

Moretti
CRIME FAMILY



unholy
UNION

IVY DAVIS

Unholy Union

AN ARRANGED MARRIAGE MAFIA ROMANCE

THE MORETTI MAFIA

BOOK FIVE

IVY DAVIS

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CHAPTER 1

Cecilia

“**B**less me, Father, for I have sinned,” I whisper, bowing my head to my clasped hands. “My last confession was a week ago.” I’d confessed to stealing my sister, Mia’s, pillow and not returning it. But today, my confession is something much worse. It’s something I haven’t had the heart to confess before.

The seat creaks as Father Enzo shifts around on the other side of the separator. He clears phlegm from his throat. I almost want to snap at him to hurry up and ask me what I’ve done wrong. Father Enzo is an old man, probably in his eighties by now, and he thinks he can take all the time in the world. As an impatient twenty-one-year-old, he drives me crazy some days. But he’s the only priest my family has ever gone to, and in my family, you’re not supposed to break tradition.

Finally, he speaks. “What is it you think you have sinned for, child?”

I clench my eyes shut as I press my head to my hands. “I’m in love with my bodyguard.”

“Go on.”

“I’m not supposed to be. He’s been a guard in our family since I was a kid. But ever since I became a teenager, I started having feelings for him. And even now that I’m an adult, they haven’t gone away. I have ... lustful thoughts about him. I know it’s wrong, but I can’t help how I feel. I know we’ll

never be together. It's impossible. But I can't stop my feelings or thoughts. What should I do, Father?"

"You are forgiven for confessing. You recognize it's wrong to have these feelings. So, the only course of action is to stop feeling them." I have to stop myself from rolling my eyes at his advice. If only it were easy to stop "feeling" what I feel for Theo. If it were, I wouldn't be here, confessing to my priest.

"Your penance is a prayer," he continues. "An Act of Contrition."

I let out a rough breath. "That's ... it?"

"That's it."

"But why? I just confessed to have inappropriate thoughts about my much older bodyguard."

"You haven't acted on your feelings. That's a good thing. You need to know God is always with you. A prayer will suffice."

"My God, I am sorry for the sins with all my heart. In choosing to do wrong and failing to do good." I continue with my penance as Father Enzo listens. Once I am done, he absolves me of my guilt.

"I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen."

"Amen," I whisper, signing the cross.

I leave the confessional booth feeling shaky. Father Enzo didn't really help me as I was hoping. I still feel what I feel.

And when I approach my family, who's seated in one of the pews with our bodyguard Theo standing behind them, all I can think about is how handsome Theo is.

With broad shoulders, a tan, and dark scruff on his chin, he's something out of any Italian girl's fantasy. His brown hair is cut short, but there's a hint of a wave to it. His dark eyes always seem like they're peering into my soul. At thirty-five, he's fourteen years my senior. It's not uncommon for mafia girls to end up married to men much older than them, but it is

uncommon for them to marry their bodyguards. In fact, it's not just uncommon. It's completely unheard of.

He's such a stark contrast to my lighter features. My hair is almost platinum blonde, and my skin looks like it hasn't seen the sun in years. I wonder what it would look like to see his skin close to mine. I shiver at the thought.

His eyes flick to mine briefly before darting away. A man like Theo Williams would never look my way. He's known me since I was twelve. He'll only ever see me as a little girl. That's for the best, even though the thought breaks my heart. I'm in love with him, and he'll never know.

I'll be married someday, and Theo will become a thing of the past. That's how it should be. I just keep telling myself that.

Theo looks at me again, and I quickly look away. I'm staring again. I need to work on that.

My mom, Giulia Moretti, stands up once I reach her. She's a gorgeous woman, even in middle age, with her long golden hair and pretty smile. She's birthed eight kids, but you wouldn't know by looking at her.

I clutch the cross around my neck tighter as Mom turns to me. I feel even guiltier than I did talking to Father Enzo. My mom is a perceptive woman, and I'm terrified she'll sense the sins on my face.

"All done?" she asks, motioning at my younger two siblings, Lucia and Luca, to stop messing around. They're twins and only ten years old, which means they're pure chaos. They're the opposite in look to my mom and me, with their dark hair and eyes. They have our father in them.

"Yes." I clear my throat. "I'm good."

"Good. Let's go back home. I need to start on dinner." My mom's duties are never done. "Come on," she tells Luca. "Stop hitting your sister. Let's go." Luca sticks his tongue out at Lucia, who just shoves them back. They might fight all the time, but I know those two will go to bat for each other when

they're older. They'll have to, being so much younger than the rest of us.

Mia steps beside me as we walk out of the church. At nineteen years old, she's the next one to be married off after me. She rolls her eyes. "God, I hate church. Why do we have to come every week?"

"Because it's a sacred thing to do. It's tradition," I tell her.

Her eyes flick to my cross. "Right. Why am I talking to you about this? You're the only one in our family who actually has a relationship with God." She makes an irritated sound as she pushes her dark hair over her shoulder. It's always unruly. "I should be complaining to Gemma. I know for a fact she always hated church."

Gemma is one of our older sisters. Emilia is the oldest, followed by Gemma and Francesca. After Francesca is our brother, who's also my best friend. We don't see Emilia and Francesca all that often because they live in LA with their husbands, and we still reside in New York. However, Gemma lives in New York with her husband, Viktor.

Antonio has just recently taken over as head of the family business after killing Franco, our uncle.

Franco took over when our father died. Antonio was only twelve at the time, too young to take over, and Franco used that to his advantage. But then, just a few months ago, Antonio killed Franco and took his rightful place as leader of the business.

With Franco gone, home has felt much more relaxed. He knew how to suck the fun out of everything. But I'm still not used to my brother being a boss to me. It's strange.

"Maybe you need to invite God into your life, Mia," I tell her as we walk outside. Theo's behind us, and with every step I take, I can feel his presence more and more. "It might do you some good."

"How? From what I can tell, God is pretty boring. All he does is smite people."

"He does more than that," I respond, feeling indulgent.

“Like what?” she tosses back.

“Like ...” *Forgives you for having lustful thoughts about your completely off-limits bodyguard.* There’s no way I’m telling Mia any of that. “Like ...”

Mia huffs. “See? Even you can’t tell me. And if you, of all people, can’t give God a good word, then why should I believe in him? And who even says it’s a man? God could be a woman, you know.”

“God is not a woman,” Mom says as reach the car. She opens the back door, and the twins scramble inside. “Mia, don’t say such ridiculous things.”

Mia rolls her eyes and shoots me a wink before sliding in beside Lucia and Luca.

“Cecilia, there’s no room back here,” Mom says, getting into the back seat and planting herself between the twins to make sure they don’t get into more trouble. “You’ll have to sit in the front.”

“Here,” Theo’s deep voice rings out. I almost gasp when he reaches around me and opens the passenger door for me. I sneak a quick glance at him. He gives me a small, easy smile as he nods at the seat.

“Thanks,” I squeak, fumbling onto the seat like an idiot. Fortunately, Theo doesn’t make a comment. He just rounds the car, giving me a good look at his muscular arms underneath his jacket, before sliding in beside me. Theo smells like the muskiest, musky man I’ve ever smelled. I don’t even know how to describe it except ... he smells like what a man should smell like.

My cheeks flush at where my mind is going. How stupid can I be? Of course, Theo smells like a man. He *is* a man.

Being this close to him, I can sense every movement he makes, from checking the rearview mirror to turning the keys in the ignition to putting his seatbelt on. I’m dumbly staring at him, and it takes me a beat to realize he’s looking back at me. And he’s talking.

I jump. “What?”

He nods at my lap, and I curl my hands together. “You need to put your seatbelt on.”

“Right.” I deflate slightly as I do as he says. He’s instructing me like I’m a little kid who needs to be reminded to put on her seatbelt. How humiliating.

“Luca, stop!” Mom scolds loudly, making me turn around to see what’s going on. Judging by the chagrined expression on Luca’s face, he was trying to hit Lucia again. “Why can’t you just stop? You’re always acting out, and I’m tired of it. You’re ten. You’ll be eleven in just a couple months. You need to grow up.”

Luca angrily looks away, wiping at his face. In profile, he looks so much like our uncle Franco for a second, it scares me.

Mia shoots me a look, telling me silently how awkward she feels. I give her a smile. Lucia has her head bowed and won’t look at either Mom or Luca.

Mom eventually sighs. “Luca, I’m sorry. You just need to learn to stop acting out. It’s getting tiring. I know you’ve taken the death of ...” She pauses. “Of Uncle Franco hard, but it’s time to move on. He’s been gone for months now.”

“He was like a dad to me,” Luca mutters, still facing the window.

A flash of pain crosses Mom’s eyes. “I know he was. But he’s gone, and you need to accept it.”

“Why did Antonio kill him?” Lucia asks in her sweet, angelic little voice. Between her voice and the question, it just doesn’t match.

“Because he was a bad man, your uncle.”

“How?” she asks.

Mia shakes her head and shares another look with me as she sinks into her seat. We both know what it was like going through our teen years with Franco as a father-figure. It wasn’t fun. He was controlling and rude and entitled. He acted like he owned the place, even though it was our father who bought

our house. But the twins were so young. He tended to be nicer to them than to the rest of us. I always wondered why.

Mom turns to Lucia, pulling her close. I remember when she used to that for Mia and me. Now that we're adults, she hasn't given us a proper hug in years. "Because he hurt us. He killed your father. He was bad. He tried hurting Antonio, so Antonio needed to do what he had to do. Isn't it better with Antonio as the boss now? Aren't we all happy?"

"I know I am," Mia says.

"Me, too," I reply.

Mom gives us both grateful smiles.

We just found out before Antonio killed Franco a few months ago that the reason our father died was because Franco had been slowly poisoning him. None of us ever knew until Franco thought he had the upper hand on Antonio and confessed. Antonio, fortunately, won that fight and killed Franco, saving the rest of us from a life of misery.

I think out of everyone, though, Mom was the most relieved. I've suspected in the past that Franco was abusing her, but she never said anything, and I never asked. I figured, if she wanted to tell me, she could.

"I'm not happy," Luca mutters, wrenching away from Mom when she reaches out to him. "Franco might not have been my dad, but he was my dad. And I don't like how all of you act like he was a bad man. He wasn't to me."

Mom found out she was pregnant with the twins about a month after Dad passed away. Lucia and Luca never knew him, and they never will. All they have to go off is everyone else's memories of the great Riccardo Moretti.

"I know," Mom says in a quieter voice. "I know he was good to you." She looks at Lucia. "To both of you. And you both have the right to miss him." I can tell it hurts her to say this.

The car ride is silent the rest of the way home. So much as changed in the past couple months. Franco dying. Antonio

taking over. The last anything this drastic happened was the day my dad died eleven years ago.

When we reach our white colored brownstone, Luca runs out of the car before Theo even fully brings it to a stop.

“Luca!” Mom shouts after him. He’s running down the street. Instinct takes over, and I get out of the car.

“I’ll get him,” I tell her. She gives me a grateful nod as she holds Lucia’s hand as they exit the car. Mia watches silently.

“I’ll go with,” Theo says, his voice making me shiver from excitement.

I can’t help but notice Theo at my side as we hurry down the street after Luca. The way he’s so much bigger and muscular than me. What would it be like to be wrapped in his arms? Focus. I need to focus.

Theo easily catches up to Luca and grabs his arm, stopping him. Luca pulls away, his expression firmly rooted in anger.

“Luca, what were you thinking?” I ask, catching up. “You can’t just run off like that. You could get hurt.”

“No one cares,” he snaps back. “No one cares about anything.”

“We care, Luca. We care.”

“No.” He shoves me. I stumble backward, but Theo grabs my arm, rightening me. He only touches me for an instant, but it sends flutters to my stomach.

“Don’t shove your sister,” Theo warns.

Luca rolls his eyes. “You’re not my dad. You’re the *bodyguard*.” He says it like it’s a bad word. “My dad is dead.”

