s hippie group. Phoenix wore a bright yellow sleeveless minidress that was sure to blind anyone without sunglasses. Athena wore an orange tulle dress. Raven opted for neon green. And Isla’s dress was a rainbow of colors.

“If these dresses aren’t the reason Dante cancels the wedding, I don’t think he ever will,” Athena said.

“Let’s hope he’s not color blind,” Isla announced, turning to look at me. “Is he?”

I shrugged. “How in the hell should I know?”

After our disastrous date and his subsequent visit to my apartment, I’d wholeheartedly avoided him. Dante Leone wasn’t my type, and he never would be.

Okay, personality aside, he wasn’t terrible looking. Actually scratch that. He was. He looked like his father, and I clearly disliked his father. *So much that you killed him*, my mind mocked.

I let out a frustrated breath. I hated thinking about it.

My yoga and self-defense classes helped quell my anxiety, panic attacks, and self-harming tendencies, but the key to it all was avoiding certain triggers. Like thinking about the boy who shattered me into a million pieces. Or about the murder that I committed and the revelations that’d emerged that night.

Our heels clicked against the pavement as we made our way to my rehearsal dinner at Bar 228.

We were just about to make our way to the entrance when our path was blocked.

“Your name?” the stuck-up bouncer demanded, giving us all a look that said we didn’t belong here. A comment that we didn’t *want* to be here was on the tip of my tongue.

“Isla Marchetti.” I still hadn’t gotten used to her new last name. Judging by the looks the rest of the girls gave her, none of us had.

“This is the bride-to-be,” Raven snapped at the bouncer. “So if you want to block our entrance, good luck with your party. And good luck explaining that to the groom.”

I rolled my eyes, though I couldn’t help a shudder that tracked down my spine. The most joyous moment in a girl’s life was one that I dreaded. “What are you doing, policing a damn rehearsal dinner?”

If I wasn’t convinced that Papà and Dante would seek me out and drag me here by my hair, I wouldn’t have come on my own. As it was, I was playing it safe. The wedding was in a day. Phoenix and I had to pack tonight and disappear.

His eyes flicked behind me. “And these girls?”

“They’re my plus-fours.” I crossed my arms and gave him a sideways look. “Come on, dude. Either let us in or go tell my papà that the wedding is

off.”

Now that would be funny. Especially since Isla told me the guest list consisted mostly of noteworthy criminals.

“We had a rough day,” Athena muttered and signed at the same time. “Either let us in or don’t, just decide so we can be on our way.”

“*I’m totally ready to leave,*” Phoenix agreed.

I didn’t blame her. She didn’t want to be here because she’d have to see the man she loved/hated sitting next to me, and I didn’t want to be here because I didn’t want to see the man I loved/hated sitting next to his brother.

The bouncer must have registered something on our faces because he finally stepped aside.

“That’s too bad,” Athena whispered. “I was ready to go home.”

A round of agreements. “Ditto.”

We did one last hair and makeup check in the hallway mirror before we filed across the long entryway and into the large area where a crowd of people mingled.

The door opened and the room got a few notches quieter. Everyone’s eyes flitted to us, staring like they just saw the Ghosts of Christmas Past. But there was one pair of eyes in particular that seared into me, and they didn’t belong to the groom-to-be.

My heartbeat drummed louder as I slowly stepped into the room, my friends and sister at my back, all of us flashing bright smiles.

I trained my eyes on the spot above the bar, determined not to show my discomfort at this whole situation. They wanted a cheerful bride, they’d get one. Until I become a runaway bride.

“What the fuck is going on here?” someone boomed from my left. I almost tripped over myself, my nose too high up in the air. “What are you all wearing?”

I lowered my eyes and met Papà’s glare. Grandma was on the other side of the room with a smile frozen on her face while her husband patted her hand, probably trying to lower her blood pressure.

Thankfully, I still maintained my smile. I brushed a hand over my ruffles, smoothing them down.

“You like it?”

“No.” A soft snicker came from behind me but I resisted the urge to turn my head. Instead, I feigned distress, knowing it would irk my father even more. “You look like a goddamned rainbow. And not in a good way. Jesus,

would you like some pot to smoke with those clothes?”

I tapped a finger against my chin. “Considering this is a freak show, I decided we should dress accordingly.”

“Reina—” His voice shook from anger. “Don’t test my patience today. Go change.” His eyes flickered to Phoenix and our friends. “All of you.”

“I don’t think so,” I deadpanned.

“Go. Change. Now.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” I drawled in a sweet voice, looking at him with wide eyes. The room was so quiet it felt like our whole exchange had become the center of attention. Clearly everyone was enjoying the show. “Did your marriage agreement include choosing the bride’s wardrobe?”

“No, but you’re not supposed to go around looking like a clown,” he hissed.

I let my bottom lip tremble. I even started twisting my hands as if his words upset me. It occurred to me at that moment that maybe I had inherited a few acting traits from my grandmother and mother.

“A clown?” I whispered, blinking my eyes rapidly before deciding it was enough with the theatrics. I flashed him a smile that said enough was enough. I wasn’t a little girl he—or anyone else—could boss around. “I thought it was appropriate, considering this is all a joke.”

Something flashed in his eyes—surprise or warning, I wasn’t sure—but he was left speechless. I could hear soft whispers of “attagirl” and “you tell him” behind me, and the warmth from Phoenix’s hand resting on the small of my back fed me the strength I needed to stand tall.

Before Papà could say another thing, Grandma approached and I sighed in exasperation.

“Hello, dear.” She leaned over and pressed a kiss on my cheek. “You picked an interesting time to become a rebel.” I narrowed my eyes on her but remained quiet. Any battle with her had to be carefully crafted. “I knew we should have put you in front of the lens of a camera.”

I scoffed.

Isla cleared her throat. “Um, I’m gonna go see my husband.”

“Me too,” Athena muttered. “Ah, shit. I don’t have a husband. I’ll go see someone else’s.”

Raven read the room, so to speak, and left as well.

Grandma’s eyes roamed over Phoenix, then returned to me. “Now, do you want to tell me what this is all about?”

“Yes, please explain why my daughter looks like a disgrace for her own rehearsal dinner.” Papà skipped at least five words while signing, but his message came across loud and clear.

Phoenix pressed her lips together while I curled my hands into fists. He expected us to fall in line and do whatever he said after being absent most of our lives. Well, it didn’t work like that. Although, to be fair, even if he had been around, every fiber of my being would still resist the idea of marrying Dante Leone.

My eyes darted past him to the rest of the people in the room who were studying us curiously. I was so tempted to flip them all off. Instead, I returned my gaze to Papà and smiled.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. We look like this every day.”

Then I took my sister’s hand and tugged her along to the bar.

“Two shots of anything strong,” I said, feeling eyes on my back and choosing to ignore them.

“Make it tequila. Double for all of us,” Raven announced from my left. She and Athena looked ready to ditch this party. I wouldn’t blame them. Raven’s gaze met mine. “You’re so lucky I love you.”

“I love you too.”

The bartender poured our shots and we downed them in one go. “Ah, liquid courage,” Athena purred.

“*That went well,*” Phoenix signed. “*We’re the most undesirable women at this party.*”

Athena snickered. “That was our goal, wasn’t it?” We all nodded. “Well, I got hit on by two men already, and one made my panties melt.”

All three of us turned to her in sync. “Which one?”

I watched her neck bob and a faint blush creep up her neck. “Hot guy. In the corner.” The three of us went to turn our heads but she squealed, “Don’t look.”

“*How are we supposed to see who he is, then?*” Phoenix signed exasperatedly.

“I’ll describe him for you,” Athena answered. “Do. Not. Look.”

I didn’t know about them, but that made me want to look even more.

“What are we not looking at?” Isla asked, showing up out of nowhere. “My husband said I look sexy as fuck.”

“Your husband’s lying to you,” Raven muttered. “You look like cotton candy.”

“That’s exactly what he said,” she beamed. “So later he’ll eat me like cotton candy too.”

“Gross.”

“TMI.”

“*At least someone’s getting laid,*” Phoenix said, ending the badgering.

“Athena’s about to point out someone hot to us,” I whispered, looking at my friend pointedly.

Isla’s eyebrows shot up to her hairline. “Ohhh. Well, my apologies for interrupting. I’m all ears.”

We all stared at Athena, waiting. She shifted on her legs uncomfortably, her eyes darting around, and we followed her gaze. But she never paused over a single man.

“Come on, don’t leave us in suspense,” Raven bit out.

“He disappeared,” she muttered. “He was right there but he isn’t anymore.” She let out a heavy sigh. “Maybe my choice of wardrobe scared him away.”

“*Probably,*” Phoenix signed, snorting softly. “*Did you see Isla’s brother and his wife? They look like they stepped out of a magazine.*”

“Courtesy of Reina Romero designs,” Isla said, rolling her eyes. “But hey, at least we stand out.”

“With these clothes, we definitely won’t get laid,” Raven grumbled, waving the bartender over. “We need another round of shots.”

“Except for Isla,” Athena corrected. “She’s getting freaky with her sugar daddy.”

“*I think you mean silver fox,*” Phoenix corrected her.

I smiled sheepishly, not really surprised at how our entrance had been received. I didn’t think Papà would call us out on it, but whatever. I glanced over my shoulder to find him and Grandma arguing, or at least it looked that way.

My gaze skipped over them to a handful of recognizable people. Manuel Marchetti, the sexy, hot-as-hell uncle to Enrico Marchetti. The two were close in age and behaved like brothers. The Marchetti boys, Enzo and Amadeo, who waved, grinning wide and looking like little suave Italians. They uttered something to their father who nodded, then the two rushed over to us.

“Hello, ladies,” they said. “You’re looking hot.”

The four of us chuckled at their attempt to flirt. No doubt Enzo and

Amadeo would break hearts one day.

“You’re not looking too shabby yourselves,” I told them. They looked like mini versions of their father, their suits impeccable.

“Do we look good enough to get dates?” Enzo challenged.

A round of shots landed in front of us. We paused to down them, then slammed the empty glasses onto the bartop.

I flicked a look at Enzo. “Sorry, I’m afraid I’ll have to pass,” I said. “You being underage and all. However, I’ll let you in on a little secret. I’d rather date you than—”

A hand landed on my shoulder, and I stiffened. “If you say ‘than my betrothed,’ I’m going to take it personally.”

I gulped, glancing at Phoenix who was frowning at her glass, the tension in her shoulders unmistakable.

Turning my head to meet his gaze, I flashed him a sweet smile. “You know me so well. That was exactly what I was going to say.”

Before I could gauge his reaction, my eyes snagged on a dark figure across the room, and I forgot all about Dante.

Instead, all I could see was his brother, looking devastatingly handsome in a suit. He’d styled his hair in a way that highlighted the chiseled lines of his cheekbones. His dark-as-coal eyes burned into mine, and my smile dimmed, melting off my face.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

I drowned in his dark galaxies as the world faded away, leaving us alone in the crowded room.

AMON

I stared at her as she sat at the bar, downing her sixth shot of tequila. Yes, I'd counted.

Oba, who I was surprised to see here, shot me disapproving glares. Her earlier words still echoed in my brain. *Fight for the girl. She's yours; you're hers.*

She had no idea how right she was.

My eyes drifted back to Reina. She was wearing the most ridiculous hot-pink dress, but she glowed in a way that made it impossible to look away. She could wear rags and it'd still be impossible to look away.

My heart tripped over its own beat each time our gazes collided. When she ignored me, I traced her features with my eyes, soaking in the lush curves of her body.

The minutes ticked by. Soon she'd be mine. On my yacht. In my home. In my territory.

She and her friends caused quite a stir, striding into the rehearsal dinner an hour late and looking very... bright and colorful.

I didn't give a shit. Reina still looked breathtaking, and it pissed me off that others got to see those slits up her thigh, revealing too much of her smooth skin.

When I'd caught her eye earlier, my muscles tightened to the point of pain. It hadn't escaped me that she'd been standing right next to my brother while studiously ignoring him... at what was supposed to be their rehearsal dinner. *Good.* Maybe I wouldn't have to beat his ass after all.

She'd been scanning the crowd when our eyes met.

Hot sparks blazed down my spine and I smiled—an actual, honest-to-

God, full-blown *smile*. I'd had to fight the urge to storm over to her, throw her over my shoulder, and whisk her away from every single person breathing the same air as her.

Into the sunset. Fuck, that sounded so goddamn cheesy. I didn't give a fuck.

Now, Dante was nowhere to be found, and there she was, still at the bar, smiling at yet another fucker standing next to her. Darius. Who in the fuck invited him? Of course, he came alone. No plus-one for him. But the way he looked at Reina... Yeah, I didn't like it one fucking bit.

I shoved my hands in my pockets. Why was she smiling so sweetly at him? It took me a couple of minutes to ease the fire mounting in my chest.

Dante appeared, looking slightly agitated, and I wondered which Romero sister pissed him off this time. He had two drinks in hand, one fruity one and one beer. He'd given up whiskey somewhere along the way.

He didn't seem happy to see Reina mingling with Darius either. Her sister was five feet behind her chatting with Giovanni Agosti who somehow knew ASL. Go figure. I had never seen Reina's sister grin so widely for as long as I'd known her.

In fact, if she ever happened to see my brother and me, she frowned and glared. This was going back years, even in the months Reina and I had been together.

"I see your taste in alcohol has improved," I remarked dryly.

As if he forgot he held two drinks, his eyes lowered to them and a scowl lit his features. "The colors in that drink alone make me want to stab myself in the eye." He lifted his head and his stormy expression warned he was reaching the end of his rope. "I'm trying not to murder the fucker."

"There're a lot of fuckers here," I drawled. "You're going to have to be more specific."

He looked back at me as if contemplating saying something, but then he just waved his hand, deciding against it.

"You ready to be my best man?" he asked instead. The answer would have been a ready "yes" if circumstances were different. "I have to give you the rings. Go figure, I had to get my own ring because Reina claimed she was too busy." Now that little piece of intel made me happy. "Mother and Hiroshi will come to the church tomorrow, but have decided not to stay."

"Understandable."

He paused, watching me with an odd expression. It was as if he wanted to

tell me something.

“Those dresses they’re wearing...” he continued with annoyance. “They’re hideous. And to think Reina is a world-renowned designer.” At least it was easy to spot them. “I hope she picked something better out for the wedding.”

Another pointed look from him. Was he purposely trying to poke at me? It was as if he wanted me to crack with his little offhand comments.

He slapped my shoulder. “A wedding, brother.” There it was again. The little jab. That gleam in his eyes.

He knew this fucking wedding would never happen. Knew I wouldn’t allow it. Besides, I had a plan lined up and ready to be set in motion. I couldn’t fucking wait.

The only thing that worried me was whether my brother had touched her. I didn’t want either one of them to live through the hell I’d lived through, regardless of my feelings toward this farce of an engagement.

“Have you talked to Mother and Hiroshi?” Dante asked randomly.

I shook my head. “You didn’t invite her to this joyful party?” I retorted dryly.

“I did, but they didn’t want to come.” Might as well.

I focused on what I could control and let my eyes skate over the crowd. They landed on Reina just in time to see Romero grab her forearm, his fingers digging into her soft flesh.

I just about lunged forward, demanding he take his hands off her, when Dante’s voice stopped me.

“Romero has no control over his daughters,” he deadpanned, watching him yank her forward, albeit not roughly enough to raise concern.

A growl vibrated in my chest and Dante flicked me a curious look, but he said nothing as Romero and Reina approached us.

My emotions were tightly wound but I hid them all behind a saccharine smile. My heart pounded hard in my chest as the faint scent of cinnamon trickled into my nose and spread into my lungs.

“Ah, here’s my fiancée,” Dante drawled, leaning over and pressing a kiss to her cheek.

My blood rushed through my veins, searing everything in its path. My ears buzzed with fury, each thud against my chest screaming the word mine. *Fucking mine. Mine. Mine.*

Reina’s shoulders tensed, keeping her eyes on Dante.

My blood caught fire.

This jealousy would be the death of me. She was *his* half sister for Christ's sake, and it was Dante's only saving grace. But even the knowledge of their blood relations couldn't cool this green monster that threatened to disintegrate my control.

"Are you enjoying the party?" Dante asked, his eyebrows twitching.

Reina smiled at him, batting her lashes. What the *fuck*?

"So freaking much," she purred, swaying slightly on her feet. "It was so perfect that I never want to repeat it again."

"Reina—" Romero warned, but she ignored him.

She yanked a glass of wine from a passing tray. The poor waiter looked like he was going to piss himself from the glares he earned from her father.

She brought it to her lips and gulped it down, swallowing once, twice, then draining it dry. I watched as she licked a drop from her lush pink lips. My cock strained against my pants, remembering how well those lips sucked me off. The way her tongue licked me, tasted me.

Fuck!

"It's not smart to get drunk before your big day," Dante remarked dryly.

She blinked innocently. "Two days. Plenty of time to recover." Then, as if she thought of something, she added, "Assuming I stop drinking beforehand." She was on a roll now. "And I wouldn't call marriage to you a big day. More like a doomsday."

I bit the inside of my cheek to stop myself from grinning. It was clear she didn't want this wedding, and what my queen wanted, she would get. Although it might not be in the exact manner she preferred.

"Reina, no more alcohol."

She shrugged. "I've been drinking water," she lied shamelessly, but then a hiccup escaped her and an attractive blush crept up her neck. "P-p—" She hiccuped again. "Promise." We all watched as she batted her eyelashes and swayed on her feet some more before turning to her father and adding, "Prometto."

The old Romero opened his mouth, then closed it. And opened it again. "I didn't know you knew Italian."

She blinked.

"I do?" Goddamn, she was hammered. It put a small dent in my plans. I couldn't fuck her when she was this intoxicated. Then, out of nowhere, she waved her hand and sent her wineglass flying into the air, landing a few feet

away with a loud shatter. Her blue eyes widened. “I didn’t do it.”

“Didn’t do what?” Romero hissed, eyes bouncing around the room. His face was now tomato red, his embarrassment tangible.

“I d-didn’t break i-it.” She hiccuped again. “That wasn’t me.”

Dante shoved a hand in his pocket, rocking on his heels. “I hope you won’t be this drunk on our wedding night.”

She glared at him, then brought her small palm to his chest. “The wedding night? In your dreams,” she slurred, patting his chest. “Dickwad.”

“Hooker,” Dante spat.

“Dante.” I tried and failed to keep the growl out of my voice.

“She and her friends came to the fucking rehearsal dinner dressed like circus hookers,” Dante gritted. “By the way, Reina, you missed the fucking wedding rehearsal.”

“Girls, he thinks we’re dressed like hookers,” Reina announced to the entire bar, signing drunkenly. Her father gripped her elbow, holding her upright. Apparently a hammered Reina had zero shame.

Phoenix stormed over along with their friends and raised both hands, flipping us not one but two birds. Apparently we were all guilty by association.

“Exactly how I feel about it. Thank you, sister,” Reina said. She leaned closer to Dante and me, her cinnamon scent intoxicating. “Fuck. You. All of you. Both of you.”

Then she reached into her bra and pulled out her phone. She glanced at it, surprise flickering over her features. Her head whipped to the bar, meeting the eyes of the bartender who was gawking at her.

“Whatever,” she muttered, turning to her sister.