“Franco wasn’t your dad,” I remind him.

“He was the only dad I knew.”

True. With a sigh, I lean down to meet Luca’s eyes. He’s already getting so tall. Soon, he’ll be way taller than me. Right now, he reaches my shoulders. “When our dad died, you weren’t even born yet. You never knew what it was like to

miss him. But all of us, me, Antonio, Mia, Emilia, Gemma, and Francesca, we all felt the pain of losing him. So, we know what it's like to hurt. We know how long that grief can last. Honestly ...” I look down at my cross around my neck. “I'm still grieving some days, and it's been eleven years now. So, when I say we care, of course we care. You and Lucia are going through what the rest of us went through. Losing the only father you ever knew. I understand that pain. We all do. So, don't say we don't care.”

Luca scrunches up his face like he's about to tell me off when he suddenly sits on the curb, his face in his hands. I sit down beside him, conscientious of my dress and bare legs. Theo's eyes flick to my legs before he quickly looks away. I tell myself to not make anything of it. Now's not the moment. Luca needs me.

Theo takes a seat on Luca's other side. “Buddy, listen, I know I'm just the bodyguard, but I've known you since you were a baby. I was hired soon after you turned one. I also know what it's like to lose people close to you.” My breath hitches as I look at Theo with wide eyes. I never knew that about him. But then again, he's never really spoken about any of his personal life to me. Why would he?

“And,” he continues, “because I know how painful it can be, I'm letting you know it's ok to let it out. I held things in for years, bottling it up. Don't make the same mistakes I did.”

I'm desperate to ask him what he went through. Who did he lose?

Luca lifts his head up. “Have you ever cried?” he asks Theo.

Theo smiles ruefully. “I've cried. It's ok if you want to.”

“Mostly I just want to punch something,” Luca says, scowling.

I shake my head. “Mom won't like that. Should we go back to the house now?”

After a beat, Luca nods and gets up. Theo and I walk behind him. His fingers are close to mine, and it's all I can

think about.

“I never knew that about you,” I say to Theo.

He doesn't look at me as he answers. “It's not exactly professional of me to talk about my personal life.” The way he says it makes it sound like he's annoyed with me. He was so open with Luca a second ago, and now with me, he can't seem to get away fast enough.

Theo holds the front door open for us as we walk inside. Luca bounds ahead, but I stop next to Theo in the doorway.

“I'm sorry,” I say. “If I overstepped a boundary.”

He keeps his eyes trained over my head. “You don't have to apologize. Just don't ask again.”

I flinch, feeling tears spring to my eyes. Without waiting another minute, I walk away from Theo, feeling like I want to fall into a hole and never see the light of day again.

The only sound he makes is a deep sigh behind me.

WITHIN HOURS, the house is full of laughter and chatter. It's a family dinner night where all my siblings get together. Emilia and Marco and Francesca and Leo are visiting from LA.

Mom welcomes them inside and motions them toward the dining table where the rest of us are already seated. Emilia and Marco make a stunning pair, with her golden hair and his dark looks. The scar that crosses his face is not exactly handsome, but he makes it work. Leo saunters in with his typical swagger while Francesca teases him about it.

“You can't just walk like a normal person?” she asks him.

“No. I can't.” He kisses her head, his lips touching her brown locks. With his sandy colored hair, they're the opposite in looks to Emilia and Marco.

I give both my sisters a hug. I haven't seen them in person since they came to visit after Franco died and Antonio took over, but that was a few months ago.

Gemma and Viktor are already seated at the table. “He just thinks he’s cool,” Gemma mutters, making Viktor laugh. “But I know Emilia has the coolest out of all our husbands. Marco is the best.”

“Hey, what about me?” Viktor asks, pretending to be offended, but he’s the kind of man who’s not bothered by anything.

Gemma snorts. “You think you’re cool?”

Viktor gives her a cheeky smile. Knowing those two, they’ll leave at some point to make out in one of the other rooms. They tend to do that. I know from personal experience since I ran into them almost having sex once in the guest bathroom. It was awkward to say the least.

Emilia and Marco take their seats with grace like the power couple they are. “I agree with Gemma. Marco is the best husband,” Emilia says.

Taking a seat between her parents is Emilia and Marco’s daughter, Essie. She’s five now and every bit as cute as you’d expect a five-year-old to be. Especially with beautiful parents like Emilia and Marco.

“When can I expect more grandkids?” Mom asks, looking pointedly at Gemma and Viktor.

Gemma shudders while Viktor raises his hands. “Hey,” he says. “Do you think we’d make good parent?.”

“No,” a few of us say at once, making everyone around the table laugh.

Viktor winks. “Exactly.”

“We are never having kids,” Gemma says. “End of story.”

“Fran?” Mom asks, turning to her and Leo.

Francesca blushes as Leo smiles proudly. “As a matter of fact ... I just found out I’m pregnant.”

Mom gasps, pulling Francesca into a hug. “How long?”

“Just two months. It’s still really early.”

Congratulations are passed around the table right as Antonio enters the house with Nina, his wife, at his side. And with them is Nina's younger sister, Anna.

"What did we miss?" Antonio asks, giving Mom a peck on the cheek.

"Francesca is pregnant!"

"That's amazing," he replies, giving Francesca a hug. My older brother looks the most like me, so much so that people thought we were twins when we were younger. His wife, Nina, is stunningly beautiful, it almost hurts. She has a cool beauty to her from her light blonde hair to her blue eyes, but I know how warm she is as a person. We've gotten to know each other well over the past few months.

Antonio takes his seat at the head of the table, which always makes me disappointed, I know he's technically the head of the household now, even though he doesn't live here. But I miss my favorite sibling sitting beside me. We'd always laugh and share jokes with each other. Now, he barely looks at me as he sits down. Becoming the boss has already changed him as I feared it would.

Nina takes her place by Antonio's side while Anna slinks in beside me. At thirteen years old, she has an awkwardness about her. I remember being a teenager, and I'd never want to go back to that again.

Following Antonio and Nina is a man I've met only on spares occasions. Killian Brennan. The Irishman who helped Antonio take down Franco. With charmingly good looks, he's more like the boy next door. If the boy next door had a biker edge to him with tattoos and wavy black hair.

Mom stands up with narrowed eyes when she sees him. "Oh no. I won't have any Irish in my household. Get out."

"Ma," Antonio warns. "Killian is my second-in-command. Show him respect."

"I can leave," Killian says. "But Antonio is always talking about family dinners, and I thought it'd be nice to join."

“Seeing as you’re not a part of this family,” Mom replies, “you need to leave.”

“Killian, stay,” Antonio says as Killian starts walking out of the room.

“Hey, I don’t want to cause any drama with your mom. I’ll catch you later.” He throws a wink in Mia’s direction, which makes Mia frown and look incredibly confused.

After Mom sits back down, Antonio shoots her a look. “Seriously, Ma?”

“Seriously. This is my house, and I won’t let anyone into it that I don’t want here.” I know that’s incredibly important to her after Franco invaded our house without her permission. And he didn’t leave for eleven years until Antonio killed him.

Antonio looks like he’s going to object when Gemma raises her wine glass. “Let’s get drunk!” Everyone laughs, and it diffuses the tension. Even Theo cracks a smile at her comment. He’s standing by the wall across from me, making it even harder for me to ignore him.

Now that everyone has arrived, we spend the dinner conversing and eating and just having fun. We’re big on family, being typical Italians. Mom always makes a huge meal, and there’s never any leftovers, given how many people are eating and taking seconds.

“When can I expect children from you two?” Mom asks, looking at Antonio and Nina.

Nina blushes while Antonio shakes his head. Normally, my brother would make a teasing remark, but his words are more biting than any of us are expecting. “Ma, I just took over. I have the business to think about. Besides, Nina and I have only been married a few months. You can’t expect us to have children any time soon.”

Mom flinches. “I ...”

Nina places her hand on Antonio’s arm. “Easy, Antonio.”

He sucks in a breath and releases it slowly. “Sorry. I’m just stressed. Taking over where Franco left off hasn’t been easy.

My men expect a lot out of me, and I'm still in the process of proving myself to them."

"You shouldn't have to prove yourself to anyone," Mom says, taking a sip of her wine. "You're Antonio Moretti. Son of Riccardo Moretti. They should automatically respect you."

Antonio rubs a hand over his tired face. "Unfortunately, that's not how that works. I still have to earn it. I couldn't do any of this without Nina's support."

Nina rubs his arm, sharing a soft smile with him. "I'm glad to offer Antonio support. I wouldn't want it any other way." I know they went through a rough patch after discovering Nina's father was a spy, working for Franco. He tried blackmailing Nina into killing Antonio, but she wouldn't have it. Nina told me her and Antonio's marriage was almost broken until they came back together, and they've been stronger ever since.

I wonder if my future husband will ever fight for me as much as Nina has fought for Antonio. Somehow, I doubt it.

My eyes flick to Theo, and I almost jump. I catch him looking at me before he averts his eyes. Why is Theo looking at me? He's only ever treated me like I was his professional duty or a nuisance.

"Why does Lucia get soda and I don't?" Luca asks.

"Because you can't handle all that sugar," Mom explains.

"That's stupid." He grabs Lucia's glass.

"Hey!" she says, grabbing for it. They start fighting over the soda. Soon, it's spilling over the edge of the cup and landing on Mom's nice linen.

"Stop it!" Mom shouts at them. "Stop it, you two!"

Luca is in the middle of grabbing the glass from Lucia, and Lucia immediately lets go when Mom shouts. This causes the glass in Luca's hand to move with momentum, and suddenly, soda is flying across the table.

... to land exactly on my white shirt.

I gasp when the soda hits me, and the entire table goes silent.

Tears brim at the corner of my eyes as I stand.

“Cecilia,” Mom says, reaching out her hand.

“I need to clean up,” I say, trying to stop the tears from spilling over. Antonio watches me with pity. I want to scream at Antonio to tease me. That’s what he would have done when we were younger. Now, he only looks at me like I’m making *his* life somehow harder.

My eyes land on Theo across the room. His brow is furrowed in concern. Theo turns to the napkin cabinet and grabs me one, handing it to me. But to take it means I have to walk over to him in my stained shirt. I can’t stand the embarrassment. I can’t stand knowing Theo is seeing me like this—like I’m a little girl who just got soda spilled on her.

I hurry out of the room. One of the chairs scrapes as it’s pushed back, and footsteps follow me. I only look back when I reach the powder room. It’s Emilia, of course. She was always like a second mom to us growing up. And even though she’s a mom herself now, she still makes time for her younger siblings.

Unlike Antonio.

Yes, I’m bitter about it. I thought I’d be so happy for him to take over the family business, but it’s only made him distant from me. And he was gone for five years after Franco tried to kill him. I felt closer to him in the five years I didn’t see him than in the couple of months he’s been back in my life as mob boss.

Emilia follows me into the bathroom, already getting a towel wet and dabbing at my shirt. “Are you ok?”

Hearing my sister’s concern makes the tears finally spill down. “It’s just embarrassing.”

“Of course, it is. God, I’ve gotten spills on my shirt so many times since having Essie. You get used to stains after a while. You’ll understand more when you become a mom one day. Here. Let me go get you a clean shirt. Ok?”

“Thanks.”

Emilia returns a few minutes later with one of my light pink shirts. “Here.”

I slip it on, and she takes the stained one. “I can’t believe that happened. And in front of Theo, no less.” The words slip out of me before I can stop them.

Emilia pauses, staring down at my stained shirt. “What does Theo have to do with anything?”

“No reason,” I squeak.

“Uh-huh.” She gives me a pointed look. “Cecilia, I know you’ve had a crush on him for years. Every time I’ve visited, I’ve seen it. But I thought that as you got older, you’d grow out of it. That’s not the case, is it?”

I shake my head, feeling shame radiate through me.

Emilia sighs, leaning against the sink. “I’m only saying this because I love you. You will marry someone you don’t choose. That was the case for me. For Gemma. And for Francesca. And knowing how mafia politics are, it’ll be the same for you.”

“You don’t think Antonio will force me to marry a stranger, do you?”

“He’s boss now. He’s under a lot of pressure. He might. I’m not sure. Dad arranged the marriage between Marco and me before he died, and he was our dad. Antonio is just our brother. I don’t know what he’s capable of now that he’s boss. It could bring out the best in him or it could ...” She swallows hard, a darkness crossing her eyes. “Or it could bring out the worst in him.”

“But Antonio and I were always close. He wouldn’t force me into a marriage I don’t want.”

Emilia only looks at me with a sad expression. I slump. She’s right. I don’t know who this new Antonio is. He could very well marry me to a stranger. I know for a fact he’ll never marry me off to Theo.

“You need to be prepared for anything,” Emilia says, squeezing my hand. “And having a crush on Theo will only make things harder.”

“It’s sinful, I know,” I say. “I shouldn’t be having these thoughts.”

Emilia pulls me into a hug. Even though I’m twenty-one, I still find comfort in Emilia’s embrace. “I never said it was sinful. It’s just going to be hard. To love a man and to have to marry another one day will only set you up for heartbreak. For your own benefit, I’d find a way to move on from Theo.”

“It’s ok,” I sniffle. “He doesn’t even like me like that. Every time I try to talk to him, he just acts all gruff.”

“Then you should learn to do the same,” she says, pulling back. “Try to limit your interactions with him. It might make things easier. Now, should we go back out there? You don’t need to feel embarrassed.”

“Yeah,” I whisper.

Following Emilia into the dining room, all I can think is that while my brain knows she’s right, my heart is screaming at me to never stop loving Theo.

When I see him in the dining room after taking my seat, I instantly look away. Theo is my sin, and I need to snuff it out.

CHAPTER 2

Theo

For the past year, I've been in torture.

I cannot have feelings for Cecilia. I do not, I tell myself.

But watching her run from the room, covered in soda, I can't help but feel the smallest amount of affection for her.

It's been growing in me since she turned twenty. It was like, one day she was just a kid, and then suddenly, she was a young woman.

Cecilia has a subtle kind of beauty about her. Yes, her blonde hair would draw anyone man in, but the rest of her is subdued. Humble. Like she's not fully aware of how beautiful she is.

I just hate that I'm becoming aware of how beautiful she is.

I've been a bodyguard working in the service of the Moretti Family since I was twenty-six, ever since I left the army. I first met Cecilia when she was twelve years old. She was nothing more than young girl who wore a cross around her neck. She was part of my assignment. My duty. To protect her and her family. Nothing more.

I remember when we first met.

I stepped foot through the fancy Moretti brownstone. I grew up in New York, but my life was centered around baseball down the street with the neighborhood kids and trying to get food when my dad forgot to pay the bills and my mom

wrapping my in her arms, keeping me warm when the power went out in our tiny Queens apartment.

Entering the Moretti brownstone was like entering a completely different life. One full of fine China, fresh-cut flowers in glass vases resting on a lone table in the middle of a huge foyer with a grand chandelier overlooking everything, and a family comprised of multiple children and a mom who looked elegant despite all of it. I'm a single child, so I never knew what it was like to grow up in such a huge household.

It really was an entirely new world for me.

I was hired because one of the Moretti siblings, Gemma, was kidnapped by Viktor, and Giulia wanted to make sure none of her other children would suffer the same fate. I was surprised when Gemma ended up falling in love with Viktor and they started attending family meals with everyone, but it wasn't my place to cast judgment. My place was and has always been to stand guard behind the family and remain silent.

On that first day I arrived at the house, Giulia looked me over head to toe and gave a sharp nod. "You have the right stature to protect my kids. When I hired you, I was told you know how to fight?"

"I was in the Army, ma'am," I told her, straightening my back and locking out my knees.

"Why aren't you still in the army?"

"I suffered a broken leg and was discharged. Now, I'm looking for other work."

She narrowed her eyes at me. "And you think you're capable of protecting my kids?"

I had to shove the memory that haunted me forever out of my mind to answer her. "Yes, ma'am. I know how to fight, defend, and use a gun."

"Good. You'll meet my children, and we'll do a trail run to make sure you're a good fit for my family." She blinked and suddenly, she was crying. "I'm sorry. It's just ... one of my daughters is in trouble. I'm worried."

Without thinking, I placed my hand on her shoulder. “I may not be able to protect your daughter, but I will protect the rest of your kids. I promise you that.”

She gasped and lifted her head, nodding. She didn’t even seem out of sorts with my hand on her shoulder. “Thank you. I need someone who cares.”

A man entered the foyer, one with dark hair and a lean build. He had a predatory way of walking that instantly made me uneasy. “Is this the new guard?”

“Yes, Franco,” Giulia said.

Franco sniffed, looking me over. “He’ll do. But make sure he knows his job is to remain silent and keep an eye out for any enemies that come knocking on our door. Nothing else.”

Giulia nodded, but that didn’t seem to please Franco. He gripped her arm, making her wince. I tensed. “You understand, Giulia?”

“Yes, I do,” she whispered.

Franco looked at her for so long, I wondered what he would do. I felt my body tensing, getting ready to strike, when he let her go. “Good. Remember that.” With one finale glance at me, he walked away.

I turned to Giulia. “Are you ok, ma’am?”

She chuckled without any humor to it. “You don’t need to call me ma’am. Giulia is fine. But I’m fine.”

“You hired me to protect your children from outside threats, but it seems you have an inside threat, too.”

She shook her head frantically. “No, no. Don’t worry about Franco. There’s nothing you can do about him. Please, just help keep my children safe.”

I wanted to object, but I was there to do my job, and if Giulia didn’t want my protection from Franco, there wasn’t much else I could do.

She showed me into the living room where her children were. Francesca was reading a book. Mia was playing with a

Barbie doll. Lucia and Luca were trying to get up and walk, but as babies, they were having a hard time. Antonio was brooding in a corner. And lastly, there was Cecilia.

She was kneeling beside the couch, saying a silent prayer. She was so tiny and young. I found it admirable how she had the courage to pray. I never had God in my life. Never understood. Never cared to. But she looked so confident in herself; I found it inspiring, even though she was only twelve.

“Kids,” Giulia said, “this is Theo. He’ll be our new bodyguard.”

They all greeted me, but it was Cecilia who stood up and approached me. “You’re tall,” she commented, looking up at me.

“I am.”

“I prayed my family would be ok. Did God send you to us?”

I tensed and shared a look with Giulia. She nodded for me to answer. “I don’t know,” I told her. “Your mom hired me.”

Cecilia frowned. “But God had something to do with it, right?” I could see the desperation behind her eyes. It was clear she was clinging on to God for help.

I kneeled to meet her at her eye-level. “I’m really not sure,” I said. “But I can promise I’m here to help keep you safe. Ok?”

That appeased her, and she nodded and resumed her spot on the floor, praying again. From then on, I always found Cecilia to be fascinating. The way she had such conviction in her belief, even in the toughest of times, was truly admirable.

Now, back in the present, I look over the entire Moretti family, having dinner together again. Franco is dead, which puts me at relief just as much as the rest of them. I knew he’d abused Giulia for years, but every time I asked her if she wanted my help, she declined, telling me he had too much power.

I didn't know when I took this job that the Moretti was a crime family, but I quickly learned. I didn't have any other job prospects so I stuck around, but then I ended up caring for this family and knew I couldn't leave.

So, when Giulia told me how much Franco had, I knew she was telling me I didn't stand a chance against him. Not as a lowly, ex-military man with no other connections.

"Luca," Giulia says tiredly, grabbing the now-empty glass from his hands. "You can't be fighting over things with your sister. You just spilled this all over Cecilia."

Luca shrugs. "I wanted soda."

Giulia sighs, covering her face with her hands.

"I can go get him some," Francesca offers, starting to stand up, but Giulia holds up a hand, stopping her.

"No enabling him. He didn't get soda, and he still doesn't get soda."

"What about juice?" Luca asks.

Giulia levels him with a look. It reminds me of how my mom would look at me whenever I'd get in trouble as a kid. I can't quite hold back my smile. "No," Giulia says. "If you don't get soda, you definitely don't get any kind of juice. No sugar. Just drink your water."

Luca grumbles under his breath, sitting back in his seat with his arms crossed. If he's this much trouble as a kid, I don't even want to imagine what he'll be like when he gets older.

Cecilia and Emilia come back, Cecilia now in a new shirt. The soft pink color goes well with her hair and skin tone. Shit. I shouldn't be thinking like that. Cecilia should never be on my mind, but over this past year, she encroached on my thoughts more and more.

As she takes her seat, I force myself to look away from her. But I don't hold out for very long, and when I glance back at her, I notice her looking at me. I turn my entire body to face

the front of the room, so I can only see her out of my peripheral vision.

No more thinking about Cecilia. No more thinking about how pretty she looks in her pink top or how soft her hair looks or how plump her lips are. It's inappropriate. *Highly* inappropriate.

Fuck, I've known her since she was a kid. That's not ok. It doesn't matter she's an adult now and I've only started thinking of her in a more romantic way since she turned twenty. None of it matters. I'm her bodyguard. My duty is to protect her.

Not seduce her.

I keep my focus on the twins as they start banging their forks into the table.

"Stop," Giulia says.

Lucia does, but Luca doesn't listen. He continues to bang his fork into the fine wood of the table.

"Stop!" Giulia shouts at him.

He jerks, and his elbow ends up hitting his plate, knocking it to the ground.

The loud crash makes me jerk back against the wall, and my vision suddenly becomes filled with images of guns and uniforms and my best friend's face.

Without meaning to, I'm clinging to my chest, unable to breath.

"Theo?" someone asks, but I'm not sure who.

"We need to make sure he's all right," comes a feminine voice.

I'm gasping, my vision going dark.

All I can see is Benji.

"COME ON, THEO," Benji said, pushing my book out of my hands. "I want to enjoy the city tonight. Let's go. All of us are

going.”

I looked around the fort we were stationed in. Bunks took up most of the space, and there’s was a small kitchenette area and a tiny bathroom that was more like an outhouse.

“The lieutenant wanted us here for the night,” I told him. At eighteen, I was still fresh to the army in so many ways. After my training, I was sent to Afghanistan, where I met Benji. We were in the same battalion.

“The lieutenant is out at some brothel. You know he is. He’s not here, so why should the rest of us be?”

Benji made a good point. Lieutenant Johnson had a soft spot for the local girls. I thought it was disgusting how he took advantage of them, but there wasn’t really much I could do. I wasn’t the one with power.

We were on the outskirts of Kabul. Lieutenant Johnson loved being stationed there because it made it easy for him to find brothels. It also made it easy to go out and get drunk.

I followed Benji outside, and with the rest of our group, around twenty of us, we set off into the city to have a night of fun.

I took in the bazaars and people selling crafts and food. The cars zipping by. The smell of warm sand in the air, which couldn’t even be escaped in the middle of a crowded city.

The locals watched us warily. A group of Americans. Even though we weren’t in uniform, it was obvious we didn’t belong.

Benji found us a restaurant that sold alcohol on the black market. When I first got to Afghanistan and found out alcohol was illegal, I almost shit myself. I couldn’t believe it.

But thankfully, I befriended Benji, and he was good about finding people who would sell us alcohol.

We clinked our beers together in the back of the restaurant. Benjo took a good, long chug. “Man, I’ve missed this. I’ve missed not being in uniform all the time. I’ve missed just hanging out with my friends and enjoying a cold beer.”

“I agree.”

Benji waggled his busy eyebrows. “I also miss sex. Have anyone back home you miss?”

“Nope. I was single when I joined the Army and still am. Usually when I return home, I have a few one-night stands, but nothing more.”

“So, no woman you’ve been desperately missing to fuck?”

I chuckled as I took another sip of my beer. “Nope.”

“Man, you’re missing out. My girl back home ... whew. She’s a wild card. Great in the sack.”