The two shared a glance, the kind that stank of trouble. No wonder their old man let their grandmother raise them. He had zero authority over them.

“Siri,” Reina said, like she was talking to a human person. “Play Carrie. ‘Church Bells.’” The next second, every single speaker in the bar let out an earth-shattering boom. The song was so fucking loud the crystal shook throughout the place. She grinned at her friends. “The bartender put his thing in my thing.”

He what?

My jaw locked as my gaze strayed to the bartender who was scrambling behind the bar to lower the music, looking disheveled. He went rigid, probably reading the threat in my eyes.

I stormed his way, flexing my hands into fists. The crowd parted like the proverbial Red Sea. I reached over the bar and gripped him by the collar, slamming his head onto the counter.

I brought my mouth to his ear and growled, “Did. You. Touch. Her?”

My voice was low but full of unspoken threats. The rage I’d been harboring finally roared to life, and this asshole would take the brunt of it if he didn’t clear out of this place, this city—hell, he’d probably only be safe on another continent with the way my blood was singeing. And all the while, the country song that Reina loved so much blasted through the speakers.

“W-what?” His voice was a whimper. He shook his head, the stain on his pants getting bigger by the second. He really did piss himself.

“I hate repeating myself,” I growled in French. “What did you do?”

He tensed. “I got her phone number.”

“Did she give it to you?”

He shook his head. “When she asked me to connect her to the speakers, I sent myself a message from her number.”

I punched him again, and it took less than a second for blood to pour from his nose.

“Amon, this might not be the best time to reveal your cards,” Illias’s voice behind me warned, calm and full of reason.

So of course, I ignored him. Instead, I punched Piss-Pants in the face. I jumped over the bartop and stepped on his hand in the process, hearing the bones crack. Grabbing a fistful of his hair, I hit him again, taking pleasure in the way my knuckles burned.

“Send him on his way, then follow through with your plan.” Illias’s voice managed to reach me, and I paused.

My plan. He didn’t even know the half of it.

The plan I had would change the course of Reina’s life beyond any point of return. Her reputation would be tarnished, leaving her with only one option: a marriage to me.

Yeah, maybe I was a tad bit on edge. The fucking circus of this rehearsal. Wedding plans. My scheming. Reina’s “my kind of man” Instagram post played in my mind.

Yes, I stalked her social media platforms. Fucking sue me.

And then there was the little disturbing fact that this bartender looked like the type.

Irritation crawled up my back remembering that fucking post and

Darius's smug face. No matter though. She was destined for me, and nobody could keep us apart. Not her father. Not Dante. And certainly not this fucking prick.

I bent over so I was eye level with the guy who thought himself worthy of a shot with someone like Reina. My queen.

"Get lost before I break every bone in your body." I shoved him out of the way. "Delete her number. If I see you anywhere near her, you're a dead man."

He scurried away like a mouse released from a trap. I turned around to find Illias and Marchetti standing behind me. Marchetti's eyes were trained on Reina and her friends, who were all sloshed, and from the looks of it, ganging up on Dante. It was actually quite entertaining to watch. Plus, it was nice to know I wasn't the only one causing a scene. I shouldn't have been surprised; this crowd of people didn't exactly operate in dignified circles. My run-in with the bartender was likely a blip on their radars. *Good.*

"This has certainly been an interesting rehearsal dinner," Marchetti remarked. "Thank fuck I didn't have one."

My eyebrows climbed as I studied the way he watched his wife, an uncharacteristically soft expression taking over. Even a blind man could see that Isla had him wrapped around her little finger.

"It seems your wives are the only sober ones," I pointed out. "Tatiana's pregnant. What's Isla's excuse?"

Marchetti flicked a glance my way, then returned it to his wife. "She said Reina is always the one responsible for getting them home safely," he finally explained. "Isla decided to be the designated walker tonight, I guess."

"As if they're walking anywhere," Manuel snickered.

"Where in the fuck did you come from?" Marchetti said.

"Looks like Romero and Dante are having one hell of a time," Manuel remarked dryly, ignoring Marchetti's question altogether. He was right though. The girls had turned their attention away from Dante and were now gesticulating wildly in Romero's face.

Reina's grandmother made her way in front of us, wearing a floor-length lilac dress and looking like the star of her own life. Her husband jutted his chin in greeting while her cold blue gaze flicked over us with disdain. Until her eyes landed on me. She paused, her lips thinning with displeasure before she resumed walking.

"Damn, man. That look... The dragon woman loves *you.*" Manuel was so

helpful with his observations tonight. “I’d sleep with one eye open if I were you.”

We all watched Romero’s mother-in-law stroll over to the speaker and yank the cord out of the wall, putting a stop to Reina’s music.

“This party is over,” she announced, her voice loud enough to rattle the silverware.

“Well, damn. It was just getting good,” Raven complained, her voice a slur.

Reina mouthed something that made them all snicker.

“Reina Amora Romero!” I watched her freeze, then slowly turn around, meeting her grandmother’s eyes across the room. “You’re better than this.”

She closed her eyes, her long blonde eyelashes resting on her cheeks. When she opened them again, they flared with stubbornness. “You’re right. Hence the reason for making a statement.”

“Reina, this behavior is unacceptable,” Romero hissed.

She didn’t seem troubled. “I agree. Marrying off a twenty-one-year-old in today’s day and age is unacceptable.”

Her friends nodded furiously in agreement. Athena even lost her balance and had to grab Raven’s hand or risk falling over.

Reina yanked another glass from a passing tray, but before she could bring it to her lips, Dante grabbed her wrist.

I’d seen enough.

I was next to him in my next breath. “Take your hand off her.” My voice was unnaturally calm, my face now inches from his. He held her wrist, her skin turning a shade paler from the loss of circulation. “Now,” I gritted.

The air stilled, the battle of wills between us calm and deadly. My gaze coasted over her. Wild blonde curls. Smooth ivory skin. And so much pink—pink heels, pink dress, pink fingernails.

“Or what, brother?” The amused breath he let out told me he knew I slipped up, but it was too late to retract the words. I was done with standing by.

I’d have to set my plan in motion. Tonight.

REINA

My pulse leapt into my throat.

Even in my intoxicated state, I could taste the tension. Blood buzzed in my ears. Words followed in Italian. Hissed, angry tones. Papà's. Grandma's. Dante's.

Everyone watched us, some glaring, others with amusement in their eyes. I didn't fucking care. I wouldn't just accept whatever they dished my way. Phoenix wouldn't either. They could all go fuck themselves.

I found Amon's gaze among all the voices while my heart hammered loudly, drowning everything out.

Bu-bum. Bu-bum.

My beating heart filled the silence, its steady humming in my ears. I couldn't find enough oxygen, his gaze drowning me. I should break this spell that weaved around us before I found myself right at the beginning of my heartbreak all over again.

One second, two seconds.

The look in his eyes flickered with turbulence and something else that set off flames through me, warmth conflicting with the cold anger I felt for him.

Dante's voice cut through the moment. "How long is this stare-down going to last?"

Phoenix closed the distance, getting in his face. "*Would you shut the fuck up!*"

Dante's amusement slowly faded as he and my sister battled wordlessly. "What is your problem with me?" he spat.

Phoenix let out a bitter, angry laugh. I didn't know if she'd read his lips or just didn't give a shit what he'd said. The latter was more likely.

Dante's dark gaze flicked my way, then returned to Phoenix, who was beyond pissed off. Rightly so.

Without warning, Phoenix rammed her knee into Dante's groin and whirled around, turning her back to him.

A round of gasps and snickers followed. I might have actually giggled. I wasn't sure, but I knew deep in my soul I was laughing.

"*He might not be able to produce children,*" Phoenix signed. "*Or orgasms for the foreseeable future.*"

We all snickered as she walked away, leaving Dante gaping after her.

"She's got issues." Dante snapped from his hunched position, glaring at Phoenix's retreating figure. I laughed lightly and his eyes narrowed on me. "And you, Reina, are a lousy drunk."

I spun toward him. "You... you're a—" I searched for a word and failed to find it. Silence settled on the space until I came up with an appropriate insult. "*You are the reason God invented the middle finger, dickwad.*"

"You're a spoiled brat," Dante spat, glaring at me.

I crossed my arms over my chest, fury quickly unfurling. "You're a liar, cheater, and—" *You look like your father.*

He smiled coldly. "You're shit-faced, so I'll give you a pass."

Raven burst into a loud laugh, her eyes shining with mischief. "Please, *biatch*. She could kick your ass with her eyes closed."

"I know what I'm going to buy you for a present," I announced with a devilish grin.

Dante raised a brow. "What?"

"A pain-relieving cream."

He gave me a blank look. "What for? I'm not in pain. Phoenix's move barely tickled me."

"No, but you will be after I kick your ass."

Proud of myself for such a witty comeback, I laughed until my cheeks hurt. My friends snickered too, shooting mean glares at Dante.

Darius appeared out of nowhere, shaking his head. "You couldn't beat anyone when sober. So if you plan on kicking his ass, better give up the booze."

Looking over at him, I smiled softly and leaned in for a hug.

"Ahhh, Darius. My favorite guy." Amon just stared stonily back at me. "I love your confidence in me, or lack thereof," I tossed out playfully, aware of those onyx eyes burning into me.

I *wanted* him to experience even an ounce of the pain I'd felt three years ago and every day since. *Do something, damn it!* But he remained stubbornly immobile, uninterested.

The air pulsed in sync with my heartbeat as I waited... hoped.

Time stretched. His every muscle was tense, the vein in his neck visibly throbbing.

If I could get away with pecking Darius's cheek without stirring trouble or getting him killed, I totally would. But I couldn't do that to him. Not to mention that Darius saw me as his baby sister.

"Wild night, huh?" Darius's voice penetrated through the haze in my brain and brought me to reality. The one where Amon didn't give a shit whether I married his brother.

I winked at him. "Not wild enough."

"Who invited you to my rehearsal dinner?" Dante's voice filtered in, grating on my nerves all over again.

"I did." I stared up at him, all fire and defiance. Then I turned to look at Amon. "Your people skills suck, Dante. Two brothers, both dickwads. It must run in the family."

Dante flashed me a cagey smile that was almost terrifying. "You would know, wouldn't you?"

My heart tripped over its own heartbeat. A tremor rolled through me, slow and painful, because something about Dante's eyes set me on edge. They reminded me of another set of terrifying eyes.

His father's.

My chest tightened and suddenly each breath felt like glass cutting through my lungs. The alcohol must have evaporated from the fear that worked overtime, putting every cell on alert, but I didn't move a muscle.

My friends and sister got so rowdy that Enrico Marchetti and Manuel had to escort them out and take them home. Isla shook her ass, fluttering her eyes at her husband all the way out the door while Manuel kept rolling his, muttering under his breath.

Probably calling them disgusting lovebirds, I snickered to myself.

Once they disappeared from sight, I glanced at Papà, only to see him watching Dante with an unreadable expression. Could he sense an unspoken threat from his desired son-in-law? I could feel it like the alcohol swimming through my bloodstream. The moment Papà announced this wedding arrangement, I felt the imminent destruction.

The blood in my veins froze over. *What if he kills me like I killed his father?* Warning bounced around in my skull.

“Could your brother give Reina a ride home?” Papà’s voice rang out and fear shot through me. My eyes darted between him and Dante. It took a moment for me to realize he stared at Amon, not his brother. “I have wedding plans to discuss with Dante.”

“Shouldn’t I be part of the wedding discussions?” I asked.

“Considering your wedding dress came in today and it is black, no.” His voice told me it wasn’t up for discussion. “We’ll handle all the wedding arrangements.”

“But—”

“Amon, are you okay to give Reina a ride home?”

“Sure, I’d love to give your daughter a ride.” Amon’s voice was filled with darkness, or maybe it was the promise of retribution. Except he was the one who’d broken me, not the other way around.

“Okay, Reina,” Papà stated calmly, oblivious to the roller coaster of emotions that was giving me whiplash. “Go with Amon. Your grandma and I will be coming to see you first thing in the morning.”

I glanced up at the man who used to fascinate me and saw my downfall staring back.

Tugging me by my elbow, he leaned in close enough to violate my personal space. “Let’s go.”

I stared up at him, refusing to move, and heat curled inside me.

“Don’t fucking tell me what to do,” I hissed.

Of course he ignored me, ushering me out of the restaurant area and down the dark corridor. It was the worst place to find yourself with an ex-lover.

Amon, dressed in a three-piece black suit, was devastatingly handsome. His dark eyes burned into mine in a way that seared my blood. His dark hair was tamed into a neat style, my fingers itching to touch it. I wanted to tug on it as I brought his lips to mine.

All the pain and humiliation he’d put me through, and I still wanted to orbit him. Be part of his universe as he was mine.

A group of women passed us by, their eyes drawn in by the chiseled lines of his cheekbones and his tall, intimidating frame. The jealous side of me wanted to claw their eyes out.

But Amon’s eyes never wavered, all his attention fixed on me. Something shifted in the air between us.

His eyes caressed their way down my body, only to return to my face.

“Nice dress. I missed your light.” Was he mocking me? “Pink should be the only color you wear, cinnamon girl.”

My heart tripped. He hadn’t called me that since—

It hurt to think about it, but it was all the reminder I needed.

“You don’t get to call me that anymore.” I narrowed my eyes.

“Who’s going to stop me?” God, I hated him. It was definitely a thin line between love and hate.

He made me hungry for his affection and his love, and I hated him for that. For making me feel this way. For craving him.

“I don’t want to spend another second in your company.” I turned to leave when he grabbed my wrist. Maybe it was because it was the first time I’d been touched in three years, or maybe it was because it was *him*. His grip felt like a band of fire leaking into my bloodstream. “You are history. I’m looking to the future.”

His teeth clenched. “*This... Us...* It will never be over. You and I, we belong like the stars and the moon. Like the tides in the ocean.”

My lungs hitched. I had craved the words for so many years, and now he was offering them to me. Just like that.

But it was too late. I was his brother’s now. Okay, not really, but I couldn’t just forget about the arranged marriage situation. Nor the way he broke my heart.

“Then tell me why?” I breathed. “Give me a good reason. Just know that I will never be yours again.”

There were times over the last three years when I would feel like I’d moved on, but then I’d remember his smiles and his words and fall right back in love with him. I couldn’t afford to be that naive, romantic girl anymore.

A flicker of something passed through his dark eyes, soft and soul-wrenching. It was something I’d seen in my own eyes each time I looked in the mirror. But I didn’t dare believe it.

Fool me once and all that.

“I can’t,” he gritted. “But believe me when I say you are the only woman I want.”

We held each other’s eyes while something heavy brewed inside my chest.

“You’re three years too late, Amon,” I whispered. “You broke me, and now you can’t fix me.” I whirled around, not able to look at him anymore,

scared I'd cave if I let myself gaze into his eyes for too long. But he refused to let me go. He moved closer, his jacket brushing my bare arm. "I hate you."

I took a small step back.

"Tell me how much, cinnamon girl." His lips tilted up.

God, that nickname. I hated it. I *should* hate it.

"I can't stand you."

"That's a pity."

A flush heated my neck. "And why's that?"

"Because of what I'm about to do."

I blinked in confusion.

"What are you going to do?" I snarked. "Kidnap me?" I snorted my disbelief. I didn't know why that came to mind except that it was exactly what Enrico Marchetti and Illias Konstantin did. "Because that's so original in your circles."

Something flashed in his eyes, and I just shook my head at this ridiculous situation. It was time for me to get the heck out of here.

We stood there, our chests flush against each other, his dark eyes burning into me.

"That's exactly right."

AMON

“You’re kidnapping me?” she repeated slowly. My answer was a non-committal smile. I’d specifically done what Illias had warned me against, but it wasn’t my fault I’d shown her my hand too soon—barely a minute around her and my focus faltered.

I laughed darkly, the temperature in the space between us dropping a few degrees. “Let’s get out of here before your papà changes the plans again.”

I clutched her forearm and she yanked away from me. Before I could say anything, she pushed past without a word or so much as a look, her shoulders stiff. I followed, admiring those curves that tempted me while the scar on her right shoulder taunted me, reminding me of how much groveling I had ahead of me.

We exited the restaurant and she whirled around, facing me. “So we’re clear, I’m not going anywhere with you.” I ignored her, signaling for the valet to bring my car around. She tapped her pink heels impatiently. “Did you hear me?”

My gaze burned into hers. She hid behind thick, steel walls, but I’d made it my mission to break them down.

“It would be hard not to, considering you’re yelling. The entire street can hear you.”

She ignored me and flicked a glance at the valet. “Call me a taxi, please.”

I gripped her elbow, digging my fingers into her soft skin. The contact seared through me and shot straight to my groin. Jesus Christ. Touching her felt like heaven.

It’d been a long time since I’d touched her, one thousand two hundred and sixty-nine days to be exact, and now that I was, I was like an addict

who'd been thrown back into the habit.

"You're drunk, cinnamon girl," I gritted. "And you're going home with me."

She had no idea I meant it literally.

"For what?" she challenged, but something sad glittered in her eyes. "It's my party, my rehearsal dinner, and I can do what I want." A muscle twitched in my jaw as I fought the urge to kiss her and shut her up that way.

"Let's not forget you pretty much missed dinner," I pointed out. "Very mature."

She didn't answer, but something told me her temper was at the point of burning this city to ashes.

"Your invitation has been rescinded," she snapped. "For all future events. Now go to hell."

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock. I was a bomb waiting to go off and change our lives as we knew it. "I'm the brother of the groom. I'll always be around."

"You're a—" She searched for a word that would offend me but couldn't seem to come up with one. "Nobody." I chuckled wryly, though there was nothing amusing about it. "I want to rip your heart out and feed it to the zoo animals."

I let out a sardonic breath. "So vicious," I said softly, the anger I'd lived with for the past three years slowly easing with each second I spent in her company.

Reina took a step toward me, her finger jabbing me in the chest. "You haven't seen anything yet. I despise you, Amon Leone. And a lifetime without seeing you wouldn't be long enough."

My gaze flicked past her head where my car was pulling up.

"Well, I'm sorry you feel that way, cinnamon girl," I drawled. "Because you're about to see me every day for the rest of our lives."

She raised her brows, her eyes shining as she stared at me. It didn't escape me the way her hands balled into fists. Her lips pushed forward into a pout.

"Dickwad." It had to be her favorite word today.

Her fists were now on her hips, and it was all it took to spur me on. I stepped forward and threw her over my shoulder. Pulling the small needle from my pocket, I used my teeth to rip the cover from the tip before piercing the skin of her bare ass. A small squeak left her as I squeezed the plunger down, injecting the tranquilizer into her as I strode to my car, opened the

door to the back seat, and slid her into it.

She was out cold in less than ten seconds.

The valet and other guests either pretended not to see or didn't care what was happening. Each set of eyes looked away as I rounded the car and slid into the driver's seat.

My eyes were trained on the rear window as I drove off, but nobody followed me. When I looked at Reina again, she was curled up in a ball, the buns fastened to the top of her head were slightly disheveled, and her hair curled wildly around her temples. I itched to wrap one around my finger and feel its silk again.

There'd be time for that later. For now, I focused back on the road, at the city lights rushing past and taking us closer to our future together.

REINA

I went from the invisible shackles of an arranged marriage to being Amon's prisoner.

Sometimes life just sucked. It'd thrown me at the mercy of the devil better known as Dante, and just as I was prepared to escape him, destiny decided to fuck with me and steer me back to the bitter prince. The only man who could do more damage to me than Dante Leone.

So here I was, back on Amon's yacht, questioning everything. My beliefs. My purpose. My plans. My whole being.

When I first woke up, my mouth was dry and my mind groggy, my temples throbbing. A glass of water and two pills awaited me. It might've been a trap, but with the headache I was sporting, I was willing to risk it.

I took the pills and gulped the water down, then closed my eyes. When I came to next, my headache was gone and the moon was still high in the night sky, although I had no idea how late—or early—it was.

I could feel the steady rocking beneath my feet and knew we were already moving. I let my gaze roam the dark room, its familiarity creeping up my spine. It was the room where I'd lost my virginity to Amon.

Memories flooded in as the waves hit the yacht. I sat for what seemed like forever before I stood up and made my way around the room, checking each corner, starting with the door. It was locked.

I was so royally screwed.

There was one thing for certain. Amon's enormous yacht had a different appeal tonight than it had three years ago. The further we sailed, the more my arranged marriage felt like a distant memory.

This was bad. How in the heck was I to run from Amon if we were out at

sea? I could swim, but not for miles. I padded to the window and peered outside, but all I could see was the moon reflecting off the dark water.

No shoreline.

If only I knew where we were approximately and our surroundings!

A heavy sigh left me, squeezing my chest, but before I could wallow in self-pity, heavy footsteps sounded outside my room.

The door opened and there he was. My heartbreak. My devastation. My ruin.

I closed the distance between us and pounded my fists against his chest. “I demand you take me back to my apartment. Back to land. Anywhere but *here*.”

“No.”

“But—”

He threw me a chilling look from the side of his eye. “Not another word about leaving me.”

Who did he think he was?

Realizing I was too close to him, his warmth cocooning me in his scent, I took a step back. Then another. It was too hard to breathe around him.

“I have no idea what’s going on, but my family *will* destroy you.” He pulled the door shut with a soft click. “Besides, Darius—”

One moment I was standing there and the next the breath was knocked out of my lungs when strong fingers wrapped around my throat and slammed me against the floor-to-ceiling window.

Amon’s face was inches from mine, my lungs greedily inhaling his addictive scent despite my clear distaste for the man. It’d been a long time since he was this close to me.

“Don’t mention him to me again, Reina, or I swear to God, I will end him and hang his body off this boat for all to see what happens to those who touch you.”

His nostrils flared and his jaw clenched as tension steamed from his body.

I swallowed, aware more than ever that the boy I fell for was gone. Although, my body clearly missed the memo because the throbbing ache between my legs was alarming. I had to get away from him before this carnal desire did something stupid and overrode my brain.

“Get your hands off me,” I said, my voice eerily calm. If the situation hadn’t been so dire, I would’ve mentally high-fived myself. “You lost the right to touch me.” And then, because I clearly had a death wish, I added,

“I’m your brother’s now, and only he can touch me.”

Mental barf. There was zero chemistry between Dante and me, although there was plenty of animosity.

“What did you say?” His tone should have been enough.

“I said I prefer Dante to you,” I stated with foolish bravado.

He mustn’t have liked that at all because his grip on my throat tightened.

“Has he touched you?” I pressed my lips together, determined not to answer him. He lost the right to questions too. His voice dropped when he repeated, “Has Dante touched you?”

A war of shivers broke out over my skin at the way his voice darkened.

The battle of wills reflected in our gazes, my own resistance staring back at me in his dark eyes.

I lifted my chin. “None of your business.”

“It’s very much my business.” His grip tightened. The fucking nerve. “Answer, or there’s going to be punishment.”

“Debatable. You’re probably going to lose your hands when my family gets ahold of you,” I scoffed despite my trepidation and the unnatural way my heart shuddered. In fear, I convinced myself. “Now, for the last time, get your hands off me. I’m not game for whatever *this* is.”

“You...” He trailed off, closing his eyes for a brief second. It was enough to soak in his features. He was so close but so far away.

I was no longer that innocent girl. He’d broken me. Killing his father had finished the job, extinguished my light, and made him forever unobtainable.

When his eyes opened again, I was dragged into their abyss against my will.

“You leave me no choice, then,” he remarked in a dark tone.

I barely had time to process his words when my yelp echoed in the air.

For the second time in less than a day, he yanked me off my feet and threw me over his shoulder. The world was upside down, Amon’s stride sure and confident as he made his way across the room and then unapologetically threw me on top of the mattress.

“What’s your problem?” I breathed, shuffling to prop myself up on my elbows. For a moment, we stared at each other, memories of the last time we were on this bed together dancing through the air. Judging by the look in his eyes, he was remembering the same.

I tried to control my wild thundering heartbeat with measured breaths.

Amon stood at the foot of the bed as I watched him peel his jacket off,

revealing a white shirt that'd molded against his muscles. He was unbuttoning his cuffs and rolling the sleeves to his elbows when I spotted it.

For a moment, the world slipped away. The bracelet I gifted him three years ago—our matching yin and yang—wrapped around his wrist, the leather band worn thin. It wasn't Japanese, it had nothing to do with either of our heritages, it just fit the story of the two of us. At least I thought so.

He followed my gaze, and when our eyes met, I saw the entire solar system in them.

"I never take it off."

"I threw mine away," I lied.

"But you're still wearing the pendant," he pointed out.

"Only because it's on my mother's necklace," I spat.

"Extra punishment for you, then," he said, but there was no heat in his voice. God, I wished all these emotions would go away. I wanted them wiped clean and forgotten.

"What punishment?" I cleared my throat. "I didn't do anything wrong. You did."

"You will answer my question one way or another." His words felt like a bite of winter against my burning skin.

He unbuckled his belt and my eyes locked on his strong veiny hands as he slowly removed it.

"What type of punishment is this?" I didn't like the husky, breathless tone to my voice. I despised this reaction to him. My whole body erupted with goosebumps, igniting flames everywhere he looked.

"What do you think?"

I shook my head, scrambling away from him. I couldn't be liable for my actions if he touched me. It'd been too long.

He rounded the bed like a predator circling their prey, and the moment he reached over, I flinched, my back hitting the headboard.

"You can stop this any time," he drawled. "Just answer the question."

I swallowed. "Question?"

"Has Dante touched you? Kissed you?"

It made no sense why he wanted to know. I wasn't questioning his transgressions over the past three years. I didn't want to know of the women he'd been with.

"Fuck you." There was no heat in my voice.

"Very well." He wrapped the end of the belt around his strong hand and

my breathing became labored.

Shudders traveled through my body and gathered between my legs. Holy fucking shit. Was I wet?

No. It couldn't be. My body was confused, hypersensitive. Abstinence and loneliness put me at a disadvantage, and my body chose this exact moment to become sexually frustrated.

Amon effortlessly seized both my hands and a shock of electricity bolted through me at the contact.

It'd been three years since I was touched so intimately. The force of this attraction stilled me as he fastened my wrists to the headboard above my head.

A relieved breath left me. I didn't think I was into belt play or any of that shit. The moment I thought that, I scolded myself.

I'd be engaging in no kind of play with this man.

The leather secured me to the board, stretching my arms and preventing me from moving.

"Amon, I'm serious," I gritted, pissed off. "Unbind me or I'll murder you when I escape this. I'm done with your bullshit."

He ignored me, letting his forefinger slide from my wrist, down my arm, until he brought it to my cheek. Much to my horror, my lips parted and my skin sizzled beneath his touch.

"You will never be done with me, cinnamon girl."

The audacity of this fucker.

"Release me." I yanked on the stupid bindings, cursing myself for not thinking quicker on my feet.

But more than anything, I was disappointed at how I still desired him, how my whole being lit up in his proximity.

My nostrils filled with his citrusy scent, his heat seeping through my pores. My dress rubbed against my bare thighs, every inch of my body heightened with hormones that suddenly seemed to be in turbo mode.

My nipples were hard and achy.

I'd have liked to blame the alcohol, but deep down, I knew it was all me. My lips parted when Amon's fingers found their way under my dress. I couldn't let him find the evidence of my arousal, so I pressed my thighs tightly together.

My heart drummed so hard it threatened to leap out of my chest. His fingers brushed over my thighs, sending shivers through me. He was almost

there, where I needed him the most. I craved it and feared it.

Don't let him, my brain warned.

Take it all, my body demanded. It'd been a long time coming.

He hovered over me, almost touching but not quite. It stimulated every inch of my skin, making me crave a reprieve with desperation. The moment his fingers brushed against my soaked panties, my back arched off the bed.

"Some things never change," he purred.

His consuming gaze studied the length of me in a slow, lazy way that told me he would take his sweet time with me. The notion had me hyperventilating.

He wrenched my dress, shredding it with staggering ease. As if it were made of paper.

There was nothing sweet about this Amon. He was more intense, darker somehow. His face looked harsher, his jaw more angular. There was a certain danger to him now.

"Did Dante touch you?"

A part of me wanted to submit to him, cave in. But the stubborn part of me pressed my lips together, refusing to answer.

"None of your business. Amon, I swear—"

My words got stuck in the back of my throat when he unclasped my bra, sending my breasts bouncing free. If I'd known where I'd end up, I would have definitely opted for the more complicated bra with the clasp in the back instead of the push-up one with easy access.

The fact that I was bound and unable to do anything added a perverse notch to my throbbing core.

"By all means, deny me the answer," he drawled darkly. "And we'll do this all night. I'll make it worthwhile, I promise."

His big hand traced my body, lazily brushing over my stomach until he reached my pussy.

"I hate you," I breathed, fighting my body's response.

His mouth hovered over mine. "You can lie to yourself, but not to me."

He brushed against me with the tip of his nose, bringing his mouth so close I could taste it. I closed my eyes, my fingernails digging into my palms instead of doing what they desired and reaching up to tangle in his black hair.

His kiss was soft, yearning. His body covered mine like a weighted blanket.

"I hate you," I breathed against his mouth once more. "I hate you so

fucking much.”

He kissed me harder, a harsh growl vibrating in his chest and turning me into hot liquid.

I grasped for my reason, desperate to hold on to my sanity. My hate.

In another instant, he was ripping my panties, the sharp sting against my flesh making me flinch.

“Tell me again,” he growled, his mouth moving against mine.

I shook my head, unable to remember what he was asking. “What?”

“Tell me you hate me,” he whispered.

“I hate you.” He kissed me harder—deeper—nearly sucking out my soul. I returned the kiss, emotions high and running circles through me. His lips invaded mine, dominating me, and the worst part was that I let him.

Because I’d missed him with an ache that never eased. I lay completely naked under him while he was fully clothed, doing what he pleased, drawing on the parts of my pleasure like a map. My hips arched, grinding against his, craving friction.

Then, through the carnal fog, it occurred to me I wasn’t fighting at all. If anything, I was playing right into his hands. My legs were parted and I ground against him.

Without a moment’s hesitation, I rammed my knee into him. Much to my dismay, he caught my leg, his grip firm on my thigh.

I needed this to end before I came out of it even more broken.

His palm caressed gently, lovingly even. He looked at me like he—

No, it was all a lie. He was just a jealous prick. His fingers thrust inside me and a moan bubbled in my throat, but I quickly swallowed it. I was completely at his mercy. His knuckles brushed against my clit and my hips arched off the bed as he fucked me with his fingers.

It felt so hot. So erotic. He thrust faster, harder. The buildup threatened to erupt and pull me under.

“Stop it, please,” I cried out, all the while pressing into his palm.

Sweat coated my skin, shudders rolled down my body, and my nipples ached. I hadn’t been this turned on since our last time together and my body was at its limit, screaming for release.

I hated that I was completely at his mercy.

Amon’s stony expression met mine as he teased my clit with his fingers, the scent of my arousal filling the room.

“Just answer my question, Reina, and I’ll make you come.”

My breaths came in harder and my skin flushed a deeper red, heating every inch of me while my hips involuntarily jerked.

“Fuck. Off,” I gritted.

“I’d much rather fuck you,” he growled. “But if you fight me, I’ll just play with you. I’ll edge you to the peak but never let you reach it. Not until you give me what I want.”

And then he did exactly that.

As exhaustion started to slowly pull me under, Amon kissed the top of my head.

“It’s you and me against the world, cinnamon girl.”

AMON

I t nearly destroyed me not to give in.

My cock strained against my pants, demanding to be inside her. I didn't want to do something I'd regret for the rest of my life.

So when she dozed off, I took it as a blessing in disguise, because I knew I wouldn't have been able to resist her much longer. I untied her wrists, pulled the covers over her naked body, and then made my way to the bathroom with controlled steps. I needed a cold shower. It was the only thing that would fix this raging hard-on. I couldn't jerk off though. Not while I denied my cinnamon girl her pleasure.

After my freezing shower, I stared at my reflection in the mirror, the flames burning inside me still present. The man who stared back was different to the one who'd taken her on a carousel ride and danced with her under a lantern-filled sky. I was angrier, full of fucked-up energy and rage so pent up that I could level a continent.

Only the woman on the other side of the door had the ability to ease this anger, and she didn't want anything to do with me.

I pulled on a pair of sweatpants and a white T-shirt, then headed back into the suite.

Reina lay in the middle on top of her shredded dress, her naked skin flushed with arousal. She was in a deep, slumbering sleep, her mouth slightly parted as her chest rose and fell.

I didn't expect her to be so stubborn, refusing to budge. Not even a little. Maybe it was a new side of her, or it was there all along but I never got to see it.

I climbed into bed and wrapped my arm around her still form. I tried to

fall asleep, but my brain refused to shut off. So did my cock, pulsing harder.

A low groan rose in my throat, stirring Reina, and I inwardly cursed myself.

“Shhh,” I murmured softly, and my chest tightened when she burrowed into me with a soft sigh.

Suddenly, everything seemed to be right with the world.

I closed my eyes and slept through the night for the first time since I shattered both our hearts.



I woke up to the faint scent of cinnamon and a leg thrown over mine. Almost as if she were staking a claim. I was perfectly fine with it too. I was hers; she had always been mine.

I traced my finger over the smooth skin on her thighs until I felt it become bumpy and or raised. I narrowed my eyes and shifted so I could inspect it better.

Were those—

No, it couldn't be.

Yet... they looked too perfect to have come from anything else. They didn't appear recent, but still my chest twisted at the thought of Reina hurting herself. That. Wasn't. Okay.

I returned my pensive gaze over the horizon.

Sunrise spread vibrant colors, casting an orange palette across the sea. After I kidnapped her yesterday, I drove to my helicopter that was on standby, then flew us to Monaco where my yacht was docked.

And here we were.

A new day. A new chapter. I just had to get Reina to trust me again, and it'd be the two of us against the world. *Together.*

I watched her sleep, her gold hair fanning across the pillowcase. I brushed a stray lock of it away from her face and traced my finger across her delicate jawline.

“I'm not letting you go,” I whispered.

An edge of warning rang in my brain, but I ignored it. I'd lock her up and throw away the key until she stayed of her own free will if I had to. The man I'd been before the lies and deceit knew what I was doing was wrong, and

still I didn't stop. I wouldn't be able to coerce her into forgiving me and giving me—us—another chance if I set her free.

Besides, I was sparing her and Dante from the true nightmare that awaited them.

She shifted slightly, giving me a glimpse of the scar on her right shoulder. I'd harbor the guilt that scar represented for the rest of my life.

I reached for my phone and checked on my business dealings. Everything had been running smoothly, but I liked to keep my finger on the pulse. When I moved on to the summary report of my cousin's shipment, my lips tugged up. I'd paid off some Feds and had another one of his shipments disrupted. Another one of Perez Cortes's, to be precise.

This constant bullshit with my cousin and Cortes bothered me. The bodies of women—the clones of Reina we recently found—kept nagging at me. There was something brewing, I could feel it in my bones.

And then there was my cousin who I didn't trust further than I could throw him, but now even less so. Itsuki had his hands in Sofia Volkov's bullshit, Cortes's flesh trafficking, and who knew what else.

It was time to end him, but not before I won over my queen.

I was just about to put my phone away when a message from my captain filtered through.

Your packages are on board.

A whimper yanked my attention from my phone and I found Reina writhing in the sheets.

"No, no, no." Stark terror drenched her voice and a deep frown creased her face. "Mamma, please."

Sweat coated her upper lip and her delicate features were full of pain as she thrashed, her legs gripping my torso like she was holding on for dear life. She whispered unintelligible words, but all I could focus on was the way seeing her in pain gutted me.

I grabbed her by her shoulders and shook her. Her eyes flew open and her blue irises were as dark as the deepest oceans. Like Dante's. The resemblance was so strong it felt like a gut punch. How had I never seen it before?

Slowly, the deep dark blue turned into aquamarine, leaving nothing but shattered innocence staring back at me.

"Breathe." I squeezed her shoulders, and only then did she slightly relax. She inhaled a lungful of air. "What were you dreaming about?"

She sank her teeth into her bottom lip and my eyes followed the motion. Then she slowly exhaled, her lips pursed and her eyes narrowed.

Shoving against my chest, she snapped.

“Why are you in the same bed as me?” Even when she was mad at me, glaring at me with hate in her eyes, this woman did shit to me. The sheet slid down her body, pooling around her waist. Her eyes widened and she rushed to cover herself up.

“It’s my bed too.”

She sneered. “What? Not enough beds on this boat?”

I laughed darkly. “There are plenty, but I prefer to lie next to you.”

“Fuck you.” She was determined. “I’d prefer not to have you anywhere near me.”

She behaved like she was disgusted by me, but I could see the subtle tremor rolling over her body.

“Why?”

She blinked, confusion marring her features. “Why what?”

“Why don’t you want me near you?” It didn’t matter how long it took, we would reignite our connection. We would find ourselves back where it all started. “Worried you won’t be able to resist me?”

“No.”

She rolled her eyes, but there was a pink hue that covered her cheeks. She was still attracted to me, still wanted me. It was a start, and deep down in my black heart, I knew sooner or later, she’d cave. And I’d ensure it happened sooner versus later.

“It sure sounds like it,” I deadpanned. “Otherwise why avoid me? I slept just fine next to you.” Like a baby, in fact.

She glared at me before giving me a sweet smile that promised retribution.

“Do me a favor, Amon. Get the fuck out of *my* room. I want to get dressed, and I don’t want the wrong brother gawking at me naked.”

I flashed her a maniacal grin.

“My brother will never—fucking ever—have you.” So help me God. “Especially when I send him the video of you writhing under me as I fucked you with my fingers.”

Her mouth parted and my cock responded immediately.

“I swear to God, Amon, if you do that, I will murder you.”

The way she glared at me told me she meant it too.

The woman I was about to marry was as stubborn as her brother.

REINA

Morning came, and with it, new problems that started and ended with my first and only lover.

I didn't know where it all went wrong, but it was painfully clear to me that Amon wasn't who I thought he was. He wasn't my savior. At least not anymore.

Which meant I was left to my own devices.

Grandma and Papà would be searching for me. Would they think I bolted? Fuck, I had to get out of here. I had to ensure Phoenix didn't pay for my mistake. It would be catastrophic. Amon's supposed recording of us would be even more so.