“I hope you get to go home to her soon. When do you have leave?”

“In just a few months. I can’t wait.”

“Then, cheers.” I clinked my bottle to his again.

The explosion happened before any of us could even process it.

A huge fireball went through the restaurant. I’m not sure what caused it. A bomb. A gas leak. I was never able to find out, not even years later.

All I knew was I was blown off my chair, and I landed hard on my back. The table in front of me protected me from the worst of the explosion.

But when I looked over and saw Benji lying beside me, my eyes immediately locked on a piece of glass sticking out of his neck. Blood was gushing down his throat. His eyes were wide open.

I crawled over to him and shook him, but his head just flopped to the side. He was dead. And all I had to show for it was the blood covering my hands.

“THEO?”

I gasp again, my vision clearing.

“Theo?” It takes a moment to recognize the voice.

Cecilia.

She’s standing right before me, looking at me with concern. When my eyes finally focus, I realize everyone else is giving me the same look.

“Are you all right?” she asks, reaching her hand out to me.

I wrench away from her, and she drops her hand, hurt written on her face. I don’t have time to feel bad for her. She shouldn’t be asking me if I’m all right. She shouldn’t be so close to me at all.

It’s a recipe for danger.

“I’m fine,” I say, hoping everyone will stop looking at me like that. “I’m fine.”

Cecilia hurries back to her seat, her eyes downcast. I straighten, brushing a hand down my shirt.

“I apologize,” I say. “That was unprofessional.”

“What was that?” Giulia asks.

I clear my throat. “Just bad memories is all. I’m fine. Please. Go back to enjoying your dinner.”

After a few more looks of concern thrown my way, the family resumes their dinner.

Antonio clears his throat. “Actually, there’s something I want to discuss tonight. Something important.”

Everyone turns to him.

“As you know, I’ve been looking to expand our territory. It’s a great way to show the men I’m a leader. But to do so ... I need to make an alliance with a man named Salvatore Fontana.”

Viktor grins. “You’re talking about the money magnet, Salvatore Fontana. I’ve never met the guy, but I know he’s loaded.”

“He is. And he’s willing to help fund us and ensure our influence remains intact. Ensure we remain the most powerful

Mafia family in New York.”

After taking a sip of his wine, Marco asks, “What’s in it for him?”

“Right.” Antonio takes in a deep breath. His nerves are obvious, but I’m not sure what has him so worried. “He said he’ll need something in return for giving me the money.”

“And that is ...” Giulia asks, waving her hand, silently telling her son to hurry up.

“A marriage alliance,” Antonio says in a firm voice, leaving nothing to the imagination.

The room goes silent. They all know what this means. I never would have in the past, but having spent the past nine years in the employ of a Mafia family, I’ve learned to read the cues. One of them will have to marry Salvatore Fontana.

And there’s only two viable options.

Mia, who’s nineteen.

Or ...

Cecilia.

“To who?” Giulia asks.

Antonio answers my worst fear. “Cecilia.” He turns to his sister. “He wants to marry Cecilia.”

Cecilia is as white as a sheet. She’s gripping her wine glass so hard that I’m worried she’ll break it. “Me?”

“It’s time for you to get married. And this will help our entire family. You know it will.” Antonio clears his throat like he’s unsure of what to say next. “I’ve already arranged a meeting between you and him for later this week. You will go and meet him and be polite. I need this, Cecilia. I need you to marry him.”

She doesn’t say a word as she glares at her brother. I remember watching them as kids, how close they were. Now, there’s a huge divide between them that feels impossible to cross.

Cecilia finally cuts the tension by getting up and leaving the room.

All I can do is watch her go.

CHAPTER 3

Cecilia

There's only silence as I leave the dining room.

I'm almost halfway up the stairs to my room before I hear footsteps behind me. "Cecilia, wait," Antonio says.

I keep walking.

He follows me to my bedroom, planting his foot between my door and the frame before I can shut it. "Wait. Let's talk about this."

"What is there to talk about?" I ask, trying to shove the door close. Antonio won't let me. "You've already decided my future. You didn't even ask me about this before you told this ... this ... ugh! What was his name?"

"Salvatore Fontana."

"Yes, that. Him. You didn't even talk to me about this before telling *Salvatore Fontana* you would marry me to him. How is that fair? I haven't even met him!"

Antonio rips my door open, stepping inside my room. "That's why I set up a meeting for you to meet to him."

"But you already told him we're going to get married."

"That's because you are."

I huff, plopping down onto my bed. "You should have talked with me about this."

"I am." He places his hands on his hips. "I don't understand what the problem is. We all knew we'd have to marry someone for political gain. Emilia knew it when she

married Marco. Gemma knew when it she married Viktor. Francesca knew it when she married Leo. I knew it when I married Nina.”

“That’s not fair. You got to see Nina before agreeing to marry her. And judging by how beautiful she is, it’s not surprising you said yes. This isn’t the same thing. I don’t even know what this man looks like.”

“Neither did Emilia, and look how happy she is.”

I deflate slightly. “True.” I play with my cross, rotating it between my fingers. It’s so worn down from years of me touching it. The gold is more like rust now. “But you should still have talked to me about it before agreeing to anything. How could you? You’re my brother. We were best friends.”

He sits beside me on the bed. “We’re still best friends.”

“Are we? You’ve barely spoken to me in the months since you’ve been back.”

“That’s because I’ve been—”

“Busy,” I finish for him. “Yes, I know. That still doesn’t excuse how you’ve treated me more like a stranger than a best friend. I missed you for five years while you were in hiding. And now that I have you back, it doesn’t feel like you’re really back.”

Antonio sighs, rubbing a hand over his face. “Cecilia, I just don’t have time for this. I’m so busy with work. It hasn’t been easy, taking over where Franco left off. He left things a mess for me. Half of my men don’t respect me.”

“Then focus on the half who do.”

“It doesn’t work like that,” he snaps, dropping his hand. I flinch. “I need all my men to respect me and not see me as a little boy. I’m only twenty-three. Most of them are older than me. I have a lot to prove. I don’t need my favorite sister making things harder for me. I need you to marry Salvatore. It’s the only way he’ll agree to give me any funding. But you will get to meet him before marrying him. You might like him.” He doesn’t sound convinced.

“I might like him? I don’t know him. What does he look like?”

“You’ll see at the meeting.” Antonio won’t look at me. It’s like he’s keeping something from me.

“Why won’t you just tell me?”

“Because I’m your boss!” he shouts, standing up and making me jerk back. He instantly looks regretful. “Cecilia, I’m sorry. I just ... This would all go easier if you’d just do as I tell you.”

I stand up, too. “You’re not dad, you know. And a good leader earns respect by being nice. Not by forcing others to do things against their will. That sounds a lot like Franco if you ask me.”

His face scrunches up in anger. “I am not Franco.”

“I know.” I nod at the pendant around his neck. I belonged to our father, and Mom gave it to Antonio at our father’s funeral. Antonio hasn’t taken it off since he was twelve. “But you need to learn to be like dad.”

Antonio stares at me for a long, hard minute before leaving. “You will meet with Salvatore later this week,” he calls out.

I shut my door behind him and fall back onto my bed. My world has just completely changed, and I didn’t have any say in it.

Yes, I’m angry Antonio would agree to marry me to a man with consulting me first. But I’m also upset because getting married means I’ll have to move out. Which means I won’t see Theo every day anymore.

My heart breaks at the thought.

I WAS the closest with Antonio growing up. We’d always pick fights with each other, but we’d also always made each other laugh the most.

He was my protector before Theo came along.

One time, when I was nine and he was eleven, my family went camping. It was our dad's idea to bond as a family, but my mom hated it. She's most definitely not the camping kind.

While Emilia looked uncomfortable, Francesca read, Gemma kept complaining about every little thing, and Mia slept in the motorhome, Antonio and I explored. Dad was so caught up with making a fire and Mom was busy trying to make dinner that they didn't even notice us wander off.

"Let's find a cave," Antonio said, pushing a branch out of my way so I could walk forward.

"Won't that be dangerous?"

He puffed out his chest. "I live for danger."

I rolled my eyes but went along with him anyway.

We kept walking until Antonio found a hole in the ground. By then, it was getting dusky out. "What do you think is down there?"

I peered into the hole, but all I saw was darkness. "Nothing good. Probably a rabbit hole or a snake hole. I don't want to mess with snakes."

The sneaky grin that passed over Antonio's face made me worry. "There's only one way to find out." He stuck his hand into the hole ...

... and screamed.

I jumped back. "Oh my god. Are you ok?" I reached for him as he pulled his hand out, laughing.

He was fine.

"You're such a jerk," I said, smacking his arm.

"There was nothing in there. You try."

I couldn't let Antonio win this round, so I took a deep breath and stuck my hand inside. It was cold and damp but nothing else.

When I pulled my hand out, a rabbit poked its head out of the hole. I gasped. "A bunny."

Antonio and I watched it as it scampered away. I took one step forward to follow it when I almost stepped on a snake that blended into the woods.

I screamed, jumping back. The snake hissed and lunged at me, but thankfully, Antonio grabbed me and pulled me back in time. The snake scurried away.

“You saved me,” I said, barely breathing.

Antonio patted my arms before letting me go. “That’s what big brothers are for.”

I walked beside Antonio back to our camp, knowing I’d be fine because I had my brother protecting me.

AS EMILIA and Francesca prepare to return to LA, I say my goodbyes to them, feeling my heart break even more. It’s nice whenever they visit. It helps me feel less alone.

Being stuck in a house with Mia and the twins isn’t the easiest. Especially when the man I love doesn’t even look at me most of the time. Gemma is usually never around, except for family dinners, because she prefers to spend time with her husband. I don’t fault her that, but Gemma does make things more exciting.

Emilia hugs me tight. “I know you’re not happy about Antonio’s command. But remember, this is your duty. Maybe it will give you a love you never knew you needed. It did with Marco and me.”

I smile tightly as she pulls back. “Thanks. I’ll try to remember that.”

Emilia looks at me with concern but doesn’t say anything else. She knows she can’t fix this for me. This is my own journey, even if I didn’t choose it.

Once my sisters are gone, Mia heads back to her room and the twins start chasing each other around the house, leaving me alone in the foyer.

Except for Theo. I can sense him behind me.

When I look over my shoulder at him, I notice he's looking at the door, not at me. The realization makes me frown, and I depart the foyer, feeling like everything is out of my control.

ANTONIO MAKES good on his word, and my meeting with Salvatore takes place by the end of the week. It's just Mom and me in the living room as we wait for Antonio to arrive with Salvatore. Theo stands in the corner, but he's more like a piece of furniture, given how still he is. I've always wondered if he gets tired just standing all day, watching my family live our lives. What about his life? Surely, he has other people he likes to spend time with.

But the sad reality is, I don't know. I've never asked him. And something tells me that even if I did, he wouldn't tell me.

When the front door opens, I hear Antonio's voice mixed with another man's voice. My body tenses, and out of the corner of my eye, I swear I see Theo tense, too. But when I glance at him, he looks like his normal confident self.

Antonio steps into the living room, followed by a man.

A really old looking man.

At minimum, Salvatore Fontana is in his sixties, but given how many wrinkled he has, he could easily be in his seventies. Sunspots cover his hands and neck, and he's balding at the top, with white hair circling his head.

This has to be joke.

There's no way Antonio is marrying me to a man older than dad was when he passed away.

Even Mom looks surprised. "Salvatore Fontana?" she asks, standing up.

"The one and only," he replies, giving a little bow. I almost want to laugh, but the stern way Antonio is looking at me keeps me quiet.

"Right," Mom says, shaking his hand.

Salvatore sets his eyes on me. His eyes are rimmed with red, making him look that much older. “Cecilia, I presume?” He holds out one wrinkled, spotted hand.

I gulp. I can’t move. I can’t do anything. This has to be an elaborate, practical joke from Antonio. There’s no other explanation.

But when Antonio sternly says, “Cecilia,” I know he means business.