"I don't believe you," I finally said, calling him out on his bluff. "Y-you didn't have your phone on you. How could you have recorded anything?"

He smiled, so fucking pleased with himself. "Are you asking for proof?"

"Yes."

"I thought you'd never ask," he drawled, flashing me a smile that would have, once upon a time, stopped my heart. Yet right now, all it did was piss me off. He reached for his phone on the nightstand and slid it open.

My pulse trembled when I saw myself in the shot, wrists secured to the headboard while a soft moan filled the air. There I lay, naked on Amon's bed, grinding on his hand. I stared at the screen playing in front of my eyes, revulsion rising in my throat.

This wasn't real. This couldn't be happening to me.

He leaned in and his voice rumbled in my ear. "Just say the word and I'll send it to your papà and Dante. So they know once and for all who you belong to."

Panic expanded in my lungs, clawing and biting for escape.

“Please don’t,” I begged. Tears burned the back of my eyes. It was humiliating to think of anyone seeing the video.

“Tell me what I want to know.” Who was this man? Taunting and harsh, yes, but was he cruel too?

Tears ran down my cheeks at the impossibility of the situation.

“Dante and I have never done anything,” I whimpered. “Not even a kiss.”

The look of pure relief appeared on his face. He lowered to his haunches in front of me and rubbed his thumb over my lip, slowly trailing a finger down my neck and into my hair.

“I can’t lose you again,” he said softly, nuzzling his face against my hair while twisting a curl around his finger. “I want them to know.” With one press of his finger, the sound of a message being sent hit my ears. My heart dropped like lead. “You’re mine now,” he purred against my ear, his voice sinister.

Acid and anger climbed up my throat. I lay naked except for the two pendants pressing against my skin, serving as a reminder of how far I’d fallen. Heart racing against my rib cage, I held his gaze.

I screamed at the top of my lungs, letting out all my frustration.

“You have no idea what you’ve done,” I lashed out, attempting to headbutt him. He was too fast, jerking back out of reach. “Take me back home, you fucking asshole.”

“No.”

His calm voice enraged me even more. “Release me.” Desperation crawled up my throat. “I swear to God, Amon.” I pounded my fist against his chest. “I will never forgive you.” Tears burned the back of my eyes. “I need to get to Phoenix.”

“She’s safe back at your apartment.”

“You’re giving me whiplash,” I said, glaring at him menacingly. “You think you can come back into my life and do whatever you want.” I let out a bitter laugh. “You’re history to me.” When he didn’t respond, I screamed with raw fury. “You hear me? You’re fucking history.”

His eyes flashed with something terrifying.

“Better watch it, Reina.” He reached for me and I flinched. Not because I was scared but because I knew what happened when he touched me. “Push me and I might prove you wrong.”

“Get lost,” I breathed, clutching the sheets to my chest and feeling angrier

than ever at myself for being so weak. “I have to get dressed and I’m starving. You’d better have food here. Otherwise I’ll throw myself overboard.”

“Try and run, cinnamon girl. I’ll catch you every time.” The subtle threat in his voice penetrated my veins, freezing my blood from the inside out. “Change and meet me on the upper deck. You know the way.”

I jumped off the bed when the door closed behind him. A cool draft touched my bare skin and sent a shiver through me.

I rushed around, looking for something to wear. My feet soft against the plush carpet, I reached the dresser and opened it. My eyes widened and a soft gasp slipped through my lips. It was stocked with designer clothes for every season. Givenchy. Prada. My designs.

“Don’t be so easily impressed,” I muttered to myself. “The guy is an asshole. Remember what he did three years ago. Remember what he did ten minutes ago.”

Self-loathing came back with a vengeance. The sun slanted across my body as I rushed to pick out something to wear—undergarments, leggings, a pink Givenchy sweater—then headed for the shower.

Despite the water spraying hot against my skin, cold prickles erupted over me as I thought of all the shit I’d done wrong. I’d managed to make a giant mess of everything. I was supposed to take Phoenix and run, not get kidnapped by none other than my fiancé’s brother. Worry slithered down my spine as different possibilities of escape played through my mind.

Swimming. Getting to the captain’s cabin to call the coast guard. Stealing the yacht. Flagging down another boat. So many ideas and no clue how to execute a single one of them.

I scrubbed every inch of my skin until it turned red, standing under the streaming water for minutes. Once out of the shower, I got dressed, slipping the one-piece on first.

I needed a plan to get off this godforsaken yacht. A good one.

My eyes flicked to the horizon, the shoreline now in sight. I could steal a tender and drive it ashore. How hard could lowering it into the water and starting up the motor be?

Swimming it is, I decided as goosebumps broke over my skin at the thought of the cold water. It was December and hardly the time for a dip in the sea.

I made my way to the upper deck. It was larger than I remembered. The

sun glimmered over the spotless wood and the sea reflected off the expansive windows. My ballet flats were silent against the wood floor as I approached the table where Amon was seated, speaking to a man. Judging by his uniform, he had to be the captain.

Without a word, I took a seat on the opposite side of the table from Amon.

“You took your sweet time.” His words dripped with sarcasm like a strawberry freshly dipped in chocolate. His voice was husky, pouring over me like dark silk. Seductive. Smoky.

“Nobody asked you to wait.” I shot him a dry look and found him smirking at me. “What?” I snapped.

“I have a gift for you.”

“Not interested.” Not after the shit he pulled earlier. “Not unless it’s dropping me off at the nearest port.”

“I’m afraid it’s not that.”

Ignoring him, I reached for a bagel off the tray and spread cream cheese on it. I missed dinner last night, and the moment I bit into it, my hunger flared.

He switched chairs, ignoring my resentment and glares, and moved over to sit next to me. I kept eating, intent on not looking his way. I chewed on my bagel, then washed it down with the orange juice that was waiting for me.

Amon placed three boxes on the table in front of me and my teeth clenched at having to look his way. “What is this?”

“Your gifts.”

“I don’t want gifts from you.” This anger toward him spread like a rash. “Wouldn’t touch them with a ten-foot pole.”

“I’ll change your mind.” He didn’t seem offended. Why in the fuck wasn’t he offended? “Your attitude reminds me of someone.”

I sat up straighter. “I don’t give a shit. Stop talking to me.”

His eyes gleamed, the old stars and galaxies dancing in them. Damn him.

“Don’t you want to know the occasion?” he asked, unperturbed with my defiance.

“Nope.”

“They’re gifts for your birthday,” he proceeded to say.

“It’s not my birthday,” I muttered. The fucker didn’t even remember my actual birthday.

“The birthdays I’ve missed, cinnamon girl.”

My heart fluttered, but I immediately hardened it. “Stop calling me that,” I snarled. “You lost that right a long time ago. And there’s nothing you could possibly give me that I want.”

His jaw visibly twitched. “Open your gifts, Reina. It’s rude to refuse.”

“As if I give a shit after what you’ve done.” I immediately bit my lip, cursing myself. I didn’t want him to know I was bitter. “Asshole,” I muttered, flipping my hair and returning my attention to my bagel.

“Did you say something?”

I closed my eyes and focused on the taste of the bagel and the feel of the cool winter air against my skin. Truthfully, each moment I spent out in this cold had my earlier resolve about swimming ashore wavering.

I tried to remember how long it took for hypothermia to kick in and couldn’t. I really should have paid more attention in school. I looked out into the distance. It couldn’t be that hard. Just had to jump in and then maybe, if I was lucky, another boat would pick me up and I’d be back in Paris in no time.

In the middle of winter? my brain mocked. Maybe I’d try for the tender and swimming could be my last resort. Yes, good plan.

Silence followed as I continued to eat my bagel, ignoring him and his gifts. I bided my time, studying the surroundings and contemplating where the tender would be located.

“Where are we?” I finally asked. It looked like Southern France, but it was hard to tell.

“Open one gift and I’ll tell you.”

I clenched my fist, the bagel crumbling under the pressure. I let it fall onto the plate with a thud, wiped my fingers, and then ripped the first shiny pink package open. A black velvet box. A soft clank and the box opened.

I stared at it, tears burning my eyes. I refused to let them fall. A platinum bracelet with the symbols for yin and yang, encrusted in opalescent and black diamonds, holding each other as one. Separate but together.

I refused to move, to touch it. Why did he keep giving me jewelry?

Almost as if he could read my mind, his next words slashed my heart in two. “You’re the sun and the moon. Diamonds are just the stars that dance around you. So you can shine brighter, and I can always find you.”

Damn Amon Leone and his stupid sweet words. I didn’t want them. I didn’t want him.

He reached for it, then grabbed my hand and clasped it on my wrist. He

concentrated on my wrist where his fingers made contact, his touch and the gift fraying the edges of my nerves. I was approaching dangerous territory, letting him touch me.

I yanked my hand back. “Where are we?”

“South of France. Going back to where we started.”

I stared at the man—a heartless monster—and realized I no longer knew him.

Maybe I never did.

AMON

She looked around, tilting her chin over the horizon. “So how far from the shore are we?”

Her tone was too aloof and an alarm instantly shot through me. Call it a sixth sense or premonition, but I knew she’d try to run. Some way. Somehow.

Her eyes roamed about the deck casually until they landed on a knife, and I watched her body tense. She shot up, but instead of lunging for it, she flicked a glance my way.

“I want a tomato sandwich.”

“Suit yourself.” I pulled out my phone, scrolling down my emails to answer the ones that needed my immediate attention.

From the corner of my eye, I watched as she made her way to the other side of our table, reaching for a dragon fruit and a tomato. Clearly she wasn’t paying attention because nobody would mix the two.

The corner of my mouth lifted as she reached for the knife. She was so predictable it was almost endearing.

The breeze swept through the upper deck, blowing her wild curls around her heart-shaped face.

She cut the tomato into slices, slowly and methodically. I watched her fingers flex around the handle and I could almost hear her mind working, weighing her options.

“I wouldn’t if I were you,” I murmured softly.

Her head whipped in my direction. Tension sang in the space between us, her lips parting and her fingers trembling. The moment she made a move to raise her arm, I was up and behind her, grabbing hold of her wrist.

The knife dropped with a loud clunk, clattering against the table, and a frustrated cry tore from her throat. "I hate you."

I chuckled darkly. "So you keep saying. Although your moans could have fooled me last night."

"Go to hell," she muttered, striding away from me and throwing herself into the farthest chair where she proceeded to stare out to sea.

Crouching, I picked up the knife and threw it into the basket of dirty dishes, then fixed her a sandwich.

I put the food in front of her and sat back down, giving her some space. Wordlessly, she started eating, ignoring me a little too well.

Now that I knew my brother hadn't touched her, the fury within me eased. However, I wanted to know if anyone else had heard her soft moans, felt her clenching around their cock. I wanted their names so I could find them and kill them.

All in due time though.

I let her eat in peace, pleasantly surprised with her appetite as I got back to my emails. Once she was finished, I put my phone down and met her eyes.

"We should teach you self-defense," I said.

"What? Eager to die?" she snickered. I missed the carefree, innocent girl she once was and hated that I'd destroyed that. But I had to admit this side of her had my dick twitching. I loved her backbone. "Besides, I already know how to fight. Darius taught me."

I gritted my teeth.

Darius.

A name I'd gladly never hear again. My jaw tightened, fighting the urge to lash out and go find the blond asshole, cut his pretty hair, and smash his face. It took me a few moments to compose myself and stop the creative murderous ideas from playing in my mind.

"Want to go sightseeing today?"

She narrowed her eyes suspiciously. "Sightseeing what?"

"The beaches, caves, cities. Whatever your heart desires." I kept my answer vague. Her hand flitted to her neck and she fidgeted with her pendants. I still couldn't believe she kept mine. It gave me hope that we could move on and start fresh.

"I want my phone. I want to text my sister."

"She's fine."

The fire in her eyes flared. "You don't know that," she hissed. "I'm not

doing anything with you until I hear from her.”

“You can use my phone,” I offered.

She hesitated, weighing her options. She had none. I wouldn’t risk losing her, not until she came to terms with being mine forever. Her phone and clutch were secured in my safe.

“Fine.” She extended her hand, tapping her foot impatiently. Pissed-off Reina could be quite entertaining. The moment her fingers touched the phone, she let out a frustrated breath. “It’s locked.”

“And?”

“And I need the code to open it,” she snapped.

“It’s your birthday.”

Her eyes were ablaze with a mixture of volatile emotions, but she opted not to say anything. She typed in the digits and then tried FaceTiming her sister. Riiing. Riiing. Riiing.

No answer.

“Damn it,” she muttered, distress evident in her voice. “I’ll text her.”

Her fingers skated over the screen and then the sound of a message being sent hit my ears. She waited, her eyes glued to the screen, willing it to light up.

“No answer?”

“No,” she gritted, handing back my phone reluctantly. “You can’t keep me prisoner forever.”

“You want to bet, cinnamon girl?” I drawled with a lazy smile.

She shot to her feet. “Stop. Calling. Me. That.”

I raised an eyebrow, rising to my full height. “And who’s going to stop me?”

Her curls flew around her shoulders, and before I could think better of it, my hand darted out and wrapped them around my finger. Her mouth parted, staring at me. I released them, grabbing the back of her neck and tugging her to me.

Her fingers curled around my biceps as she steadied herself. Her breaths came in fast, and her grip on my sides tightened.

Lowering my voice and lacing the words with seduction, I said, “You’re mine, cinnamon girl. Get it through your head, because I’m never letting you go again.”

Anger warred on her face before she whispered, “I’m not yours anymore. Get that through *your* head, bitter prince.”

Leaning closer, my lips brushed over her flushed cheek. “Never.”

She yanked herself away, then whirled around, leaving me staring after her again. Something warned me to follow as my eyes landed on the other two gifts she hadn’t bothered to open. One for every birthday I missed, each with another kanji pendant to add to her necklace.

Reina was determined not to give in, but at least she kept her bracelet on. I’d take that as a good sign. The sooner I put a ring on her finger, the sooner she’d be all mine.

Tomorrow, I reminded myself. We’d wake up in Venice and elope there. I had the Church of Saint Mary of Miracles lined up. The very same church that every Romero man had married in before. Did I give a shit about it? Fuck no, but I thought it’d be a nice touch for Reina’s sake.

Pushing off the table, I felt something was amiss. I’d learned a long time ago to trust my gut.

So I went searching for her.

I couldn’t stand keeping my distance, not anymore. With each minute that passed, my paranoia mounted. Until a reflection of gold caught my eyes.

She was by the tender.

“Stop,” I shouted, my feet already racing toward her.

Her eyes darted my way, the blue reflecting the sea. She ran to the railing and jumped before I could reach her.

The world stood still, an endless second as I screamed for my men. Running to the edge, I saw her breach the surface. Then she was kicking and swimming in the direction of the shoreline. No way would she make it.

Not before she died of hypothermia. I couldn’t believe she would rather die than stay with me.

Well, wish denied. She would live the rest of her life healthy and happy. With me and only me.

Without a second thought, I jumped in after her. My body hit the water, the coldness snatching the breath out of me. The waves were rough, but I started swimming after her. I kicked my legs hard, closing the distance between us. Her surfing years made her a strong swimmer, but nothing was adequate preparation for the arctic temperatures seizing one’s muscles.

She paused, looking behind her. Our eyes caught as a wave hit her. She thrashed, a choked breath escaping her. Another wave slammed into her and her head went under.

I grabbed her forearm and pulled her to me.

“No,” she screamed, trying to break free as I swam back toward the yacht with my grip firmly around her.

“Stop it, Reina,” I ordered. “Or we’ll both drown.”

She froze for a moment, then her body went limp. With her secured, I swam over to the orange buoy and slid it over her, then signaled the men to lift us up.

It took several minutes for us to both be lifted back onto the deck.

“Blankets,” I barked. It took thirty seconds for the captain to hand me the blankets and I rushed to wrap her in them. “Do you need help taking your wet clothes off?” She shook her head, her teeth clattering and her fingers shivering so badly she couldn’t grip the hem of her sweater. I took her hands and curled her fingers around the blanket. “Hold this.” She did without question. “Captain, do you have a knife on you?”

He handed it to me without question and I cut her shirt open, then did the same with her pants, noting the pink panties and bra underneath her clothes.

“Next time you do something so reckless, I’m going to put you across my knee,” I barked, adrenaline still pumping through my veins. The thought of her drowning was enough to bring me to my knees.

She rolled her eyes. *Rolled her fucking eyes.* “You jumped too.”

“You could have drowned,” I pointed out needlessly.

Judging by her expression and annoyance sparkling in her eyes, she wasn’t the least bit concerned.

We both opened our mouths at the same time, likely to continue our bickering, when the captain’s voice interrupted. “I would have let you both drown.”

Then he whirled around and left us.

“He’s a red flag if I’ve ever seen one,” she muttered.

“Agreed.” But he was one of the best captains in the world and had successfully evaded pirates on more than one occasion. The rest of the crew dispersed, leaving the two of us alone.

With Reina safely wrapped in a blanket, I shed my own clothes and reached for one when a soft gasp had me pausing. I turned around and found Reina staring at my back.

“Is there a shark bite on my back?” I asked, amused at her horrified expression.

“Your tattoo.”

Her eyes met mine, unspoken meaning hanging between us. After all the

shit that happened, I'd gotten a yin and yang tattoo on my left shoulder blade, right where her scar was.

To remember.

The bitter aftertaste of my guilt still lingered on my tongue even after all this time.

Her brows furrowed in confusion. "I don't understand."

"Neither do I, cinnamon girl." I reached for my own blanket and wrapped it around me. "You'd rather drown than be near me?"

It was a far cry from the girl who watched me with hearts in her eyes.

REINA

I didn't understand him. Not one bit.

He broke my heart, but ended up getting a tattoo that would remind him of me? It made no sense.

"I want to get back to my sister," I finally said. "I can't let her take the fall with your brother because of me."

He proceeded to dry off, then shot me a look. "Trust me, Reina. Better her than you."

Then I remembered all the shit he made me go through last night and my anger flared. "Why? Because you decided you're not done with me?" I curled my fist and punched him in the gut, taking us both by surprise.

"Fuck, Reina." Satisfaction filled me and I went for another punch when he blocked it. "I don't think so."

"Go to hell," I spat.

"I've been there. Every single day for three years. Every day without you."

Hope mixed with what I was already feeling. It was a vicious circle that nothing good could come out of. Hope and empathy for the Leone family would destroy me, just like it had my mother.

"It didn't look like you had a hard time to me," I muttered, still pissed off at him. It might have been bratty and childish, but I fucking hated that he kissed someone else, and even worse, danced to our song with someone else. And then he fucking sent a recording of the two of us.

I started to shake with humiliation. It was all I needed to remember for me to want to murder him again. "I want to be taken ashore."

He smiled coldly, a smirk on his face telling me he was enjoying our

bickering. “No.”

God, what I’d give to wipe that smirk off his face! My grip on the blanket tightened, and his eyes fell to my breasts. His gaze caught fire and my body instantly responded. Damn him.

“I guess we’ll be swimming a lot,” I said casually, turning on my heel and striding away. I had to get away from him before I punched him in the face.

“Try to go for a swim again and you won’t like what follows.” Amon’s voice came right behind me, startling me. I hadn’t even heard him move.

“Stop following me,” I said, hurrying my steps along. “I’m going into my room to take a shower to wash the salt water off and warm up.”

“What a great idea. I always loved your suggestions. Especially your bucket list.” His voice deepened, wrapping around my body.

“You’re no longer my go-to for bucket list ideas.” His smirk disappeared, and I smiled smugly. “I have someone else for that.”

He moved so fast I didn’t get the chance to draw another breath. The air escaped me in a rush as he grabbed me by the back of the throat and yanked me against him. My heart pounded in my chest, and despite almost freezing in the sea, I was suddenly burning up.

“Who is it?” he growled, his voice rougher. “It’s Darius, isn’t it?” I was trying to catch my breath. Much to my horror, every inch of my body responded to his dominance. “I’m going to kill him.”

He didn’t wait for me to answer. He crushed his mouth against mine, and all my plans vanished into thin air.

All-consuming heat raced through my veins like wildfire and erupted into a full-blown volcano. My heart thundered with such a force it made me dizzy. My pussy throbbed, remembering how he felt inside me.

“I’m going to kill every man who has ever touched you,” he whispered against my throat.

Amon plundered my mouth—hard and rough—and I loved it. It was what I’d craved in those lonely days, weeks, months, years.

My hands wrapped around his neck and we let our blankets slide to the ground. He yanked me even closer, my chest pressing against his. His hips shifted, grinding his length against me. A small moan bubbled in my throat.

“You’re mine.” His whisper ghosted over my lips as he tugged on my hair.

Tears burned in the backs of my eyes and the throbbing in my lower belly intensified. “It’s just sex,” I hissed.

He trapped my bottom lip between his teeth and tugged hard. Pain and pleasure spiraled through me. I had no idea how we'd gotten back into the suite. The world faded and so did my thoughts as I succumbed to lust.

Our kisses were desperate, our tongues dancing against one another's. His fingers peeled the wet panties and bra off my body. I pulled off his boxers, leaving us standing naked, chests heaving.

He broke the kiss, a low growl vibrating in his throat. Our hearts raced as we stared at each other, embers burning bright in his gaze. Every inch of me was flushed with arousal, but he was impacted too as I stared at his shaft growing larger and harder under my gaze.

"Are you sure?" My heart screamed its confirmation although I didn't voice it. It had always been him. I couldn't stop loving him any more than I could stop breathing. "I don't want you to regret it."

"I won't." The lights and sun rays sparkled and so did my heart. My body vibrated with his closeness, his body heat finding its way under my skin. I licked my lips in anticipation, his eyes following the movement. He watched me with such a tender look in his eyes that it made my chest ache.

"I don't want to hurt you, cinnamon girl." The air was so heavy and thick that it put pressure on the backs of my eyes. *Oh, you romantic fool*, my mind whispered.

"I have an IUD," I breathed, trying to put some distance between my heart and this lust. I needed some boundaries.

"I'm clean. I haven't been with anyone..." His voice trailed off, but I didn't dare finish his sentence for him. Then his mouth touched mine so softly, it could barely be called a kiss.

To hide my reaction, I forced out, "I don't want to talk." I just want to feel. This fire. This desire. But not these feelings.

As if he understood me, he ordered, "Get on your hands and knees."

My skin pebbled with goose bumps at his rough command, barely reining in his control. And like a fool—or a woman intent on chasing her pleasure—I did as he commanded.

The mattress dipped under my weight. My curls fell forward into my face and I threw a look over my shoulder. Amon came up behind me, slipped a hand between my legs, and rubbed my swollen clit.

The jolt of pleasure wrenched a loud moan from my throat.

"That's right," he purred. "Let me hear your voice."

He pushed a finger inside me while keeping his thumb on my clit, curling

it and hitting my sensitive spot. He played with me, dragging it out only to shove it back in.

My head fell back.

His breathing harshened. My thighs quivered. I wouldn't last long, not like this. His chest heaved with deep, ragged breaths. His cock brushed against my drenched entrance, and the whole time, I watched him over my shoulder, needing to see him. Sunshine glimmered through the windows and cast sharp shadows across his face. The blaze of lust in his eyes would have brought me to my knees if I wasn't already kneeling.

"Amon." His name escaped on a moan. Wetness slickened my thighs, and my pleasure built with every brush of his knuckles against my bare pussy. My body shuddered violently.

"I fucking love when you say my name," he growled, fisting my hair and jerking my head back until his mouth hovered near my ear. "Now scream it."

He slammed into me from behind with a vicious thrust and his name ripped from my throat on a scream. He was big, his size stretching me to the point of pain. Tears sprung to my eyes as he thrust into me with a roughness I wasn't used to from him.

Thrust. "That's my cinnamon girl." *Thrust.* "Who does this pussy belong to?"

I had enough sense to grit my teeth and not answer for fear of falling deeper into him like a stupid, romantic fool.

He gave my hair another thug. "Who does it belong to?"

"Stop talking," I panted, so close to orgasm. "And just fuck me so I can come."

His dark chuckle reverberated through the suite, maybe even his whole yacht. Without warning, he flipped me around so I was on my back. He brought his hand to my throat, pressing me into the mattress.

He lined his cock to my throbbing pussy and I arched my back, needing him to finish this. To finish me. The tip of his cock pressed against my entrance. A moan tore from my throat, vibrating against his palm.

"You want my cock?" He lowered the tip of his hard shaft inside me and I whimpered needily. "Beg for it." Why did that feel so erotic and degrading? Even worse, why did I like it? "Your pussy craves my cock."

My core throbbed harder at his filthy words.

"Please, Amon," I panted. "Please fuck me."

He lifted one of my legs and hooked it over his shoulder to give himself a

better angle, then started thrusting. He hit spots that turned me into a mindless woman.

“My cock is going to wreck your pussy,” he growled. “It won’t remember anyone else.” *Thrust*. “Fucking ever!”

His name was a whimper on my lips as he pounded into me. My nails dug into his biceps as he fucked me harder, our groans colliding, the slap of our bodies filling the space.

This man ruined me. I shouldn’t let him inch his way back into my life. Not that I could find the will to stop him. I rolled my hips, greedy for more. This was just a physical attraction and a need being met. Nothing more; nothing less.

The Amon from three years ago had been sweet. This Amon was savage, rough, and so fucking delicious that I shuddered around him as he fucked me like a man possessed, stealing my breath.

Sweat gleamed on his skin and taut muscles corded his neck. He kept hitting that sweet spot, spearing pleasure through me. Black dots danced across my vision as I climbed higher and higher to my orgasm.

“Oh God... I’m going to... Yes.” I gasped for air, an electric sensation shooting through me. He pulled out only to ram back in until my moans echoed all around us. His thrusts turned wilder and more savage until all my energy was wrung out of me.

“*Oh fuck!*” I screamed as pleasure blazed through me, stars dancing in my vision.

Everything—memories, worries, thoughts—vanished, leaving only mind-numbing pleasure in its wake. Amon kept fucking me through my orgasm, my pussy clenching his length, until he finally came with a feral, guttural sound.

He collapsed on top, still inside me. He kissed me like he couldn’t get enough. Like he *needed* me.

His cum filled me and his next move made me so hot and bothered that I could have orgasmed all over again. He rubbed my clit with his cum before he thrust it back into my pussy.

As our breathing eased and pleasure slowly faded, reality of what I’d done slammed into me with a startling clarity.

But before I could freak out, Amon’s fingers wrapped tighter around my neck as he whispered, “You’re fucking mine and nobody else can have you.” He stroked my cheek while I stared dumbly at him. “I need you to trust me on

what I'm about to do.”

I blinked, confused.

“What are you about to do?” He didn't answer. Instead, he got up, pulled on a pair of gray sweatpants—fuck, he looked so good in them—and then headed for the door. “Amon, what's going on?”

He stopped, his hand on the door handle, then glanced over his shoulder. “Everything will be the way it was supposed to be three years ago. Trust me.”

Then he disappeared from the room.

Click.

I jumped out of bed, my legs slightly unsteady, and ran toward the door, yanking on the knob.

The goddamn bastard locked me in the room.

REINA

After I took a shower, paced twenty-one circles around the room, and banged on the door, I finally decided to take a nap.

I couldn't even remember the last time I took a nap. My mind whirred with so many thoughts. Would they postpone the wedding or just do a quick wife switcheroo? Bile rose in my throat at the thought of Phoenix having to go through that.

I should have told Papà the truth about what Angelo Leone told me. And fucking Dante... The thought of him breaking my sister's heart made me want to murder another member of the Leone family.

What the heck... Let's kill them all.

My meals were delivered by the captain, who clearly had no qualms about letting me drown, so I made sure not to agitate him. I watched as he placed my meal down, left it, and then disappeared with an audible click behind him.

The next day, just as I was about to start banging my head against the wall, the door opened again. Expecting to see the captain, I didn't even look away from my spot on the little loveseat, my knees curled underneath me and my eyes fixed on the beautiful horizon.

I could see the outline of the shimmering city ahead. It looked familiar, but I couldn't quite place it. We were still too far away to home in on any specifics of the buildings.

"What? Not even a hello?"

I jumped out of my seat so fast I almost tripped over my own feet. Catching my balance, I whirled around and glared at Amon. He was dressed in a tuxedo, looking dashing enough to stop my heart.

He gave a nod to someone behind him and one of the men strode in with ten, maybe fifteen designer garment bags.

I still couldn't find the right words. "What's... Why are you...?"

The man dropped the bags and threw a terse nod at Amon, closing the door on his way out. I took in the sight of them and ran through different possibilities in my head.

Amon took me by my hand, leading me over to where they lay scattered across the coffee table and couch.

"I wasn't sure what you'd like, so I picked several options," he said.

I stared at him like he'd gone mad. That would be an explanation for this version of Amon.

"Several options of what?"

"Of dresses. I won't tell you which dress is my favorite one, but I hope you pick that one. We're getting married today."

What?

I stumbled back from the madman, my jaw on the floor.

"W-what do you mean?"

Today was meant to be my wedding to Dante, not Amon. Clearly, I didn't want to marry either one.

"We're getting married," he repeated patiently. "In the Romero family church."

"Romero family church?" I repeated, drawing out each word slowly. He nodded. "And that is..."

"The Church of Saint Mary of Miracles." Amon's hand wrapped around my waist, bringing my body flush to his. "I know the circumstances aren't ideal, but it's always been you, cinnamon girl."

My brain still refused to process it all. Amon reached into his pocket and retrieved a black velvet box. He opened it, and two wedding bands stared back at me, one simple and the other covered in diamonds.

He pulled the ring out and handed it to me. "It's engraved."

I didn't dare touch it, so I just peeked at it, curiosity getting the best of me, and when I read the engraving, my heart just about stopped. *You and me against the world.*

"It's you and me against the world."

My eyes flitted to him, and for a moment, my heart beat just like it had before.

But then I remembered what happened. All the tears, pain, *death*. Worst

of all, what it would mean for Phoenix. So I pushed him away from me, shaking my head in disbelief.

“Please tell me you’re joking.”

He stared down at me. “I’m not exactly the joking type.” I took a step away from him but he pinned me in place, his eyes darkening. “Reina, don’t push me on this.”

“You’re mad! I’m not marrying you. You... us... we don’t *love* each other!”

Something cracked in his eyes, but before I could zero in on it, his mask was back in place. “You will marry me.”

Frustration welled in me as tears gathered in my eyes. I gulped in a deep breath and exhaled it slowly.

“No.” I shook my head again, making my rejection loud and clear. “We can stand here and argue all day, but I’m not marrying you.”

His eyes flashed. “Reina, *do not push me.*” Hearing the words a second time sent shivers up my arms.

My spine snapped upright.

“Or what?” I pushed against him with all my strength, then punched him in the chest. “You’ll kidnap me? You’ve done it already. You’ll force a marriage on me?” I let out a bitter laugh. “Well, guess what? It can’t get any worse.” My ears rang with fury as I brought my finger to his chest and poked at him with every word I spoke. “You criminals should learn to be a bit more creative. Kidnapping women and forcing marriage is so last season.”

That seemed to amuse him, his lips tugging at the corners. The man was clearly batshit crazy. God, what I’d give to have a bat. I’d smash his head and

I sighed. *Who am I fooling?* Just the thought of Amon suffering made my chest throb.

“We should at least talk about it and take it slow.”

His face was a closed-off mystery. “Even if we talk, I won’t accept your refusal. It’s happening today.”

My shoulders slumped and I resigned myself for the next truth.

“If my refusal is not enough reason for you, then this should be.” My heart thundered in my chest. I was running out of options here. “Papà said if I don’t marry Dante, my sister would have to, except those two can’t get married.”

“Those two like each other more than you think,” he deadpanned,

grabbing my elbow and digging his fingers into my skin when I tried to shake him off. He was pissed off. Good! Let him have a taste of his own medicine.

“They’re half-siblings,” I blurted out. “They *cannot* get married.”

Our eyes held and I prayed he’d see the truth in my eyes. It was imperative that he stop this bullshit and take me back, even if it meant I really married Dante Leone. I’d find a way to annul the marriage... or something.

“Phoenix is not Dante’s sister.” Amon’s voice was calm, too calm, and the expression on his face set me on edge.

“Amon, please,” I breathed. “Trust me. I wouldn’t lie about something this important. She is his half *sister*.”

“She isn’t,” he claimed, confidence oozing from him.

“And how do you know that?” I spat out.

“Because *you* are Dante’s half sister.”

Silence.

I could barely focus. He’d dropped the bomb on me with such ease, as if hearing that type of life-changing news were a perfectly normal occurrence.

I tried to free myself from him but he tightened his hold around me.

“Let *go*.”

“Now what?”

“Are you out of your fucking mind?” I screamed. “If I’m Dante’s half sister, that means...” My stomach churned and I gasped, images of the two of us playing in my head. Amon’s naked body, powering into me. Gripping his hair, the sheets. Bile rose to my throat, threatening to empty my stomach.

“We are *not* siblings.” Amon grabbed my face and leaned in, his words soft and harsh at the same time. “Reina, listen. I’m not a Leone.”

Relief slammed into me like a tsunami, then soothed like a mother’s rocking. A tear slowly rolled down my cheek until it reached my lips and filled my mouth with salt. Then, amidst all that relief, a thought pushed through.

I blinked another tear away. “Is that why—” Hope was a bitch, but I had to know. “Did you think we were siblings, and that’s why—”

He placed the pad of his thumb on my bottom lip. “Yes, that’s the reason I walked away. I thought we were related.”

Three years. Three fucking years.

“Why didn’t you say something?” I breathed.

“To spare you the exact reaction you just had.” The words were rough and full of anguish, as if he was reliving his own pain all over again. His

admission made sense, but I still struggled with it. “It killed me to learn that you were my half sister. It made me sick to my stomach and yet... I couldn’t escape the feelings that’d etched themselves into my bones. Into my heart.”

My chest filled with yearning. My throat felt tight and my stomach roiled. I had a feeling there was more to all the secrets that surrounded us.

“Who’s your father?” The muscle clenching in his jaw and the chaos in his eyes told me I wouldn’t like the answer.

“I don’t want to talk about that.” His voice, although low, was firm and controlled. “I didn’t want to push you away. Trust that.”

My heart nearly hammered out of my chest with blooming hope and my question was temporarily forgotten. “But you were kissing her—”

Something resembling regret passed his expression. “I was trying to move on, to forget that I fell in love with my half-sibling.”

That familiar ache returned, reminding me of the pain I’d barely survived. I understood why he did it, but I couldn’t agree with the method.

“You could have let me down easy.” My voice was barely a whisper. “There had to be a better, gentler way to break a girl’s heart.”

His hands, still cradling my face, pulled me closer so his nose was brushing against mine. “I’m so fucking sorry. For everything. I should have known—” He seemed to be struggling for words. “Even when the blood relation was thrown in my face, I shouldn’t have doubted you were my other half.”

Do. Not. Forgive. My mind whispered the warnings, but I could feel my resolve waning. I couldn’t just accept this. Right? The images of him with another woman kept flashing through my mind and feeding my aching, guarded heart.

“You sent a fucking video of me to my—” I broke off. Could I still call him Papà? I swallowed harshly, remembering his words. He didn’t want to learn which one of us wasn’t his because he didn’t think he could handle it. He loved us both and viewed us as his. I would do the same. “To my papà! I’m mortified. How do you expect me to overlook that?”

He reached for his phone and unlocked it.

“Check for yourself.” I resisted the urge to snap at him. I didn’t want to see evidence of something so private going to anyone, never mind my father. Sensing my resistance, he scrolled through his messages. “I didn’t send it to anyone.” I gasped, my eyes meeting his. “You didn’t really think I’d let anyone see you naked, did you?”

Truthfully, I didn't know. I'd started to think that the old Amon was gone, but maybe he was still there. I struggled with the knowledge that he moved on from me so easily though. It made me question everything—his devotion, his commitment, his love.

"I don't know, Amon," I answered. "I'm not sure who you are anymore."

"I'm the same person you've always known."

I shook my head sadly. "I don't think so. The boy I knew would have never kidnapped me. Put me through hell." A choked sob tore through my lips. "You said *together* and then turned your back on me." His breath lodged in his throat and the pain in his eyes glimmered. "I was only eighteen. Do you know how fucking scared I was when I found out I was—"

Pregnant. It was still the one word I couldn't say out loud. For years now I forced myself not to think about it, to forget the "what ifs" because it cut the wound open, threatening to let me bleed out. "You left me. How do you expect me to trust you ever again?"

His pained expression didn't make me feel better. It hinted at his own suffering, but a part of me struggled to be compassionate. I needed more than an apology to understand how he could have so easily moved on.

I *wanted* to believe him, but I couldn't cope with another broken heart.

"I need more, Amon," I whispered.

I watched his Adam's apple move as he swallowed. "Please don't give up on me," he said hoarsely. He closed his eyes for a brief moment before he opened them, heaving a heavy sigh and stepping closer still. "I watched, you know." I gave him a confused look and he explained, "I was there in the hospital with you until your family came in. Your grandma didn't want me around, but I watched you. When you left the hospital. Returned to Paris. Every self-defense class with Darius. I saw you have your tea and croissant at the café around the corner from your building." His words sent a rumble through my chest. "I watched you for three years, unable to let go. I should have been there for you and our baby."

His voice broke, piercing my chest with a fresh, throbbing ache. He caressed my hair in gentle strokes. "I made a mistake before. I'll probably make more, but letting you go won't be one of those. You're the light I need, the key part of me. Let me be that for you too." My whole body shuddered.

I pulled back and stroked his cheek gently.

"You're making it difficult to resist you." I was his. He was mine. Fear and doubt were still there, lodged in my heart, but it was impossible to hold

on to it. “This isn’t exactly how I imagined my proposal, you know.”

He took my hands in his and then lowered himself to one knee. The stormy dark skies in his eyes bore into mine as a rare smile curved his lips.

“Reina, my cinnamon girl, will you please be my wife? I love you. I’ve tasted life without you, and I don’t want it. Nothing and nobody makes me burn. Not like you do. I’m nothing without you. If I have to prove myself for the rest of our lives, I’ll do it. Three years ago, you gave me your heart, and I’m not giving it back.”

I swallowed. “You’re wrong.”

His dark gaze filled with anguish as he brought my palm to his lips and kissed it. “There hasn’t been anyone else for me, cinnamon girl,” he vowed. “I couldn’t bear another woman after you. My heart has been yours all along. Please don’t break it.”