I force myself to shake Salvatore’s hand. It’s clammy. I let go as soon as it’s appropriate without being rude. My eyes find Theo’s over Salvatore’s head, and his frown makes me happy. At least Theo doesn’t like this either, though I’m not sure why. Maybe he just doesn’t like an old man like Salvatore preying on a younger woman like me.

Or maybe ...

No. I can’t even consider Theo could like me. That’s not possible.

Antonio motions for Salvatore to sit down, and when the old man does, he groans like he might have a heart attack at any second. I know it’s incredibly petty, but the thought of him dying makes me relieved. If he’s dead, I won’t have to marry him.

Salvatore takes the spot on the couch next to me. I scoot over to make room, but he just scoots closer. Mom, on my other side, is getting wedged into the side of the couch.

“Could you move over?” she asks kindly to Salvatore.

“Oh.” He nods and gives me more room.

Mom and I share a look. At least she has my back.

Antonio sits down in a chair, acting like he’s the head of the household. But he can’t be. Not when he doesn’t live here and barely visits except for family dinner nights. Mom is the head of the household and should be given that respect.

“I wanted you two to meet,” Antonio says, not meeting my eyes. He knows he lied to me. Well, not exactly lied, but he kept the truth from me. He never told me Salvatore would be

so old. He knew if he told me, I'd never have showed up for the meeting.

"I'm glad," Salvatore says. "Such a young, pretty thing."

I tense when I smell his breath. It's like musty old candies. I'm expected to marry this man and make babies with him? I'd honestly rather die.

"Cecilia, say something," Antonio says.

"What?" I ask.

The tension in the room is almost suffocating. Good. Then I might die and not have to go through with this wedding.

Antonio sighs, shifting in his seat. His displeasure at this moment makes me want to cry. How can he do this to me? All because he's worried about his reputation with his men? Because he wants to expand?

"Talk to Salvatore," Antonio encourages.

I force myself to turn slightly toward the old man. "Uh ..."

"I know you probably didn't expect to marry a man like me," Salvatore says.

He's right about that.

"But I can assure you," he says, taking my hand. I resist the urge to pull back. "I'll take good care of you." He licks his lips, and I shudder. I literally recoil from him.

But when I try to take my hand back, he holds on tight. So tight it almost hurts. He roams his hand higher up my arm, stroking me like I'm a pet.

I try pulling back, but he still doesn't let go.

I turn to Mom, and though she looks uncertain, she stays quiet. She's deferring to Antonio. When I look at Antonio, he seems uncomfortable with Salvatore touching me like this, but still ... he doesn't do anything. He's letting his own needs come before my own.

A strong, tan hand grips Salvatore's hand and pulls it off my arm. Theo. My heart leaps.

Salvatore turns to Theo with a sneer. “You don’t get to touch me, you ... you ...”

“I’m Cecilia’s personal bodyguard,” Theo explains. “It’s my job to protect her.”

Salvatore stands up, but his head only reaches Theo’s shoulder. “I’m going to be her husband. It will soon be my job to protect her. And I get to touch my wife.”

“Not wife yet,” Antonio reminds him, joining Salvatore and Theo. “While Theo was out of bounds to touch you”—Theo tenses at Antonio’s words— “you shouldn’t touch Cecilia until you two are married. We can agree on that?”

Salvatore huffs but nods. “Yes. I can agree on that. The girl should be an untouched virgin when we marry. I’ll do my part in respecting that.”

I lean into Mom, who wraps her arms around me. This can’t be happening. Salvatore is a disgusting old man.

Which is exactly what I tell Antonio once Salvatore leaves.

Antonio sighs. “Don’t be rude, Cecilia. Yes, he’s old, but he’s not disgusting.”

“I beg to differ. You won’t be the one who has to sleep with him.” I grab my cross and rub it until my fingers start to ache.

Theo resumes his place in the corner, watching the showdown between my brother and me.

“Just do this for me,” Antonio says. “I need to expand. It’s the only way to prove myself to my men. Salvatore can provide a lot of power to our family. You can be the reason our family becomes so powerful that we’re untouchable. Just think about that, Cecilia. This should be an honor. It’s not a punishment.”

“It feels like one,” I mutter, crossing my arms.

“Well, it’s not. And besides, why would you think I’m punishing you?”

“Maybe because I didn’t see you in five years? Do you blame me for not trying harder to see you?”

“Of course not!” he shouts.

“Are you sure? We were best friends. And I didn’t see you in five years. I didn’t even try to reach out. You’re not just the tiniest mad at me for that?”

“No. I know you couldn’t reach out because of Franco. I didn’t want you getting hurt. I don’t blame you.”

I place my hands on my hips. “If you were so worried about me getting hurt, then why are you marrying me to man like *that*?”

“Like what? Please, Cecilia, tell me. What is Salvatore other than old?”

“When he grabbed my hand, it hurt.”

Antonio huffs, turning away from me. “You’re just making up excuses so you don’t have to marry him. You’re just not happy because you have to marry an old man, whereas the rest of our sisters are married to men closer in age to them. You’re jealous.”

“I’m not jealous,” I say through gritted teeth.

“No? Because that’s what this feels like. You knew it was your duty to marry whoever I chose for you. You’ve known that since you were a kid. You knew Dad would choose for you, so why is this any different?”

“Because you’re my brother!” I shout at him. “You’re not Dad. Stop pretending to be.”

Mom stands up. “Ok. I think that’s enough. Cecilia, you will marry whoever your brother chooses for you.”

I turn to her. “You’re only saying that because Antonio was and has always been your favorite. He can do no wrong in your eyes.” I storm out of the room before anyone can stop me.

I only make it halfway up the stairs before I’m crying.

Antonio has just ruined my entire life, and I'm powerless to stop it.

Solid footsteps approach. I'd know those footsteps anywhere.

When I look up, Theo is standing at the foot of the stairs, looking up at me with concern. "I thought you might need this." He hands me a tissue.

I wipe my eyes quickly, not wanting him to see me like this. "Thanks."

He nods once and turns to leave, but I say his name, stopping him. "Theo?" He glances at me over his shoulder.

I have to ask before I lose my nerve. "Why did you stop Salvatore? From touching me?"

His eyes darken as he looks away. "I'm your bodyguard. That's my job."

"Is ... is that all?"

He sucks in a quick breath, his eyes meeting mine for a moment. At that moment, it's like an eternity passes by. "Yes." His answer quickly dashes my heart into pieces. "That's all."

I sit on the stairs, feeling utterly dejected, watching the love of my life walk away from me.

CHAPTER 4

Cecilia

The florist's shop is an attack on my senses. Filled with hundreds of flowers, it's a disastrous mix of floral scents. I can barely breathe when I walk inside. Though I'm not sure if it's the flowers or my impending anxiety over my marriage to Salvatore.

Mom is at my side as I take a seat. Behind us is Theo, keeping a watchful eye as always. I wish he'd do more than just keep an eye on me, but I know that's an impossible ask.

The floral designer brings out a bouquet of flowers. Roses and tulips. She sets it down before me. "What do you think?"

What do I think? I think I hate having to go through this. I hate having to marry an old man and not be with Theo. Maybe things wouldn't be so bad if Salvatore were younger and handsome and kind, but I guess Antonio doesn't care about that with me. He's only focused on his own problems. Everyone else be damned.

"Cecilia," Mom says, nudging me. "What do you think?"

All I can do is glare at the bouquet.

Mom shifts awkwardly in her seat. "We'd like to see another one."

The florist smiles and walks away, promising to be right back with another bouquet. Mom turns to me. "Cecilia, are you all right?"

"No, I'm not."

She waits for me to say more, and when I don't, she asks, "Tell me what's wrong."

I shoot her an incredulous look. "What's wrong? Did you see the man I have to marry?" Theo makes a sound behind me, and I glance over to catch him smiling slightly. But when he sees me looking at him, his normal stoic expression takes over. Did Theo find what I said funny? If so, the thought makes my heart feel warmer.

Mom sighs, giving me an understanding look. "I know it's not ideal. But Antonio is in charge now, and we have to do what he tells us."

"Did you always listen to Dad?"

"Of course, I did. I was a good wife."

I pause. "And Franco?"

She looks away from me, but I notice the flash of hurt in her eyes before she can fully turn away. "I had to do what Franco wanted from me. It wasn't ideal, but I had to. It was my duty."

"Even if it felt like it was eating away at you?"

She offers me a smile. "I'm a survivor. We all are. After losing your dad ... it wasn't easy on any of us. But we made it through, and a big part of that was because Antonio got rid of Franco before he could even more damage. It might not seem like it, but I'm sure Antonio is thinking of your best interest. You've barely gotten to know Salvatore. Give him a chance."

"How can I when he might die before we even make it to the altar?"

Shaking her head, she says, "You joke. And I don't blame you. You're not in the wrong for not wanting to marry a man as old as Salvatore. But he might turn out to be a kind man. I have to believe Antonio would only marry you to a man who would treat you right."

"Would he?" I ask in a small voice.

The expression on Mom's face is like I hit her. "Of course, he would. He's Antonio." That's the thing with Mom. She's

always had blinders for Antonio because he was always her favorite kid. I don't think she sees the changes that have taken root in him ever since he took over as boss.

I didn't see the changes myself at first, and now, it feels like it's too late. Antonio has my life in his hands, and I have no control. I was raised to do my duty, but this is the last thing I ever expected. All my sisters have gorgeous husbands, and Antonio has a beautiful wife.

Why is it I'm stuck with a man old enough to be my grandfather?

The florist comes back out with another bouquet, one full of hydrangeas and petunias. "What do we think about this one?"

Mom gives me a sharp look. "Give her an answer, Cecilia." The florist smiles awkwardly as she waits for my reply. I feel a little sorry for her. It's not her fault I'm miserable.

I grab my cross and rub it between my fingers. I have no choice but to go through with everything, so I might as well get the wedding of my dreams.

"Do you have any orchid bouquets?" I ask.

The florist smiles, looking so relieved I almost want to apologize for my behavior. "Yes. We can do that."

After I pick out my bouquet—white orchids—Mom and I leave the florist. I reach my hand out for the car door at the same time as Theo.

Our fingers brush. A spark of energy passes between us.

I gasp but don't pull back. I stare down at our fingers touching, mine so small compared to his. What would it be like to have Theo touch me with his hands?

But then Theo pulls away, breaking the spell. I look up at him, but he doesn't meet my eyes. I'm desperate to get him to tell me what's on his mind, but Theo's a closed book. He has been ever since he first started working for us.

I remember trying to get him to open up to me when I was around sixteen.

He was standing in the foyer, keeping a watch on things when I approached him. Sixteen was when my crush on him really started to take place. With flushed cheeks, I walked over to him. “Theo, what’s your favorite color?” I blurted out, even though that wasn’t what I wanted to ask him.

He kept his eyes trained on the far wall. “Cecilia, I’m working.”

“Come on,” I said, leaning against the wall in a posture I hoped made me look attractive. Yet he still didn’t look at me. “You can tell me your favorite color.”

He sighed. “Black. Now, I need to focus.”

“There isn’t anything more you want to talk about?”

“No.” His gruffness hurt my feelings, but I couldn’t seem to get myself to stop.

“Fine. What’s your favorite movie?”

He finally looked at me, and the expression on his face was pure stoicism. “I’m working, Cecilia.”

Sighing, I walked away. I couldn’t even get him to open up about mundane things like movies and hobbies. How was I supposed to get him to like me if he never wanted to talk to me?

Now, Theo opens the car door, still not looking at me. I know it’s futile to get him to talk, so I take my seat as Mom slides in beside me. Theo shuts the door, and I flinch at the subtle click. Theo really doesn’t want anything to do with me. He’s repulsed at the mere touch of our fingers.

And how can I blame him? I’m just a little girl in his eyes, after all.

THE NEXT THING on the wedding planning agenda is dress shopping.

I've been dreading this ever since Antonio told me about my marriage alliance to Salvatore. I've dreamed of my wedding dress since I was five, but that was with the assumption I'd marry for love. Being forced into a marriage really puts a damper on the whole wedding dress thing.