My throat closed. I couldn’t move, couldn’t form words.

We stared at each other for what felt like forever when I broke. The sincerity in his expression made that earlier hope blossom to something real. I searched deep into my soul for what I knew to be true, and I made a decision.

“I didn’t give you my heart three years ago,” I murmured. “It was yours way before that.”

Amon’s eyes blazed with a darkness that vowed to sweep me into the abyss. “Just you and me. Together. Against the world.” I nodded, my heart shuddering with each beat. “Will you give me the honor of calling you my wife?”

And just like that, he was forgiven. Three years of pain and suffering erased by such simple words. It was selfish and wrong, but at that very moment, I forgot all about Dante and Phoenix.

Happy tears rolled down my cheeks. “Yes.”

Oh my God. I was marrying Amon. My bitter prince would become my king.

REINA

I walked down the aisle of the empty church in Venice, oblivious to its beauty. All my focus was on Amon in his black tuxedo, standing in front of a priest in his full Sunday suit.

The astonishment and awe in his eyes were my guiding light as I closed the distance between us.

The moment I was within reach, he slid his hand around my waist and pulled me close, his chest brushing against mine.

“You look so fucking beautiful.” Emotion hung heavy in his voice. “The most beautiful specimen in this world.”

My breath snagged at the base of my throat from so many emotions dancing in my chest.

“The dress is perfect,” I murmured softly, smoothing the soft material with my free palm. “You have good taste.”

“I do,” he confirmed, although the look in his eyes told me he wasn’t talking about the dress.

The wedding dress he’d picked as his favorite—Valentino wedding gown which was my favorite as well—was stunning. I would have preferred to make my own but I couldn’t deny it: Amon’s choice was perfect in every way. The material hugged my waist as it fell to the floor in an abundance of lace and satin. The long train, embellished with pearls, drifted behind me, making me feel like a heroine in one of the fairy tales I used to love so much. Amon even thought of something blue—lacy garter—and something old—an antique bracelet that had belonged to his grandmother.

My hair was pulled up in a pearl-adorned crown with a veil attached.

“You can start,” he ordered the priest, his eyes never leaving my face.

The priest started the ceremony and spoke with a heavy Italian accent, but I wouldn't even dream of complaining.

I was unable to rip my gaze from the carnal possession shining in Amon's depths. "Skip that," he demanded.

I suppressed a laugh at his eagerness.

"Do you, Amon Leone, take Reina Romero as your lawfully wedded wife, to be with you always, in wealth and in poverty, in sickness and in health, in happiness and in grief, from this day until death do you part?"

Amon's attention never wavered from mine. "I do."

The priest chuckled at his ready response.

"Do you, Reina Romero, take Amon Leone as your lawfully wedded husband, to be with you always, in wealth and in poverty, in sickness and in health, in happiness and in grief, from this day until death do you part?"

Butterflies erupted in the pit of my stomach and spread throughout my body. "I do."

Amon's eyes blazed with intensity as he took my hand and slipped the wedding band on my finger. I shook so badly he had to help me do the same.

He didn't wait for the priest to pronounce us husband and wife.

Sliding his fingers around my nape, he slammed his lips on mine in a passionate kiss that screamed domination in its purest form.

And I didn't mind it, not one bit. I had been his from the beginning, and I'd be his until the end.

"I now pronounce you husband and wife."

My prince became my king.

AMON

M *y wife. Fucking mine.*

The sweetest words in any language.

Reina was now my wife, bound to me for life in a legal union that I'd been planning since the moment Illias handed me those documents and I learned the truth. I owed him a lot more than what he'd asked for, but I would honor my commitment to move all weapon shipments through his territory. Illias had always come through for me, even before I helped him with Tatiana. Maybe he wanted access to the Yakuza or maybe he just cared—it didn't matter. We made a good alliance.

Reina's eyes met mine. A dark sense of possessiveness gripped me, and I knew without a doubt it'd remain with me for as long as there was breath left in my body.

The dress fit her perfectly, hugging and enhancing her soft curves. I studied the flush coloring my wife's cheeks and her swollen pink lips. She was breathtaking.

"I couldn't have imagined a more romantic wedding." Her eyes shone like stars, and it took effort to tear my gaze from her. She faced the priest with a warm expression. "Thank you so much."

He smiled softly. "It was all your husband's doing." Reina's hand slipped into mine and squeezed it gently. "Would you like me to photograph you?"

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and handed it to him. He snapped a few photographs of us kissing, Reina smiling against my lips and pressing up on her tiptoes to wrap her arms around my neck.

"Ah, *que belli*," the priest gushed.

"How about one with you?" Reina offered. "So everyone knows our

priest.”

He smiled. “I married your father.” I stiffened at the mention of Romero. He married him and my mother, not Reina’s. Fuck!

A delicate frown creased her features. “Really? In the States?”

He shook his head, but before he could say anything else, I stopped him, interlocking her fingers with mine and adding, “Let’s get a quick selfie, and then I’m taking my wife out on a gondola.”

I hadn’t told her the whole truth yet. Now that she was finally back in my life, I intended on proving that I was here to stay. I knew I’d eventually need to share the truth, but I wouldn’t risk losing her. Too many things had come between us already.

“How romantic. I can’t wait.” Reina’s happiness projected through her bright, hopeful eyes. I shook my head and grinned, wanting to immortalize this moment more than ever before.

She grabbed my phone from the priest and handed it to me. “Your arms are the longest, you take the photo.” She turned to the priest. “Okay, Father, just look at the red dot and—”

Snap.

“Ah, mamma mia, I wasn’t ready.” Father Mario laughed.

Reina threw her head back and groaned playfully. “Me neither. Again, husband.”

My heart stilled. “Say it again,” I whispered, kissing the top of her head and wishing her veil was out of the way. I didn’t want any barriers between us.

“Husband.”

My hand extended and I snapped the photo.

The priest was the only one looking at the camera.



Our gondolier waited for us outside the chapel on Ponte di Rialto. I’d requested for it to be decorated with Japanese snowbells, and from the mesmerized look on Reina’s face, I knew I’d made the right call.

“*Congratulazioni per il matrimonio,*” the gondolier said in greeting.

Reina smiled hesitantly. “He’s congratulating us on our marriage,” I explained.

“I can’t believe we’re married,” she murmured as I helped her into the gondola.

“Better believe it.” I followed and took a seat, pulling her onto my lap by her slim waist. “Because this is for life.”

She blinked innocently. “What? No divorce in your world?”

I tightened my grip until my face nuzzled against her neck and nipped her gently. She was the most intoxicating thing I had ever smelled or tasted.

“The word divorce holds no meaning when it comes to you. You’re mine now, and I’m never letting you go.” Her eyes glistened with unshed tears and I took her chin between my fingers, pressing a soft kiss to her lips. “I’ll be proving my devotion to you for the rest of my life.”

A shadow seemed to pass over her. “What’s the matter?” I asked.

She sank her teeth into her bottom lip. “I’m worried about Phoenix.” Her eyes darted away from me. “I don’t want her to suffer because of my mistakes.”

“The circumstances surrounding your birth are not your fault. You didn’t make any mistakes.”

She released a shuddering breath and let her lashes rest against the apples of her cheeks for a brief moment. “I have,” she whispered, her throat bobbing. Her face paled when she finally looked up and met my eyes. “I killed him.”

I frowned, taken aback by her admission. “What are you talking about, Reina? Who did you kill?” Our gondolier was sitting too far away to hear our conversation, so I didn’t bother lowering my voice to match hers. I knew he didn’t speak a lick of English anyway.

She jutted her chin stubbornly, her whole body stiffening. “I killed Angelo Leone,” she announced in a calm tone, and this time there was no misunderstanding.

“You killed him,” I repeated.

“Yes.”

“Why?” Thoughts were swirling in my head, and I fought the urge to look around for hidden cameras. How was I to believe the five-foot-nothing girl in front of me had *murdered* a fully grown man?

“He hurt my mother. He came into the apartment and—”

“When?”

“New Year’s Eve. After my accident, when I was back in Paris.” I stilled, something nudging at my memory. Reina’s bruised neck, her busted lip. I’d

turned the city upside down trying to get information but never learned exactly what happened. I'd assumed the Brazilians were to blame, which was what had set me on my rampage, picking them off one by one. "He barged into my apartment on New Year's Eve." A small shudder rolled down her body. "Then he attacked me and kept blabbing about Phoenix and called her a deaf freak. He was going to hurt her. I... I don't know. I snapped. I killed him."

I only heard three words. *He attacked me.* I remembered the bruises I saw on her when we saw each other in Oba's restaurant. Fucking Angelo caused them. The horrific images of all the things he'd done to my mother flashed through my mind like a bad polaroid.

"He hurt you." My tone was deathly calm. That fucking bastard had laid his hands on her. The memories of him beating my mother and brother surfaced, making me see red.

"I hurt him more." *That's my woman.* I loved her determination. Her fierce protectiveness of those she loved.

"Did he..." If he touched her, I would find his body and bring him back to life, only to kill him again. "What did he do to you?"

"He didn't rape me. He was drunk when he showed up at our apartment. He got rough with me and I... I panicked. The girls were out and I had no idea when they'd be back... I was all alone. He was going on about Phoenix and saying terrible things about our mother. When I saw his gun, I just reacted. I shot him, and when he was bleeding out on my kitchen floor, he told me Phoenix belonged to him." She took a deep breath and closed her eyes.

I was struggling to keep up, but hearing Reina speak this truth confirmed the only thing that mattered: she was the strongest woman I'd ever known.

"So you shipped his dick to me?"

She snapped her head up and met my eyes. When I gave her a small nod, she smiled sheepishly. "It was a bit too savage, I know."

"I fucking love it." I rested my forehead against hers. "If he was still alive, I'd tear him limb from limb."

I might have passed the point of being obsessed with her, but the need to protect her was a separate, raging beast that would gladly tear this world apart. It screamed that I failed her. The image of her bruised face mocked me with the evidence of my failure.

"I saved you time and effort, then." After a moment of silence, she looked

at me, the heaviness of her gaze way beyond her years.

In fact, it reminded me so much of Dante that it rendered me speechless. Right along with a single thought that pierced through my skull. *The video clips*. Dante had been getting them for months now. Did he know? Was that the reason he'd been so quick to accept the marriage arrangement? It would make sense.

Fuck! Dante wasn't the type to take anything lying down. He'd fought losing battles before, more than once, and always found a way to destroy his enemies. It led me to believe he had an ulterior motive. Did he view Reina as his enemy? Was it revenge?

"Who else knows about this?" I asked her, blood rushing to my ears. "Who knows you killed Angelo Leone?"

She gulped. "Nobody." She had to be lying. Reina and the girls shared too strong a bond to keep such big secrets from each other. Besides, she might've been alone when she killed Leone... but what did she do with his body? I waited patiently for her to continue rather than bombard her with questions. "What if Dante finds out? Or the rest of the Omertà members?"

"Nobody will touch you," I assured her. "Including Dante." I'd failed in so many fucking ways, but I wouldn't fail in this one. "What did you do with the body?"

We made our way down the Grand Canal, the buzz of people laughing around us lifting the heaviness that had descended on our gondola. Reina's eyes swept over the dreamy Venice landscape before she returned to look at me.

"I cut him up and then took him into the catacombs. May he rot in hell."
May he rot in hell indeed.

REINA

We dined at a luxurious restaurant overlooking the Grand Canal.

The staff fussed over us, although the fact that Amon had booked out the entire restaurant might have had something to do with it. It was magical. The chefs prepared food to feed fifty—antipasto, chicken limone, risotto, cured meats, a tower of Raffaello and Ferrero Rocher chocolates, and of course a wedding cake that just about brought tears to my eyes.

“So we can find each other in every galaxy,” Amon murmured as we stood in front of a celestial-themed cake designed to represent the night sky and covered with tiny fairy lights that glinted like stars. “You thought there were stars in my eyes, but you were wrong. *You* are my stars, my moon, and my sun. My everything. They’re only there when I look at you.”

Emotion clogged in my throat. I could still hardly believe that one day had made such a difference, going from existing to living. Thriving, even. We were moving at a whirlwind pace, and as happy as I was, a part of me was waiting for the other shoe to drop.

For something to happen.

Maybe that was precisely the reason I couldn’t say those three little words again. Not yet anyhow. He’d given me his reasons, but something held me back. My scars still felt fresh, and I knew it would take a lot more than a few romantic gestures to heal the deepest ones.

So instead of saying anything, I wrapped my hands around his waist and buried my face in his chest. Life without him had been unbearable, and I had no intention of ever going back. Not when I finally felt like I could breathe again. *Live* again.

He took my chin between his fingers and guided my head up to meet his eyes. They were filled with so much affection my stomach dipped in anticipation. After a moment of silence, he brushed his lips against mine.

“Trust this.” It was as if he’d read my thoughts. Or maybe he knew me to my core.

“You know, we have to plan a honeymoon,” I said, changing subjects. “I think I’ll plan it since you did all this.”

“Anything you want.”

I chuckled. “Anything, huh?”

“What my wife wants, she gets.”

“Just you wait until I tell the girls that.” I felt my face drop as I let out a heavy exhale. “How about you give me my phone back?”

He grinned. “I thought you’d say that.” He reached into his pocket and I snatched it before he even had the chance to pass it over. He chuckled and said, “It’s easy to make you happy. Although, there better be only one type of man featured on your Instagram.”

My cheeks burned. “You saw that?”

He nodded. “It made me want to murder Darius,” he admitted. “I still want to snap his neck.”

He was jealous. For some dumb reason, it had me mentally fanning my face and squealing like a schoolgirl. “Darius is like a big brother to me.”

That seemed to pacify him as I started scrolling through the messages on my phone, my confusion growing with each new thread. “What’s the matter?” he asked.

I raised my head. “Nothing,” I muttered. “Just weird.” I shook my head. “There isn’t a single message from Papà, Grandma, or my friends wondering where I am. Not even from Phoenix. And the last message dates back to the night of the rehearsal dinner.”

Amon’s brows furrowed. “You have reception?”

“Hmm, I should. I’ll send them all a message.” My fingers flew across the keyboard, ensuring everyone knew I was safe and... *happy*. Married, too! “I miss them,” I sighed. “I wish...”

I couldn’t find the words. Our wedding was perfect, but I still wished they’d been here.

“We can celebrate with everyone later,” he promised, and my smile widened as I handed him my phone back for safekeeping. *Maybe I’ll design a wedding dress with pockets*, I thought. “With your family, friends, and mine,”

he added.

Reluctantly, I thought of his mother. I'd gotten the impression over the years that she didn't like me. Not that I'd seen her a lot. *Maybe it was the vase I broke*, I thought to myself.

And then there was Dante...

"Does Dante know you're not related?" He shook his head. "Won't he be... upset?" I gasped.

"I view him as a brother, blood relation or not. I hope he'll feel the same."

I was unsure what to think or say. I still struggled with the revelation that I was Angelo Leone's daughter, but maybe Amon was right. Blood or not, it didn't matter. After all, hadn't Papà used similar words when he said he didn't need to do a paternity test? He loved us both equally, no matter what.

"So what's your—" I broke off and my lips curved into a smile before I corrected myself. "—*our* last name?"

Something flickered across his expression, but in the next moment, his mask slid back into place.

"How do you feel about me taking your last name?"

He what now? I had to swallow a few times before I could answer. "You wouldn't mind that?" He shook his head. "Why wouldn't you want me to take your last name?"

It wasn't exactly traditional, but Amon never really had been.

"No, I don't mind. Especially considering what the Leone name represents." Why did my sixth sense flare, warning me there was something else to it? It'd be a topic for another day. Today was too perfect to ruin.

"Amon and Reina Romero," I murmured, tasting it on my lips. I couldn't help the smile lifting the corner of my lips. "I like it."

"Should we go home, Mrs. Romero?" His wide smile nearly stopped my heart and blinded me, wiping all my thoughts. "Let's start the rest of forever, love of my life."

Those words were my undoing.



Amon carried me over the threshold of the yacht, refusing to lower me until we got to our suite.

He slid me down his body until my feet touched the ground. His smile was all silk and wickedness, promising a night to remember.

“Take your clothes off,” he ordered in a sinfully dark voice.

Throbbing pulsed between my legs at his dark command.

“Shouldn’t that be your job, husband?” I teased softly. “We’ve just said ‘I do’ and you’re already bossing me around.”

He chuckled darkly. “Better get used to it. I don’t plan on ever stopping.”

“Is that a promise or a threat?”

“Both.”

A delicious shiver zipped down my spine.

I kept my gaze on his as I reached back and pulled at the first button, then the next, until the satin dress fell down my body with a seductive rustle. I was left standing in only my white lace thong and matching bra, the blue garter he’d given me stark against my milky thigh.

Scorching heat incinerated the shadows in his eyes and engulfed me in its flames.

I cast a glance at his groin, his arousal straining against his slacks, and my mouth suddenly dried with anticipation.

“Your panties too. Take it all off, but leave your heels on.”

Goosebumps covered every inch of my skin as I unclipped my bra, letting it flutter to the ground softly. I stepped out of my panties next, and the heat of his stare on my naked body warmed me from head to toe.

My desire crescendoed with each breath as I waited for his next command. My core throbbed, wet and aching.

“Get on the bed.”

I rushed to obey and felt the mattress dip beneath my weight.

Amon went around the table and reached inside the nightstand.

“What are you...” I trailed off when I saw what he held in his hand.

“Lie down,” he ordered with a dark gleam in his eyes. The roar in my ears drowned out his voice, and I could barely focus on the meaning behind his words. The look in his eyes whispered of sin and carnal pleasure, pulling me into their depths. I was all in, as long as it was with him.

I obeyed and sucked in a sharp breath when he straddled me and fastened my hands to the headboard posts with silk ties. My heart drummed wildly and my stomach tumbled over itself.

The material of his tux brushed over my painfully hard nipples and my juices slicked my thighs while X-rated images played in my mind at the way

I looked—bound and at his utter mercy.

He moved down my body, his hardness brushing against me, and I let out a small moan, rubbing my thighs together. My clit was swollen and throbbing, my thighs wet with arousal.

He hadn't even gotten started and I was already a puddle. A small yelp tore from me when he yanked my legs apart and tied my ankles to the remaining posts.

Amon stepped off the bed, leaving me spread-eagle. A hot flush rushed through my body, staining my skin a light pink. He reached over to the nightstand and grabbed a vibrator I hadn't noticed was sitting on the hard surface.

My whole body was engulfed in flames and a bead of sweat formed on my forehead.

I gulped. "I've never used toys before."

"If you want to stop, you tell me." His voice was soft but fire blazed in his eyes. "At any time."

"Can you at least take your clothes off?" I begged, infuriatingly aroused.

"Soon."

He turned the vibrator on, the soft buzzing sound filling the space between us, then dragged the tip over my clit, just lightly enough to send a bolt of sensation rocketing through me. My nails dug into my palms, leaving crescent moons in my flesh while I jerked against the expertly tied binds.

"You're dripping, wife." He slid a finger inside me and I couldn't hold back a moan. "So beautiful." His voice was a guttural grunt. "And all mine."