This time, it's not just Mom and me. Mia and Gemma have joined us. And as usual, Theo, too. He keeps his normal pace behind us, staying multiple feet behind but always close enough to rush forward in case any one of us is in danger.

After getting situated inside the bridal boutique, we wander off to look at dresses. Mom and Mia take one corner of the shop, leaving Gemma and me to check out the other. I notice that Theo stays closer to me, and the happiness that exudes from me could light up a town.

"What about this?" Gemma asks, showing me a mermaid style dress.

"No. That's much more you."

"Huh." Gemma looks it over. "Yeah, you're right. In fact, I wore a similar dress when I married Viktor."

"How was that? You didn't want to marry him."

"You're right. I didn't. But he had this strange charm about him that drew me in and made him irresistible. So, in the end, it wasn't such a bad thing."

I pick out a simple white dress with no lace or frills, but it's not for me. I put it back. "Is this your way of giving me advice?"

"Am I that obvious?"

"Yeah, you kind of are. And it's nice of you, but it won't help me. Viktor is handsome and young. Salvatore is ugly and old."

Gemma shows me a bohemian dress, and I shake my head. "A better person would say it's not all about looks," she says, shoving the dress back onto the rack. "But I'm not a better person, and yes, attraction is a huge part of a relationship. If

you can't even stand the thought of your husband touching you, then you're doomed."

"Great. Can you tell that to Antonio?"

"I'd like to smack some sense into him. I kind of hate how he's younger than me, yet is my boss. He's technically Viktor's boss now. It's strange."

The next dress I grab is princess style. The bodice is covered in detailed lace with a sweetheart neckline, and the skirt flows like a princess dream. It's straight out of my fairytale imaginings as a kid.

Gemma offers a nod of approval. "That's definitely more you."

I try it on in the dressing room, and the sight of myself in the gorgeous gown makes me want to cry. This dress was supposed to make me happy. Now, it's only a reminder I'm not getting the wedding of my dreams.

I walk out to show my family the dress. My mom and sister give me endless compliments, which just succeeds in making me even sadder. When I look at Theo, standing behind my family, I catch him watching me.

He looks at me like he's seeing me for the very first time. His eyes are soft, and his mouth is slack-jawed. He looks like a man in love.

I suck in a quick breath, feeling overwhelmed. I hurry off the stage, but my high heels catch on the ledge, and I start to fall forward.

But before I can hit the ground, strong arms wrap around me. Theo. He caught me.

I gasp as I look up at him. His big arms are holding me close, making it hard for me to think, let alone breathe. I've never been touched like this by Theo.

He stares down at me with that soft expression. "Are you all right?" he asks in a low voice so only I can hear.

I nod, unable to speak. My hands grip his arms. The strength of his body is overpowering. I could sink into him

forever, and it would never be enough.

“You caught me,” I finally say.

“I did.”

We stare at each other, almost like we’re in our own world. It’s not until my mom clears her throat that the moment breaks.

Theo’s stoic expression comes back with a vengeance, and he immediately lets me go. I wobble for a second, then right myself.

Without another word or look at me, he turns back to my family. Mis is on her phone without a care in the world. Gemma is giving me a sneaky smile. And Mom is looking between Theo and me with a worried expression. It’s her face that makes me realize Theo and I just shared a moment and how wrong that was.

Before anyone can comment on what happened, I hurry back to the dressing room. I wiggle out of the dress and lay it on the ground reverently. This is my dream dress, but I can’t wear it now. Not when I shared a special moment with Theo in it. I’ll have to choose another dress to marry Salvatore in. Salvatore doesn’t get to marry me in my dream wedding dress. That’s reserved only for Theo in my dreams.

I take a long time picking out another dress from the stack in my dressing room. I’m sure Mia is getting impatient. Gemma’s probably bored, and Mom must be anxiously waiting for me to come out.

I finally pick a dress to try on—a plain white one with long sleeves that shows no cleavage and has no frills. The perfect boring dress to marry a boring man.

I’m in the process of pulling it up my legs when someone knocks on the door. “Cecilia?” It’s Theo’s deep voice.

The surprise of him being right outside my dressing room makes me squeak and trip over my dress. I land against the wall with a hard thud.

“Cecilia?” The dressing room door is wrenched open, and there’s Theo, staring at me in my half-naked form. We both pause.

His mouth gapes open, and I’m sure my expression is one of shock.

“I thought you were hurt,” he says.

“I ... no.” It’s then I realize he can see my bra and bare stomach. “Uh ...”

“Shit,” he mutters before quickly turning around. His strong back muscles tense. All I want is to reach out and touch him, but I hold back. “I’m sorry. I didn’t think ... Of course, I should have. You’re in a dressing room. I just ... I heard a thud and wanted to make sure you were all right.”

His words pull me out of my surprise, and I finish pulling the dress up my body. “It’s ok. You can turn back around.”

He does slowly, and when he sees me fully dressed, he relaxes. “I’m sorry.”

I wave a hand. “Don’t worry about it. It was an accident. You were just making sure I was okay. No one can fault you for that.”

Theo nods like he’s trying to reassure himself. “Right. Your family was just wondering when you were going to come back out.”

“I wasn’t sure which dress to choose. Do you like this one?” I ask, waving my hands down my body.

He takes a second to scan me. It sends goosebumps over my skin. “It’s ... nice. I don’t know much about wedding dresses.”

“Of course. It’s ugly, isn’t it?”

“I never said that.”

“You didn’t have to.” I point at him. “It’s written on your face. I don’t want to marry Salvatore, so I don’t want to wear my dream dress.”

“Understood.” He glances behind him. “I should really head back out. You’re all right?”

No. “Yes,” I tell him. “I’m ...”

He nods before turning away. But before he fully leaves, he looks back at me and says, “For what it’s worth, the other dress suited you better. You should wear that one.”

I blink as he walks away. I swear, that’s the most Theo has ever spoken to me before.

I look back at my dream wedding dress and realize he’s right. I’ll only get one wedding. Sure, it’s not with a man I want, but I might as well wear the dress I want to wear. Salvatore doesn’t deserve it, but if I can see Theo’s face again while I wear it, looking at me with such awe, it’ll all be worth it.

MY FATHER DIED when I was ten years old.

It was all a blur, from the day he actually died to the day of his funeral. All I remember is crying and crying and praying and praying. I cried because I missed him, and I prayed in desperation to bring him back to the land of the living.

Riccardo Moretti.

He was such a strong, tall man. He filled up any room with his boisterous laughter and kind eyes. He even read me bedtime stories despite how busy he was. He made time for his family.

And when he was gone, everything went into chaos.

At his wake, he had an open-casket, and I could see him lying there, looking alive and yet actually dead. I was between Antonio and Mia as my family walked in a line to look at him. Antonio was trying to be strong and not cry while Mia was a mess.

I just clutched my cross tighter—the one he gave me—and prayed everything would be all right.

I didn't know at the time how much my life would change. From Franco moving in to my older sisters all moving away and getting married to Franco trying to kill Antonio and Antonio having to go into hiding for five years to finally being forced to marry an old man.

But back then, I was just a little girl who had just lost her dad.

When the funeral was over and everyone had left for the reception, I took a moment to hang back and look at my father one last time. Mom, in her grief, didn't even realize I wasn't walking with her and the rest of the family out of the church.

I kneeled before my dad's casket and said a prayer. "Dad, I hope you're in Heaven. That you're happy there. Please wait for the rest of us."

Footsteps behind me made me stand up. There he was—Uncle Franco.

"Praying?" he asked with a smirk like he thought it was funny I was saying a prayer for my dad. His brother had just died. It didn't make sense. It wouldn't make sense until I learned years that he'd poisoned my father.

"Yes," I whispered, wiping at my tears.

"You know," he said, stepping beside me. "I'm not sure your dad can hear you."

"Why not?"

"Because he's not in Heaven."

I gasped. "Of course, he is."

Franco just shrugged. "You tell yourself that."

"Cecilia?" Emilia called out, coming over to get me. "We're heading to the reception now."

I stared at Franco a moment longer. "My dad is in Heaven."

Emilia gave Franco a strange look when she got closer as she grabbed my hand. "Come on."

I followed my sister out of the church, feeling my uncle's eyes on me the entire way.

CHAPTER 5

Theo

The moment I take my leave for the night, I find the nearest nightclub. I can rest assured knowing the nightguard, a man named Sam, is taking care of the Moretti family.

I can't get Cecilia off my mind. Seeing her half-naked earlier today did things to me. Things I swore I wouldn't feel, and yet ...

She's taking up too much mental space, and I need to push any inappropriate thoughts from my mind. Cecilia is my duty, my job. She's not someone I should be lusting after.

So, that's why I'm prompted to the club—to find another woman to take all my attention.

I'm not exactly a club-going guy. The loud bass and chaotic energy make me uncomfortable. I prefer being alone in my apartment, reading a good book or working on one of my crafts. I have a woodworking table in my spare bedroom, and I love to make all kinds of things from furniture to practical things I might need around the house. I like the quiet of it. Just me and my tools.

But my cock won't have solitude tonight. It needs a distraction. I need a distraction.

And I figure the easiest way to find a woman for a one-night stand is at a club, even if it's slowly killing me to be inside a place like this.

I get a beer and settle in at the bar, watching the throngs of dancing people. They look so content and happy being around other people. I wonder what that's like. After I got out of the military, it was easier to keep to myself. I preferred it after spending most of my waking hours for years surrounded by other men and women in close quarters.

A new song starts, one with a much faster beat, and the rhythm makes me heart begin to pound. It reminds me of the pounding of gunshots. I shake my head to clear the memories of my time at war. Of Benji dying. His face half caved in from the explosion. Of other things I try hard to not remember. Things that speak to my shame.

A woman leans against the bar and orders a cocktail. I keep her in my line of sight. She's pretty with brown hair and great curves in a tight black dress, but my mind keeps going back to blonde hair and wedding dresses. Fuck. I have it bad for Cecilia. I can't. If anyone knew how I feel about her, I'd be in serious trouble. She's off-limits to a man like me, and I need to stay away.

I brace myself to talk to the brunette when she grabs her cocktail and walks away. I sigh in relief. I didn't really want to force a conversation. I sip my beer, working up the courage to find someone else to talk to ...

... when *she* walks through the crowd of people.

Cecilia.

My heart picks up its pace as she gets closer when I realize it's not Cecilia at all but a woman who looks a lot like her. Similar blonde hair. Similar build. But the facial features are different. Cecilia has a softer face while this woman is more striking.

She approaches the bar and orders a drink—something fruity by the sounds of it. She glances my way and does a doubletake. “Hi,” she finally says, grabbing her drink and taking a sip.

“Hi.” This is it. This woman can help me forget about Cecilia for the night. I extend my hand to her. “I'm Theo.”

“Kate.” At least her name is vastly different from Cecilia’s.

“Nice to meet you, Kate. You come here often?”

She chuckles. “Really? That’s your line?” I shrug. “Sure. I come here often. What about you?” She eyes me over. It feels good to be desired by someone.

The sudden flash of big blue eyes staring up at me goes through my mind. The feeling of Cecilia in my arms as I caught her from falling. The way she looked up at me like I was her personal hero. *That* felt good.

But it was also wrong.

I push the memories from my mind and answer Kate’s question. “I’ve never been here before,” I admit, speaking louder to be heard over the music.

“I’m glad you showed up tonight,” she flirts, rolling her straw around with her lips.

“Want to get out of here?” I ask.

She sets her drink down. “I barely know you.”

“I know. But do you want to get out of here?”

After a moment of consideration, she smiles and says, “Yes.”

We leave the club and take a taxi to her apartment. We’re already kissing by the time we set foot inside.

It doesn’t take long before we’re fucking.

Kate’s body is a dream. She knows exactly where to touch to get me off, and she’s confident enough to tell me exactly where she wants me to touch her. It’s honestly some of the best sex I’ve ever had.

And yet, Cecilia keeps entering my mind, and I keep having to push her away. I cannot be thinking of Cecilia while fucking another woman. I can’t.

I thrust hard into Kate as she moans and digs her fingers into my back. I’m getting close. I increase my pace, and with a final thrust, I come.

“Cecilia,” I call out.

Kate freezes underneath me. “What?”

Shit. I glance down at her, realizing my mistake. I just moaned Cecilia’s name as I came. “Kate, I’m ... I’m sorry.”

She pushes me off her. “Seriously? You just called out another woman’s name.”

“I know.” Not my finest moment. “I’m sorry.”

“Just go,” she snaps, slipping her clothes back on. “You ruined it.”

I don’t argue with her as I throw the condom away and get dressed. I’m almost to the door when Kate calls out to me.

“Who is she?” she asks. “This ... Cecilia?”

“She’s ...” The woman I can’t stop thinking about. “She’s no one.”

Kate huffs, crossing her arms. “I doubt she’s no one. Sex makes people lose their inhibitions. Let me give you some advice? Next time, either don’t call out her name when you’re fucking another woman or just fuck her instead.”

The thought of fucking Cecilia enters my mind, and I squash it instantly.

“Thanks,” I say lamely, opening the door and walking away as fast as I can.

If I don’t get my feelings for Cecilia under control, I’m fucking doomed.

I AVOID Cecilia the next day. Fortunately, she keeps to her room, and I’m able to focus on being the good guard I am.

That is, until Salvatore makes an impromptu visit.

When I answer the door and see him standing there, I have to resist the urge to slam the door in his face. “Yes?” I ask.

Salvatore tries to stand taller but doesn’t succeed. “I’m here to see Cecilia.”

“That wasn’t scheduled for the day.” I would know.

“It was a spur of the moment thing.”

I stare at him. “Does Antonio know you’re here?”

He laughs like my question is ludicrous. “Why would I need Antonio’s permission to visit my future wife?”

“Right.” I still don’t let him in.

“You’re just the guard,” he says. “Ask Giulia if I can see her daughter.”

I sigh. “Fine. But wait out here.” I shut the door before he can reply and go find Giulia. She’s in the kitchen, helping the twins with their homework.

“Giulia? Salvatore is here to see Cecilia.”

She glances up with a frown. “Really? That wasn’t planned for today.”

“Well, he’s here.”

She taps Lucia’s homework with a pencil. “Keep working on this. I’ll be right back.” She gets up and walks over to me. “Let him in. But keep an eye on them.”

“Of course.”

“Theo?” she asks as I turn away.

“Yes?”

Giulia lowers her voice so only I can hear. “It’s obvious you don’t like Salvatore. But try to keep your displeasure to a minimum. Antonio needs this deal to go through. Don’t do anything to mess that up.”

I frown. “What would I do to mess it up?”

She just gives me a knowing look before walking out of the kitchen. “I’ll go get Cecilia.”

I let Salvatore in, and he strides past me with a cocky swagger like he’s trying to mark his territory. Well, buddy, I’ve been here a lot longer than you have.

I show Salvatore into the living room, where he settles on the couch, taking up a lot of space. Cecilia comes down, looking glum. When she sees me, she freezes.

I clear my throat and look away. No. I can't be looking at her. We can't be exchanging glances.

With a sigh, Cecilia takes a seat in the armchair as far as she can get from Salvatore. I try to hide my smile.

"Hello, dear," Salvatore greets her. "How are you doing? How's the wedding planning?"

"Fine," she says through tight lips.

"Did you find your dress?"

"I did."

Salvatore huffs, clearly annoyed by Cecilia's behavior. "Right. Can you tell me what it looks like?"

"No." She crosses her arms. "That would be bad luck. You're not supposed to know what my dress looks like before the wedding. That's just common knowledge."

"Yes, well, you can throw me a bone. I want to know."

"She said no," I say before I can stop myself. Cecilia looks pleased.

Salvatore throws me a glare before turning back to Cecilia. She has to quickly remove her smile. "Right. Is there anything you can tell me about the wedding?"

"Not really," she replies. "You'll just have to wait and find out the day of the wedding."

Salvatore looks like he wants to object, but he closes his mouth and smiles tightly. "All right, dear. Care to talk somewhere else? Without ... present company?"

Cecilia's eyes flick to me. "No. I'm good. Where I go, Theo goes. I'm sure that will still be the case even after we're married."

"Oh, not at all. I'll hire brand new guards to watch over you. Your ... *current* guard won't be joining us after we're

married.”

“Well, he’s here now, and he’s not going anywhere.” Cecilia stands. “Now, it was nice talking to you, but I have things I have to do. Wedding planning and all that.” She hurries out of the room without a backward glance.

I lead a prissy Salvatore to the front door. “Have a good day,” I tell him, shutting the door.

He slams his hand against it, stopping me.

“Yes?” I ask.

It looks like he could kill ... Salvatore once again tries to make himself look taller and utterly fails. “Just ...”

“Yes?”

“Cecilia doesn’t need you,” he says. “I’m going to be her husband.”

“I never said you weren’t. Now, have a good day.” I shut the door on him even as he opens his mouth to speak. The blessed silence of the house fills my ears.

Salvatore will be trouble. His entitlement toward Cecilia is concerning.

A memory I don’t want to think about enters my mind.

It was before I was deployed to Afghanistan when I was still in training at the academy. I had a girl in my class named Mara. She was always proving herself to be as tough as the boys, and she could hold her own. A lot of the men respected her.

But a few didn’t.

One day, I was heading back to the barracks to grab something—I don’t even remember what—when I heard the sound of grunting. Almost like the sound of someone whimpering.

I paused, then quickened my pace. When I looked into the barracks, I saw Mara. Two men were on top of her. The pain on her face was unmistakable.

“Hey” I shouted, rushing over to the men. One was a guy named Jimmy who was in the same class as me. The other one was named Noah. He was the son of a colonel. He was privileged, and he let everyone know it.

I shoved Jimmy off Mara, and he landed flat on his ass. He took one look at me and ran. One problem solved. Noah was another matter.

He took his time getting off Mara. “Hey, man. We were just messing around.”

Mara was looking at the ceiling, not moving. “Are you ok?” I asked her.

“She’s ok,” Noah snapped. “None of this was your business. Keep walking, Theo.”

“No. You keep walking.”

Noah huffed, his lips twisted into a smirk. He looked between Mara and me before walking away.

The moment he was gone, I turned to Mara. “Let me get you to the infirmary.” She didn’t say a word as I walked her there. Once I knew she was safe with the nurse, I headed off to find Lieutenant Andrews—a man I was close to and one I hoped could help Mara.

But after I explained the situation to him, he just shook his head and sighed. “I’m sorry, Theo. There isn’t much I can do to help.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, how do I know Mara was assaulted? She could have been asking for it.”

“She wasn’t asking for it,” I growled.

“Ok, ok.” He held his hands up. “All I’m saying is, you weren’t there. These things are tricky. Besides, Noah Smith is the son of Colonel Smith. You know that boy won’t face any punishment.”

“I don’t fucking care. I’m going to make sure I help Mara. I’m going to report what I saw.” I stood up and headed for the

door when Andrews called out to me.

“Theo, listen. If you pursue this, your career is over. And Mara won’t win. You won’t win. It’s better just to keep your head down and do what you’re told.”

I couldn’t believe it. I saw an assault take place, and I was being asked to be quiet. I knew what the right thing to was, but I also knew Andrews was right. Someone like Noah would never face the consequences.

But I had to try.

I left and found Mara, wanting to make sure she was all right before I said anything else. But when I got to the infirmary, the nurse told me Mara left. I asked around for her when I was pulled into the office of Colonel Smith himself.

“Where’s Mara?” I asked.

“Private Whitlock is gone,” he told me.

I froze. “What?”

“She packed up her things and left. Just like that.” He snapped his fingers. “So, there’s no need for you to ask about her.”

“But ...”

“Mr. Williams, let me give you some advice. You’re shaping up to be a good soldier. Potentially one of the best I’ve ever seen at the academy. You want a career in the military, yes?”

“Of course, but—”

“So,” he said, cutting me off, “you will stop asking questions. You will forget you ever saw anything today. You will keep your head down and be a good soldier. Yes?”

I wanted to object. I wanted to walk out and do the right thing, but ...

What difference did it make?

Mara left, and Noah would get away with what he’d done. There wasn’t anything I could do.

So, I nodded and left Colonel Smith's office, shame weighing on my heart.

Back in the present, I think about Salvatore and how he reminds me so much of the men who never face any kind of punishment.

I wasn't able to save Mara. I wasn't able to save Giulia from Franco.

But I need to try and save Cecilia from Salvatore.

There's only one person I can talk to.

ANTONIO'S HOUSE is a lot bigger than I'd expected. I know he lived in a tiny apartment for years while in hiding. I guess money makes you want bigger and better things.

He answers the door after I knock. "Theo? This is a surprise. Come on in."

The inside of his house is ultra-modern with an industrial vibe. Exposed brick. Concrete floors. White furniture.

"What can I do for you?"

I remain standing. "This won't take long."

Antonio arches his eyebrow at me. I have to remember he's not the little kid I saw grow up. He's the most powerful man in New York now. "What is it?"

With a deep breath, I dive in. "I think you should reconsider marrying Cecilia to Salvatore Fontana."

"Why would I do that?" His voice goes low, sending chills over me.

"Because Salvatore will only hurt your sister. I know men like him. I think you know men like him, too. Your uncle, for example."

Antonio's nostrils flare. "Don't talk to me about my uncle."

"But you know it's true. Salvatore will hurt her. Are you really going to let your need for power trump your sister's

safety?”

“Who do you think you are?” he says, standing toe-to-toe with me. We’re the same height. “To tell me what to do when it comes to not only business but my family?”

“I had to try.”

“Well, you tried and failed. Cecilia will marry Salvatore. End of discussion. And I think you’re crossing boundaries, Theo. If this is going to be a problem for you, I might have to consider reassigning you.”

My skin goes cold. “Giulia was the one who hired me.”

“So? My mom isn’t the boss of the family business. If I want to fire you, I can. But I know you’re good at your job. You’re the best guard my family has ever had. So, I don’t want to fire you. Just know where you belong. And that isn’t as a part of my family. You have no say. No voice. Understood?”

I inhale to speak, then think better of it. I could take Antonio in a fight, I’m sure of it. I have more muscle than he does. I’m older. A more experienced fighter.

But he’s still the most powerful man in the city. I don’t want to be on his bad side.

I finally nod.

“Good.” Antonio takes a step back, and I can breathe again. “Have a nice day, Theo. Remember your place.”

I leave his house and return to Giulia’s.

The family is in the midst of dinner, and I switch out positions with Sam. He gives me a nod before leaving.

As I watch Cecilia eat, my gut aches. I want to protect her, but I can’t. I’ve always been expected to be silent and follow orders.

I’m honestly getting pretty fucking tired of it.

Once the family is done eating, Cecilia comes over to me. “Theo?”

“Yes?” I keep my eyes trained above her head.

“I wanted to thank you for staying with me when Salvatore was here.”

“That’s my job.”

“I know, but ...” She shrugs. “Still. Thanks.”

All I want to do is draw her into my arms and protect her from everything in this world, but I can’t. And I need to seriously take into consideration what Antonio told me. I need to know what boundaries to not cross.

And Cecilia is most definitely a boundary I cannot cross.

“Cecilia?” I say before she can walk away. She looks back at me with a hopeful expression. I know I’m going to crush it. “I think it’s better if we don’t really talk. I do my job, and you do yours. Understood?”

Just as I knew it would happen, Cecilia’s eyes flash with hurt. “Oh. Um ... ok. We don’t have to talk.” Her voice sounds choked, making me feel even guiltier.

Cecilia hurries away before I can take back what I said.

Though I know I can’t take it back.

She’s off-limits, and that’s the way it needs to be, even if she gets hurt in the process.