My thighs shook and the orgasm lurked just out of reach. He thrust a second finger in, stretching me so fully that all I could feel and focus on was him. "I own every part of you."

"I own you too." His eyes flashed with a darkening storm so beautiful I couldn't tear my gaze away.

"You do," he confirmed. "You look so beautiful like this, tied up and waiting for my cock."

His breath skated over my neck as he trailed his tongue down my skin. He pushed the vibrator inside me slowly while kissing and teasing the sensitive spot on my collarbone.

"Amon," I gasped when he shoved the last inch of the toy into me, the vibrator wrenching a strangled cry out of me. Oh God. I couldn't think. Couldn't breathe.

Intense, searing pleasure was the only thing I could focus on, zinging through my body and pushing me closer to my release.

I ground against him, desperate for relief, but it wasn't enough. All I could do was take this torture, trusting Amon to take me over the edge. Except he was taunting me, teasing me with the most exquisite touch, only to pull my orgasm away from me until I was a puddle of pure need.

"I'll never tire of this." Lust strained his voice. I met his gaze and he seemed as tortured as I was. "Seeing you writhe under me, needing me as much as I need you."

"Please, Amon." I was panting now. "I can't take it anymore. Let me come."

"You'll come with my cock inside your pussy," he grunted.

"I need you," I sobbed. "Please... Please... I need you inside me." My hips arched off the bed, grinding against him shamelessly, his hard cock teasing me through his trousers. "Take your clothes off and fuck me."

The vibrator stopped and he pulled it out of my drenched entrance. I tensed as I watched my husband through hooded eyelids as he shed his clothes with an efficiency I'd never seen before. He stood at the foot of the bed and palmed his cock, his eyes burning flames against my flesh as he skated his free hand over my parted legs and inched his way to my entrance.

"I'm going to die if you don't fuck me right now," I whimpered, squirming against the ties. "Please, husband."

He straddled me once more, the mattress dipping beneath his weight. He palmed my breasts and pinched my nipples, rolling the hard peaks between his rough fingers. Finally, he bent his head and sucked them into his hot mouth, stoking the flames in my body.

"I love when you call me husband," he grunted. "Tell me you love me." I went still, my eyes widening. "Say the words," he repeated, his velvet voice contrasting against the roughness of his touch.

I loved him, I really did, but I couldn't get the words past my lips.

"It's okay, cinnamon girl," he whispered, pushing my breasts together and rising to his knees. I sucked in a sharp breath as he positioned his cock in between my breasts. Pre-cum dripped onto my skin as he thrust, holding my eyes and seeking reassurance. My body shuddered and I licked my lips, dipping my chin in confirmation that I was okay. Better than okay. His hardness slid easily with the help of his arousal, the erotic sounds against the softness of my breasts the only thing separating us. I panted as he picked up

his pace, my tongue darting to get a taste of his cum as the head of his cock grazed my chin with each thrust. He let out a tortured groan and fucked my tits faster.

“I’ll earn your love back,” he grunted. “Just wait and see.”

He pumped harder and held my eyes, checking in with me again. My fingers gripped the headboard and I nodded furiously as I said, “Let go, Amon.”

Almost immediately, thick cum spurted on my face and neck. My chest heaved and my core throbbed as Amon slowed, his thumbs brushing tenderly against the sides of my breasts. He released me and dragged a finger through the cum on my chin and pushed it inside my mouth. He stared down at me, his face taut with desire as I eagerly sucked on the salty taste that was so uniquely him.

His torso slid down my body as he rammed inside me, burying himself to the hilt in one smooth thrust. That he’d just made a mess on me with his release but was ready to go again wasn’t lost on me, and the way it flamed my arousal had my eyes shooting to the back of my head.

“Fuck.” He stilled, and his hands tightened on my hips. “Your pussy is my heaven. It was made for me and only me.”

He started thrusting in and out of me in a slow, leisurely rhythm. His touch was gentle as he kissed me, taking me higher and higher. The tingles of pleasure started at the base of my spine and climbed. My eyes fluttered shut and all I could manage were breathless pants.

My orgasm slammed into me like a freight train. I bowed off the bed with a sharp cry, my insides clenching around his length. Amon picked up the pace, pounding into me through my orgasm and wrenching a second one out of me without even having to try.

My pants became cries as he relentlessly fucked me.

“Scream for me, wife.” He reached between us and pressed his thumb against my needy, swollen clit. “Scream for your husband.”

And I did, again and again until my body was limp and pliant underneath him.

“That’s a good wife.” His guttural voice did things to me that rivaled the blinding, toe-curling orgasms. He slowed his pace again and murmured softly, “I’ll love enough for both of us. Until you love me again.”

Then he spilled inside me with a heavy groan, his forehead against mine and our lips inches apart.

He shifted around to untie my legs and wrists, whispering words of praise that warmed me up and made me feel cherished. Goosebumps dotted my skin when he trailed his hand down my arm in a lazy pattern until it came to rest against my hip.

“We’ve consummated our marriage, Reina.” Drowsiness spread through my limbs and all the way to my brain. “You’re officially mine. Forever.”

I closed my eyes and nuzzled against him.

“Forever,” I murmured before sleep pulled me under.

AMON

My love for her was like gasping for air. It made my lungs burn and my chest squeeze whenever she wasn't near... like I forgot how to breathe when she wasn't around.

But now she was mine. Fucking mine. My wife. My life. My future.

The first signs of morning filtered brightly into our suite. Reina's hair fanned out across the pillowcase, resembling a field of sunflowers. It had been like this for the past two days, ever since we left Venice.

I knew I should let her rest. I'd fucked her through the early morning hours until she couldn't take it anymore. She panted, cried, and pleaded in that soft voice that always made me cave, begging for reprieve. The moment I tucked her safely into my arms, she threw her leg over mine in an "I own you" kind of way.

As if there were ever any doubt.

The knowledge of our legal union soothed the restlessness inside me, but I still couldn't shake the feeling of impending doom. I checked my phone messages, but there wasn't a single one waiting. Not from Romero. Not from my brother. Not even from my mother. Or maybe I was just being paranoid, letting the fucked-up thoughts in my head taunt that I'd lose her again.

I stroked my fingers through her hair, relishing the silky feel of it. It was past her shoulders now, not as long as before but enough to wrap her curls around my finger twice, three times.

Kidnapping her had been the most logical solution to the issues arising in the Omertà, but it wasn't the best one.

Especially after learning of my cousin's dealings with Sofia Volkov and Perez Cortes. Marrying Reina and announcing to the world that she was my

wife might attract problems from Sofia and my cousin Itsuki, but I wouldn't—or rather, shouldn't—worry about Perez Cortes. He was too scared to leave Brazil.

But he'd hear of this marriage and he'd know she was forever out of reach to the sick bastard.

It was my cousin who posed a bigger threat, one that I was no closer to resolving because the slick bastard was in hiding. I'd received word that even the men closest to him didn't know where to find him.

It worried me. In fact, I was worried enough that I'd been considering getting my brother involved.

I slid out of the bed, careful not to wake Reina, and then texted the captain to take us to the Philippines. She'd be the safest there. When we left Venice, I told him to take the long and slow route, but now I wasn't so sure that was smart.

My eyes landed on my wife and the sight instantly eased the tightness in my chest.

Her cheeks were pink. Her lips roughened from my kisses. My band on her ring finger.

Trailing my hand down the length of her neck, I took the black satin bedsheet and pulled it to her waist, exposing her breasts. The mattress shifted under my weight as I bent my head and brushed my mouth lightly over her nipple.

My cock jerked when her legs parted for me, demanding to be inside her.

Let her rest, my conscience demanded.

But I ignored it, inhaling her scent as I lowered my head, her arousal hitting me like an aphrodisiac.

I swirled my tongue in circles, savoring her, tasting her, teasing her. A soft moan tore from her lips and my cock hardened painfully in response.

Her fingers grasped my hair and I glanced up to find her watching me through heavy eyelids. Holding her gaze, I wrapped my lips around her clit and sucked hard.

“Amon.” Her voice was a breathless whisper.

I slid two fingers inside her slick heat, her insides clenching around them and her hips meeting each thrust. Increasing the tempo, I fucked her with my tongue and fingers while keeping my eyes on her. Her head fell back and her fingers tightened in my hair as she rocked against my mouth.

“Oh... Oh... God, please...” I grazed my teeth over her clit and she

arched off the bed with a cry. “Amon, oh... I’m going to...”

She fisted my hair, grinding against my face and chasing her pleasure as I devoured her like she was my last meal.

Her cries as she climaxed and drenched my fingers were a sinner’s melody.

I peppered kisses over her sensitive skin and then climbed to my knees, covering her body like a blanket. My cock was heavy, leaking pre-cum, and painfully hard under her scrutiny. I wrapped my fist around it, giving it a few pumps as her watchful gaze filled with lust.

“I want to taste you.” Her soft demand nearly had me spilling, and before she could take her next breath, I seated my cock inside her warm mouth. She swallowed eagerly, relaxing her throat and taking me as far as she could.

Then she pulled out, licking and sucking before sliding my length deep down her throat.

The echoes of her pleasure filled the room, sending a vibration down my spine.

“Take it deeper, wife.” My voice teetered with lust and barely leashed control.

Her eyes met mine and she quickened her pace, her fingers cradling my balls as she stroked and sucked me like her life depended on it. My hips took over, thrusting into her faster and harder. She swallowed eagerly, taking my cock like I knew she could.

Then without a warning, I pulled out of her mouth and slid down her body to bury myself deep inside her tight pussy in one thrust.

“Fuck,” I grunted, then proceeded to fuck her like a man driven to madness. “You take my cock so well.”

I pounded into her until she shuddered around me, trembling with pleasure. I continued to thrust, hitting her sensitive spot while she rode out her orgasm, her back arching off the mattress and her screams turning raw.

Lifting her up with one hand, I set her on my lap and thrust harder and faster from beneath. This angle was deeper, each thrust ripping a soft whimper from her. Her lips found mine for an open-mouth kiss. Her ass slapped against my groin, matching my rhythm, and before I knew it, I was shooting my cum inside her.

She chased her second orgasm, rolling her hips in a slow, seductive rhythm and driving me deeper. Her whole body shuddered as she lifted herself up and down on my length, squeezing out the remnants of her orgasm,

her pussy clenching like a vise around me.

Finally she sagged against me, her head resting against my neck. Her palm against my chest, her breathing slowly leveled. I shifted slightly and felt her eyes following me as I went to the bathroom and returned with a wet towel to clean her up.

I lifted her and wrapped her in the thick duvet, then removed the sheets wet from my cum and her arousal while she watched me through her half-lidded eyes. Her hair was tousled, her lips swollen, her skin slicked with sweat and marked from my rough touch, but she'd never looked more beautiful.

Once our bed was made, I joined her and she leaned into me as if she craved my touch as much as I needed hers.

She pushed the duvet off and tangled her limbs with mine. I combed my fingers through her silky curls, relishing in the feel of them against my skin.

It had been an hour since I was inside her but I couldn't shake off the strange pang in my chest at the reservation I felt from my wife. She still hadn't said those three little words.

I couldn't—wouldn't—push her. She needed to adjust to all of this and deep down I knew she was mine. Her fingers traced over my abs and I could feel her restlessness as if it were my own.

"Something is worrying you," I finally said.

She tensed, lifting her head to meet my eyes. "How do you know?"

I let out a sardonic breath. "Call it intuition."

"Has my sister replied?" I shook my head. "Has anyone texted anything to you?"

It was peculiar how in sync our thought processes were. "No, nothing."

"I've texted. I've called everyone too. Grandma, my sister, Papà, my friends. I even tried Grandpa Glasgow. No reply. No call. Nothing."

According to Reina, that never happened. It only enhanced the dreaded feeling that something was afoot. I had only gotten a reply and call from Hiroshi.

"Don't worry. I have some contacts on it." Kian Cortes and Darius being two of them, but I left that out for now. Did it make sense that I was still jealous of the man? Fuck no. But it couldn't be helped. Besides, I'd only sent the email yesterday and was still waiting for a reply, although come to think of it, Kian had never taken this long to reply before.

"Thank you." Her hands roamed my back, her palms soft against my

back. “So are you going to tell me more about this tattoo? When did you get it?”

Tension shot through me before I forced myself to relax.

“After you were released from the hospital.” It was the first thing I’d done, the only thing I had the heart for. “I saw the scar on your shoulder blade and I wanted something in the same spot. To never forget.”

Her fingers stroked my nape, brushing my hair in a comforting way. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“It was. I handled it poorly. I should have...” I wasn’t quite sure how I should have handled it, but I knew my way hadn’t been right. That much I could admit to her. “Like you said, I could have let you down gently. Maybe we would have remained friends. You might’ve trusted me then. I could’ve protected you.”

She smiled, but it was a sad kind of smile. “Or maybe it was all meant to be. There’s no sense in reliving the past. We have to move forward.”

Her head rested against my chest and I stroked her hair until her breathing deepened and she fell back asleep.

“To a new beginning, cinnamon girl.”

REINA

The next day was New Year's Eve.

I couldn't have imagined a better way to end this year or start the new one. It felt like closure and the promise of a fresh start. I was curled up, basking in Amon's scent. He wore his signature jeans and black T-shirt and I was in a pink dress that he'd picked out for me.

"I didn't know you had a library on your yacht," I said to my husband, pressing my face into his chest.

My husband.

The word itself seemed surreal. There were still many things we'd left unsaid, but we'd have the rest of our lives to say them.

"I keep it closed when I have guests because I also use it as my office." My mouth formed a silent O. "It even has a dedicated romance section."

A choked laugh escaped me as I lifted my head to meet his eyes. "Are you serious?"

He nodded. "Dead serious. There are a few books by your friend too." A small gasp escaped me, although I was grinning widely. "Full transparency though, I haven't read them."

I playfully hit his chest. "Athena will die when she hears."

Amon grinned. "How about we keep it our little secret? I have a reputation to uphold, and being a romance reader isn't going to do me any favors."

"You got it." I leaned back into him, my eyes locked on the horizon. Stars glittered like diamonds in the night sky, waiting for the show as well. Amon promised fireworks at midnight. First, my mind had gone straight to sex, ready for the fireworks he always delivered in bed. But much to my dismay,

those weren't the kind he was talking about. "When will we be back on land?" I asked curiously.

"A week or two. Eager to get off the boat?" he teased.

I shook my head. "No, but it feels like we're running from reality," I admitted.

"We are," he said. "But I think we deserve it after all the bullshit we went through to get here." I let out a shaky breath. I agreed with him, but I couldn't shake the feeling that something was brewing in the universe. His lips touched the top of my head and I heard him inhale deeply. "God, I missed your cinnamon scent."

A shuddering breath vibrated in my chest. "Even after all these years?"

I felt him smile against my hair. "My three favorite things—cinnamon flavor, the color pink, and you. Not in that order. Cinnamon and the color pink should be your trademark, wife."

"You really love calling me that, huh?"

"I fucking love it." His words were light but his eyes were filled with longing and guilt.

Amon's hold on me tightened as that familiar tension weaved its thread between us. We tended to steer clear of bringing up the past, but the pain lingered. We'd both suffered. We'd both gone through difficult periods.

"Where were you?" I rasped, the lump in my throat expanding. I'd done a good job burying my feelings about the pregnancy and the betrayal that came with it. "For the past three years."

Two heartbeats passed before he answered. "For the most part, I stuck to Southeast Asia. I spent some time in the States." He tightened his grip on my forearm. "I was... terrified to be on the same continent as you. My feelings for you were wrong and they tortured me every day, but I knew I'd cave if I ran into you." His grip relaxed. "I blamed myself. For everything."

I shook my head and shifted so I could meet his eyes. "It wasn't your fault. You didn't know."

"But my mother did," he spat, fury clear in his tone.

I tilted my head pensively, something nudging the back of my mind. "Your mother knew? How?"

His free hand took mine, interlacing our fingers.

"She knew about your mother." I blinked, desperate to sort through the memories that were pushing against the front of my mind. "She should have told me right away." The agony in his voice was unmistakable. "Your

pregnancy—”

“It’s over and behind us,” I whispered, looking away from him. A light tremor rolled down my spine, his mother all but forgotten. The pain rushing through my heart was begging for release.

Amon cupped my cheeks, forcing me to look at him. “It is, but we can’t pretend it didn’t happen.” I looked into his dark eyes and gave myself over to the emotion I saw in them. “I want to make it up to you. I want to show you that hurting you was never my intention. I thought I was protecting you by pushing you away.”

I swallowed. “I know, I just...” I bit my bottom lip hard between my teeth. “It still hurts to think about it. The baby.”

“I shouldn’t have pushed you away.”

If I were honest, I didn’t believe he had a choice. Nothing would have prepared either one of us to face the truth about our blood relation. A baby would have made the pain that much more unbearable.

A single tear escaped, but it wasn’t only sadness like before. It was hope, healing, a promise for our future together.

“If I’d gotten on birth control like I was supposed to, it would have been one less tragedy for us to bear. We were too young. We still are.”

“You don’t want children?”

I shrugged. “Not anytime soon. I’m only twenty-one. We’re both still young. Our marriage was rushed as it is.”

“I had to lock you down before another fool tried to steal you from me,” he growled.

I chuckled at his admission. “But we don’t have to rush anymore. Let’s just start over and take it slow. Enjoy each other for a while. We have our work cut out for us with getting our families on the same page anyway.”

He nodded. “I’m sorry I failed you.”

“I’m sorry you had to live with the belief we were related.”

His forehead met mine and our breaths collided. “I watched you from afar, you know,” he murmured. “I started a surveillance company to keep tabs on you. I’d even started preparing myself for when you’d eventually move on. It ripped me up inside, but I wanted you to be happy.” He let out a sardonic breath, full of anguish. “I still fucking hated Darius and your sessions with him though.”

My brows furrowed. “But he said you hired him.”

“I did, but then the fucker decided he was your friend and wanted to be

there for you. And teach you self-defense.”

“But that’s a good thing.” When he didn’t answer, I added, “Right?”

His chuckle was dark. “It is. It was. I was mostly jealous because it wasn’t me teaching you all that. He got to spend time with you while all I was allowed to do was watch you from afar.”

We’d both gone through shit and survived.

“I couldn’t stop thinking about you,” I admitted softly. “I tried. I really did. But you always came to me at night. I dreamt about our Ferris wheel ride. About the floating lanterns and the wish I made that day.”

“What was your wish?”

“To have you as mine forever,” I admitted through a smile. “And it came true.” The second the words left my lips, the fireworks exploded, startling both of us. “Happy New Year, husband.”

“Ah, my cinnamon girl. Happy New Year.” His lips found mine for a hungry kiss that made my heart overflow with emotion. “We’ll have many more together. I promise you that.”

I gently nipped his bottom lip.

“I’ll hold you to that.” He slid off the sofa and onto his knees while I stared at him wide-eyed, my lips still curved into a smile. “I hope you’re not proposing again.”

He slowly trailed his hands up my legs until he reached my knees and spread them wide. We locked eyes, the fireworks throwing off all the colors of the rainbow over his dark features.

“I’m starting our new life with a bang,” he said. Then he pressed his face against my entrance with a low groan. “I’ll die for you. I’ll kill for you. I’ll burn the world for you. Just let me taste you.” His mouth kissed my pussy, the thin material of my panties already drenched. “And never—fucking *ever*—leave me.”

“I won’t. At least not willingly,” I vowed. Then because I caught a glimpse of his bracelet, I added, “I didn’t throw it away, you know.” He gave me a confused look, so I clarified, “The bracelet. I didn’t throw it away.”

He pressed a soft kiss to my upper thigh. “It wouldn’t matter, because you’ll forever be my other half. Light to my darkness. Answer to all my prayers I didn’t make.”

Then he slid the material down my bare legs, discarding it carelessly. The heat of his mouth and his body washed away the past as his tongue found my core.

Maybe *this* was our journey written in the stars all along. We just had to experience the pain to reach our happy ending.



Safely cocooned in Amon's arms, I lay awake while my mind raced in a hundred different directions.

About life in the Philippines. About my sister and friends. Grandma. Papà.

The last few days while we sailed on his "Cinnamon" yacht had been the best days of my entire life. We ate. We laughed. We watched movies. Played games. And my favorite: we had sex. Lots and lots of sex.

The moon cast light and shadows through the room as I turned to see Amon's sleeping face. His features were softer when he slept, and I still saw the boy.

I ran my fingers through his hair, the diamonds on my wedding band glimmering even in the near darkness, and my heart squeezed.

Mine.

It felt like a dream, but also like coming home. He was my home, just like my sister had always been. *Phoenix*. Worry slithered through me. Why hadn't she called back? Had Papà forced her to marry Dante in my stead? I had so many questions and no way of getting answers.

Why was nobody answering my calls? Did we fuck up that badly?

"You're worrying again." Amon's deep voice pulled my attention back to him. "Everyone within a hundred-mile radius can hear you overthinking."

"It's a good thing it's only sea life around us, then," I deadpanned, the corners of my lips tipping up. "Keep annoying me though and you'll end up swimming with the fish."

He chuckled huskily. "You do realize your husband is one of the most powerful men in the world?"

I shrugged nonchalantly, feeling playful despite my spiraling thoughts. "You could have fooled me when you were on your knees yesterday, promising to die for me if I let you taste me just one more time."

He smiled, and the effect of it was so devastating it took my breath away. No wonder I lost my heart to him.

His knuckles brushed my cheeks, sleep slowly fading from his eyes.

“Touché, cinnamon girl.” His hand came around my neck and he pulled me closer, pressing a kiss to my mouth. “Good morning, wife.”

“Morning, husband.”

His eyes burned into mine. “It might be my favorite word.”

“I’ll be sure to use it whenever I want something, then.”

He bit my lower lip, tugging on it with his own. “No need. Ask and you shall receive.”

“Ah, there’s the promise again,” I teased. “And no taste needed?”

He paused, a mischievous gleam to his eyes. “A taste of your pussy would be very much appreciated.”

I rolled my eyes, but my cheeks heated at his filthy words. Somehow I didn’t think this craving for him would ever ease, even when we were old and frail.

He angled his chin toward the windows. “It’s way too early. What’s keeping you awake?”

“I’m nervous,” I admitted. “And worried.”

“About?”

I shrugged. “Everything. Nothing. I don’t know.” He stroked my cheek. “I don’t have my passport,” I muttered dumbly. “It’s silly, but I’m worried about everything. Why isn’t anyone calling us to congratulate us on the marriage? I’m worried about crossing the border. My family. You.”

He frowned. “Me?”

I nodded. “What if Papà kills you when he sees you?” I sat up and gazed down at him. By now, they had gotten the news of our eloping. After all, Amon didn’t even try to make it a secret. He blasted it all over our social platforms and even sent a mass text. *Very subtle*. Knowing my family, they were probably tracking us down. And then there was the Omertà. Shit, so many unknowns. “How are we going to tell him that me marrying Dante wasn’t even an option because I’m his half-sibling? Which will make them wonder why I married *you*? Unless you’re ready to reveal to them that you’re not a Leone?”

“That is a lot of worries,” he agreed, sitting up. “Let’s take things one step at a time, starting with shortening our time on the yacht.” I didn’t think I could love this man more. “Then we can work on solving everything else.”

“You have a plan?”

He grinned. “I do. I don’t like to see you worry so much.” I’d always worried a bit too much. And the worst part, Amon’s crew kept this yacht

spotless which left me without my outlet of cleaning. “We’ll take my helicopter to land, and then my plane to the Philippines,” he continued. “But for now, let’s keep our biological fathers’ secrets.”

The mere idea of letting everyone think I just threw my sister to the wolves squeezed my heart. I loved her; I was supposed to protect her.

“I’m not thrilled about it,” I admitted. “I’ve kept a lot from Phoenix already, and I don’t want to keep another secret.”

“Just for a little bit.” He cupped my face, then continued softly, “I still have to come to terms with my own father, and I need to get to the bottom of my cousin’s dealings. This will protect our families. Once he’s eliminated, we’ll tell everyone.”

My lips captured his in a searing kiss. “As long as our families are safe.” I deepened the kiss with all the love I hadn’t dared to utter in words yet.

He might have broken my heart, but he was slowly repairing it.

AMON

We took a helicopter ride to Cyprus and I'd lined up for my private plane to meet us there. From there, we flew to a little private airport in Jolo, Philippines.

The tightness in my chest refused to ease. Something felt wrong. Very wrong.

Shit was happening in the underworld. Too many women were disappearing, all of them blonde. My idiot cousin Itsuki had connected with Sofia Volkov along the way and was counting on her to strengthen his business dealings.

It was time I put an end to him.

Everything was lined up. Once I got his exact location, I'd find him and kill him.

Just like Reina, I was worried about my brother and the members of the Omertà. I hadn't heard from Dante or anyone else apart from Hiroshi since the day I kidnapped Reina. My right-hand man conveyed the Omertà didn't take the news lightly. I had been cut off from all their dealings until I returned to Italy where I would face them all.

Well, fuck that. *Fuck them!* My wife would get her peace first. She'd talk to her family and friends. Then I'd deal with them.

Of course, since Hiroshi was able to get through to me, so was my mother because she was always with him. She didn't hide her disappointment. She blamed me for Dante's distress. Blamed me for bringing shame to our family.

I recalled the conversation I had with her during our flight somewhere over India while Reina slept restlessly next to me.

"She's nobody." My mother's voice pitched higher than I'd ever heard it.

“The illegitimate daughter.”

I took a second to suck in a breath before releasing it. She’d just confirmed she’d known Reina wasn’t Romero’s daughter. “Need I remind you that to the world, I’m the illegitimate son.”

“There’s a big difference. You’re not a bastard and she is,” she screeched. Thank fuck she wasn’t here because I’d have murder on my hands. “You’re throwing everything away for her.”

“She might not mean anything to you, but she’s everything to me.” If she couldn’t accept her, we would no longer have a relationship. Simple as that. “You can have both of us in your life, or you’ll have neither of us.”

Mother’s gasp traveled over the line. “You would throw me away? For her?”

“It’s hardly that dramatic.” Frustration boiled inside me but I contained it. “It’s your choice. Accept her or lose us both.”

Reina’s body jerked, her breathing labored while a small whimper left her lips and I pushed all thoughts of my mother aside.

“Shhh,” I comforted her, combing my fingers through her curls. Her eyes slowly opened but their blue was blank, as if she was still lost in her dreams. Or a nightmare. “You’re safe,” I murmured.

That must have assured her because her eyes fluttered shut and her breathing slowly returned to normal.

I tucked her safely to me, covering her with a throw blanket, and my lips brushed against her forehead. “I’ll always choose you, cinnamon girl.”

I didn’t know what my mother’s choice would be, but it didn’t matter. She’d make hers like I’d made mine. Besides, I wasn’t willing to forgive and forget. She still owed me explanations—many of them.

Bottom line was that none of it—the Yakuza, the Omertà, power, wealth—mattered to me. I didn’t need anything but her. Like lungs needed air. Like the moon needed stars. Like Earth needed the sun.

Then there was my brother, but Dante would come around. I was certain of it. He knew why I’d done it. I sent him all the evidence about Reina’s parentage and a text explaining we had to talk about my parentage. I wanted to break the news of who my father was in person. The ball was in his court now.

This fucking silence sucked.



Two hours later, we landed in the Philippines.

Reina and I made our way through customs. So far, they hadn't even bothered checking our documents. Reina's hand securely in mine, we exited the building only to find my mother and Hiroshi waiting for us.

"Fuck," I muttered under my breath, looking past them to see my driver staring with wide eyes.

Only the people closest to me knew I kept a place in Jolo, Philippines. Hiroshi and my mother were two of them, and at this moment, I regretted it. But then who fucking thought they'd ambush me like this at the airport.

"What are you doing here?" I questioned. After all, I only spoke to them a few hours ago and neither one of them mentioned they were in Jolo. If I'd known, I'd have re-routed my plane. "How did you know we'd be here today?"

"I hacked into your plane's control center," my mother answered. "Itinerary wasn't hard to figure out."

"Privacy means nothing to you, does it?"

"Musuko." My mother clicked her tongue, her eyes on Reina as if she couldn't stand the sight of her. My wife didn't cower, but whether she realized it or not, her grip on my hand tightened. It was hard for anyone to miss Mother's glares. "We need to talk about... *her*."

There was no mistake who she was talking about. Judging by the way Reina's fingernail dug into my hand, she picked up on it too.

"Mother. Hiroshi." Mother stiffened at my tone. "Meet my wife. I presumed you flew all this way to welcome her into our family."

My mother flinched as if I'd struck her. Hiroshi took it better, wrapping his arm around her and patting her shoulder in comfort.

"Congratulations, Amon." Hiroshi's eyes darted to Reina and he even smiled. "To both of you."

"Thank you," Reina responded, her voice soft and small.

"From Dante to Amon, you're a busy young lady." I wanted to reach out and wring my mother's neck. I understood she was bitter that she'd lost Romero to Reina's mother, but that wasn't Reina's fault. Her parents' sins were their own.

"Is there a reason you're both here?" I asked instead of lashing out like I

really wanted to. “I don’t recall inviting you.”

“I have news from the Yakuza,” Hiroshi stated. I slid a lethal look at him. “Your cousin is making a move and learned of your port in Indonesia. He’s routing a shipment of—” He broke off, his eyes flickering to Reina. “It’s a product you don’t touch. He’s trying to undermine you and associate you with the business that the Omertà doesn’t approve of.”

“It sounds like he’s laying a trap,” I deadpanned. Itsuki had grown some balls in my absence, no doubt due to Sofia Volkov’s influence. The idiot was too blind to see she was only using him. “When is the shipment supposed to hit the dock?”

“Tomorrow.”

My eyes darted to Reina. I didn’t want to leave her so soon, but this was important, and the sooner I eliminated my cousin, the sooner she’d be safe. We all would be.

“I have to get my wife to my compound where she’ll be safe, then I’ll fly out.”

“I can come with you,” Hiroshi offered. My gaze flickered to my mother. “Your mother and I are staying at the hotel,” he added, as though anticipating my protest.

Thank fuck.

“You’re sure his shipment arrives tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

“Seems reckless, even for him,” I remarked. Hiroshi nodded in agreement. “Aside from eliminating me permanently, do we know his agenda?”

He shook his head.

“Now might be the perfect time to take over,” my mother chimed in. “Everything you worked for is within our reach. You can’t let her—or anyone—stand in your way.”

Reina stiffened next to me at my mother’s tactless words. Jesus, had she always been like this and I just missed it?

“I’ll touch base with you tomorrow, Mother.”

“Amon, can we talk?” She clutched her pearls, her eyes darting to Reina’s neck donning the necklace that’d once belonged to her.

“No, not today.”

“But—”

“I said not today. I’m taking my wife home.” She glared at Reina as if my

rejection was her fault.

My driver, who happened to be waiting behind Hiroshi and my mother, waited for us and I motioned for him to open the passenger door so we could get the fuck out of here. I urged Reina to slide in before following behind her. I waited until the car started to drive away before turning to Reina.

“Are you okay?”

Her shoulders slumped. “Your mother hates me.”

“She doesn’t hate you,” I assured her. “Give her time.”

She chewed on her lip. “What if everyone ends up hating us?”

“Then it will be like we said: you and me against the world.” I pulled out my phone. “Let’s try your family again.”

She sighed. “I already did. Several times. My cell service must suck. It keeps just ringing and ringing. It doesn’t even go to voicemail.”

I handed her my phone. “Use mine. Try your sister and friends. Even your papà.”

While she dialed the first number, I glanced behind me, noting Hiroshi and my mother were right behind us in their car.

“Nothing,” she muttered. “I tried calling Grandma and Papà.”

“Try your friends,” I said.

When we landed, I tried getting in touch with my brother and each member of the Omertà to no avail. This didn’t bode well, although I wouldn’t say that to my wife. She was stressed out enough as it was, worrying about her sister and family.

“I’ll try FaceTiming Phoenix,” she stated. The ringing went on and on until it was clear nobody was going to answer.

“Did you text her?”

She swallowed, worry etched in the lines of her face. “Yes, but I’ll do that again now.”

I’d always followed my instincts, and at this very moment, they were crawling over my skin like spiders. They screamed for me to turn this car around and speed back to the yacht.

Flares went off in my head.

I opened my mouth to order just that when the first bullet hit our car. It was too late. I reached for Reina and pushed her body onto the floor.

“Get down,” I ordered.

Her terrified eyes met mine as I pulled out my gun. Another bullet hit the windshield, piercing the driver’s forehead and exiting through his headrest.

His body slumped forward, sending the car spiraling out of control.

Why in the fuck weren't the windows bulletproof? All my cars were armored. *Shit.*

More bullets flew through the air, the sound deafening. Someone opened fire on us with a machine gun as the car finally came to a stop.

Pain exploded in my chest and Reina's screams drowned out the gunfire.

She went to move. "No, stay down!"

My vision blurred, filled with a red mist. Ignoring the pain, I jumped out of the car and took shelter behind the door.

I spotted movement out of the corner of my eye and whipped my head around. It was the fucker with the machine gun, aiming at the car's back door.

He would hit Reina at that angle.

Without thinking, I took off running away from her. More bullets flew as I tried to find a better angle and shoot the fucker down.

And then the ground shook.

REINA

“Amon!” I screamed, my voice raw. The whole scene moved in slow motion, but my brain still wasn’t able to process it. Why was Amon running away from me and in the direction of the bullets?

I crawled out of the car just as more bullets started flying, one grazing my shoulder. Pain exploded across my skin, but then the ground shook and I forgot all about my pain.

Smoke suffocated the air and burned my eyes as I searched for Amon. When I spotted him, my heart nearly came to a complete halt.

I watched his body hit the ground. My limbs trembled. My mind refused to process the events. He couldn’t be shot. Did the explosion kill him?

This had to be a nightmare. I had to wake up. Please, God, let this be a dream. A really bad dream.

But the roaring in my ears was real.

This wasn’t a nightmare. It was really happening.

I acted on instinct and threw myself on the ground as bullets continued flying. I started crawling until Amon’s eyes found me through the mayhem.

“Don’t move,” he mouthed.

I drew in a deep breath, my nails digging into the gravel. Shouting, explosions, screams. It all filled the air as I kept my eyes locked on my husband.

My heart pounded in my ears. “Don’t move.” I watched his mouth form the words and I let out a sob. He was so close, if only I could reach him. This couldn’t be the end. Our story had barely even begun.

“I’m coming,” I mouthed back.

He shook his head, but I refused to stay put. I had to get to him. My breaths shuddered. My knees scraped against the gravel as I crawled toward him.

There was a lot of shouting—in several languages—but I was too far in my own head to comprehend. I just had to get to my husband.

My knees burned, rocks cutting into my flesh with each move. Warm liquid pooled on my skin from where the bullet had hit me.

It was taking way too long to get to him. His head fell back on the pavement and I saw his eyes close. His body was sprawled crookedly and blood soaked his white T-shirt. Nausea churned in my stomach as bile rose in my throat, threatening to spill.

Please don't die. Please don't die. I could handle anything and everything, but not that.

“Amon,” I cried frantically, ignoring the pain I felt in trying to reach him.

I slowly closed the distance between us. The front of his shirt was soaked, the blood sticky against my fingers as they roamed over his chest, looking for the wound.

Oh, God, no. Please, no.

I leaned over and brought my cheek to his mouth. Every second I waited to feel his breath on my skin felt like a whole lifetime, my heart thudding painfully in my chest.

There! Right there!

He was breathing.

My hands trembled as I pulled Amon's shirt up and saw the big gash across his chest. I didn't need a doctor to tell me it was bad. He needed to get to the hospital.

I reached for the hem of my dress and ripped it, then pressed it against his wound.

I looked around frantically, hoping that Hiroshi or any of Amon's men were on their way.

“Help!”

The taste of copper and salt filled my mouth and I realized I'd broken the skin on my lip.

“Why are you shouting, cinnamon girl?” A choked laugh escaped me despite my heart squeezing painfully in my chest. When I met his eyes, my heart shattered into pieces. They were dull, his face paling with each second he lay here.

I brought my forehead to his.

“So you can’t ignore me,” I murmured, pressing my lips to his cold ones. The thought of him dying squeezed my throat. I couldn’t lose him like I lost my mamma. He slowly raised his hand, the effort costing him energy I knew he didn’t have. “Don’t move. We’ll get you to the hospital.”

He let out a heavy exhale.

“There’s no time.” I shifted, ignoring him. “I have to tell you this, in case I don’t—”

I pressed my finger to his lips. “Don’t you say it. Don’t you fucking dare say it.”

“I spent a lifetime living for you,” he said, ignoring my demand. “Every breath has been for you.” I swallowed. Why did his words sound like goodbye? “It’s always been you, cinnamon girl. I love you.”

A choked sob suffocated me.

“No. Don’t you dare die on me,” I croaked, my voice barely audible from how badly my throat squeezed. My mind screamed as my heart twisted with panic. He panted, struggling to breathe.

“As long as I die in your arms, I’ll die a happy man.”

I shook my head, my cheeks wet with tears.

“You still owe me a honeymoon.” He blinked, almost as if confused, and I smiled weakly. “I added it to my bucket list right after we got married in Venice.”

He winced at the pressure I was applying to his wound. “Honeymoon it is, then.”

His labored breathing cracked my own chest in half, but before I could dwell on it, a blast sounded through the air.

Someone shouting “bomb” registered through all the commotion. I froze, my mind flashing with memories at lightning speed. The day I first saw the boy who would rule my world. The people I loved—my sister, Grandma, Papà, my friends, even that crazy Dante.

Amon’s eyes searched mine and I saw a million different versions of our future in them. I laced my fingers through his and gave him a reassuring squeeze. *This can’t be the end.*

In the distance, a voice shouted, “Heads down, fuckers! I’m resorting to drastic measures.”

Was that—

“Dante!” we both whispered. Did *he* attack us?

There wasn't any time to contemplate the answer before Amon's bloodied body covered mine. And then...

Boom!

WHAT'S NEXT?

Thank you so much for reading *Unforgiving Queen*! If you liked it, please consider leaving a review.

Your support means the world to me.

You can read the books of the characters that appeared in this book in my Belles and Mobsters series, starting with [Luciano](#), and in my Thorns of Omertà series, starting with [Thorns of Lust](#).

Thank you for reading!

XOXO

Eva Winners