CHAPTER 6

Cecilia

“**B**less me, Father, for I have sinned,” I say. “My last confession was ... a week ago.” I can’t believe that just last week, I confessed to Father Enzo my feelings for Theo. So much has changed in that time. I’m engaged to a man I hate. I have to plan a wedding I don’t want. And I’m still so miserably in love with Theo, even though he just told me we should never talk again. I blame it on the moment at the bridal shop. Theo must have freaked out after seeing me half-naked. He sees me as nothing more than a little girl. He was probably traumatized.

“What have you come to confess today, child?” Father Enzo asks. I flinch when he speaks. He sounds so much like Salvatore. Both are old men.

“I hate that I’m being forced into a marriage I don’t want. I hate the man who will become my husband. I want nothing to do with him. And yet, I know it’s my duty to follow orders. To be the good girl everyone expects of me. I’ve always been so *good* that no one has even asked me what I want. I can’t help but feel shame for it, though. I’m not supposed to have wants and desires. I’m supposed to exist for the wants and desires of men, but I’m starting to think that’s wrong. I have my own feelings, and I just wish the people in my life would acknowledge that.”

Father Enzo clears his throat. “This sounds less like a confession and more like a therapy session. What are you looking to be forgiven for?”

I sigh, dropping my clasped hands and bowing my head. “I’m looking to be forgiven for ... my feelings, I guess. I don’t want to feel them. Everything would be so much easier if I just didn’t feel ...anything.”

“Life is about feeling everything. You are forgiven for how you feel. But to be truly forgiven, you need to accept your husband. That is your role as a wife. You need to show him you can be a good wife to him.”

I stare through the barrier at Father Enzo in shock. I can only make out his profile, but if I could see his face, I’d consider slapping it. Which, of course, just makes me feel even guiltier. “But I hate him, Father. How am I supposed to be a good wife to him? We’re not even married yet.”

“So, do what a good fiancé is supposed to do.”

“Which is?” I’m really losing my patience with this man.

“Be supportive. Get to know him. Give him a chance. People may surprise you.” He pauses. “Did you work on your feelings from last week? The ones you had for your ... bodyguard?”

“No,” I admit, hanging my head. “I’m still in love with him. That’s also something I have to confess.”

“I see.” He’s quiet for a moment. “There’s your problem. You’re not able to accept your fiancé’s love because you still have feelings for someone else. To be forgiven, you need to put aside your feelings for this other person and focus on the man you are to marry. You will be rid of the shame you’re feeling now. God will be proud of you.”

Panic seizes me at his words. “He isn’t proud now?”

“He’s always proud of his children. But you’ve come to confession because you had something to confess. You now know what to do to repent.”

“I ... understand.” I really do. I just hate what Father Enzo is suggesting. Really get to know Salvatore? Will that somehow make me like him and get over Theo? I guess I really haven’t given him a chance. Maybe he’s not so bad. I can’t fault him for being old.

Father Enzo finishes the prayer of Absolution, and after we've both said, "Amen," I leave the confessional booth.

Mom is the only one with me today. The twins and Mia caught a cold yesterday and were under the weather this morning. Being sick is the only time us Moretti's ever get time off from church, according to my mom. Unless, of course, you're out of the house and married.

Which I soon will be.

"Feeling better?" Mom asks as we head outside. Theo is a silent shadow behind us.

"It's confessional, Mom. It's supposed to make you feel better."

"Then why do you sound worse than when you went in there?"

I glance at Theo before quickly averting my eyes. "You know a confession is a private thing."

"All right." She doesn't push the issue.

Mom and I slide into the backseat while Theo gets in the front. The car ride is silent. I'm normally comfortable in my own mind. I'm in it every time I pray. But at this moment, I feel like I could scream.

It's even worse being so close to Theo and feeling like I'm a million miles away from him.

IT'S A NEW DAY, and I have a new purpose.

Spend time with Salvatore.

God, help me. Please.

I find Mom in the kitchen making a large breakfast. Even though it's only five of us still living in the house compared to the eight or nine of us from years past, Mom still makes large meals no matter what.

Theo stands near the back door, and I purposefully don't look at him. "Mom?"

She glances up from the scramble egg platter in the pan.
“Mmm?”

Here we go. “I ...” Gulp. “I think we should invite ...”
Pause. “Salvatore over today.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Theo tense. His eyes widen for a moment before a stoic expression crosses his face.

Mom sets the spatula down. “Oh? You ... you want to invite Salvatore over today?”

“Yes. That ... that is what I said.”

She places her hand on my head. “Are you sick?”

I step back. “No, Mom. I’m not sick.”

“Just checking.” She resumes making the scrambled eggs.
“Because that doesn’t sound like you, Cecilia. I know how much you’ve been against this wedding.”

“Yes. But you also know I will follow orders, and if ... Antonio wants this, then I will do it.” That is the toughest thing I’ve ever had to say.

“All right. I’ll invite Salvatore over. I’m sure he’ll be happy to see you.”

Turning to leave, I pause. Theo is looking at the wall across from him with a very hard expression. I want to ask him what’s on his mind, but he won’t tell me. He’ll just say we’re not supposed to talk to each other. I can’t have a crush on him forever. I need to move on with my life.

And God help me, Salvatore is my future. It’s what Antonio wants. It will help the family. It’s my duty.

I will try with Salvatore even if it kills me.

SALVATORE ENTERS the house with a saunter like he believes he has a right to be here. I stand in the foyer, trying to plaster a smile to my face. Mom stands beside me, and Theo is behind us.

Salvatore smiles wide, showing off his slightly yellow teeth. “Cecilia! How good to see you again.” He grabs my arms and leans in to kiss ... my lips. I realize at the last second where he’s heading and turn my head to give him my cheek. He steps back, smiling slightly. I give him a tight smile of my own.

His eyes turn to Theo behind me, and his smile disappears. “What’s your guard doing here? I thought when your mom reached out it would just be the two of us.”

“We’re not married yet, Mr. Fontana,” I say. “It would be inappropriate.”

“Please, call me Salvatore.” He grabs my hand and kisses it. I resist the urge to shudder.

“Fine.” With as much subtlety as I can muster, I rip my hand away from him. How am I going to survive this marriage when I can’t stand Salvatore’s touch one bit? I’ve always wanted to be a mom someday, but I doubt I’ll have children when I can’t stand Salvatore looking at me, let alone touching me. “Shall we sit?” I walk toward the living room without waiting for Salvatore.

“She’s in a hurry,” he murmurs to my mom, chuckling. His laughter makes me skin crawl.

“That’s just Cecilia,” Mom replies. I can tell by her tone that she’s at a loss for words.

I’m about to take the armchair when I realize I should probably sit next to Salvatore if I’m going to give him a chance. I need to acclimate to him.

Salvatore doesn’t hesitate to sit beside me. His leg touches my leg, and I want nothing more than to pull away, but I force myself to stay where I am. At least I had the forethought to wear pants, so I don’t have to feel him against my bare skin.

The thought of him touching my bare skin makes me want to vomit.

Theo takes his place against the wall while Mom takes the armchair.

“It’s so good to see you again,” Salvatore says, grabbing both my hands. “We’ll be married in just a few weeks. I’d love to get to know my wife a bit better.”

“Future wife,” I remind him, trying to pull my hands back. He doesn’t let go. In fact, his smile grows sharper, and his eyes narrow. I feel a hint of fear at the back of my neck, but I push it down. No. Antonio would never marry me to a man who would hurt me. Would he?

“Of course, of course.”

“So, Mr. Fontana—”

“Salvatore, please. I already told you to call me that.”

“Yes. It’s just ... you’re so much older than me. It feels strange to call you by your first name.”

“I am older, yes. But I’m not dead yet. I’m still a very *capable* man.”

I try to not grimace at his words. I may be a Catholic girl, but I learned all about sexual innuendos from my older sisters, mainly Gemma, so I know when I’m hearing one.

“So, Mr. Fontana—”

“Salvatore,” he says through gritted teeth. Theo leans from one foot to another, almost like he’s ready to strike. But strike what? Would Theo get rid of Salvatore for me?

That’s a confession waiting to happen: My bodyguard killed my future husband, so I don’t have to marry him, all because I asked him to. Because I love him.

I smile at the thought.

Salvatore looks pleased with himself, and I realize he thinks I’m smiling at him. He doesn’t know I’m smiling because I’m imagining him out of my life forever.

“What’s your favorite movie?” I ask.

He huffs. “We’ll be married soon, dear, and all you can ask me is what is my favorite movie?”

“It’s a good way to get to know a person.”

“Fine.” He scrunches up his face as he thinks, making his prominent jowls even more prominent. “I would have to say ... *The Godfather*.”

Of course, it is.

Theo snorts.

My head snaps up to look at him while Salvatore whirls around to face him. Theo immediately composes his features.

“Do you have something to say?” Salvatore asks him. Mom and I share a worried glance.

“No,” Theo replies. “Nothing to say.”

“Then why did you make a sound?”

“I sneezed. I apologize.”

That was no sneeze. I’m not mad at all that Theo is lying right now. It just makes me love him more that he’s standing up to Salvatore.

Salvatore stares at Theo with a hard expression.

“My favorite movie is *Pride and Prejudice*,” I cut in. “Just ... if you were wondering.”

That does the trick. Salvatore turns back to me, ignoring Theo for the moment. “Oh? It is? I’ve never heard of it.”

“Never heard of ...” I shake my head. Who hasn’t heard of *Pride and Prejudice*? Book form, movie form, miniseries form. It doesn’t matter. It’s famous. “It’s a romance,” I explain.

“Oh, that would explain it. I find romance movies to be droll and disappointing. A waste of my time. Of anyone’s time. You shouldn’t be filling your head with such nonsense.”

A flash of anger passes through me. “You don’t even know what it’s about.”

“I don’t have to. All romances are the same. For girls without any brains.”

I’m about to open my mouth to tell Salvatore off when my mom cuts in. “I’ll have you know, Salvatore, that all my

daughters have a mind of their own. They all have intelligence. I don't appreciate you insulting that."

I stare at my mom in surprise. She's never really stood up for me like that before. It warms my heart. Ever since Franco died, she's shown a softer, nicer side to her. It's almost like she's a new woman.

"Right." Salvatore looks properly scolded. You don't mess with an Italian mama, let me tell you. "I apologize." He turns to me. "We'll have to watch *The Godfather* together some time."

"I have no interest. Men who love *The Godfather* have no originality." Yes, it's petty, but it feels good.

"Cecilia," Mom says, placing her face in her hands.

Salvatore sits up straighter. "Oh, I see. I insulted your little movie, and now, you're insulting mine."

"My movie isn't little. It's based off one of the most famous books of all time."

"Then why have I never heard of it?"

God, help me. I'm going to slap this man.

"So," Mom says, cutting in before I can say more. "Let's talk about something else. Cecilia, is there anything else you'd like to know about Salvatore?"

I pause, breathing heavily. It's taking everything out of me not to scream at Salvatore right now. "Um ... yes." A more important question seems pertinent right now. "Once we're married, what will be my role?"

Salvatore looks confused. "What a strange question. Your role is to be my wife. A housewife and soon a stay-at-home-mom."

"And how will you treat me and our kids? Will you do your part in the child raising?"

"Why are you asking me such strange questions?" He chuckles in such a patronizing way I have to grit my teeth to keep from screaming. "I won't raise the kids. You will. It's not

my job to do that. I have more money than God. That's what I'll provide in this marriage."

I'm not surprised by his answer. It only proves what I already know—he's a horrible person. "No one is above God."

"Oh, dear Cecilia. I am above God."

The clatter of footsteps running down the stairs prevents me from snapping back.

Luca and Lucia run into the living room. "I'm sick," Luca says.

"I know you are," Mom replies. "You two should be resting in bed."

"I just wanted to do this." Luca proceeds to run into the kitchen, and judging by the retching sound emitting from him, he's throwing up. Lucia giggles and runs after her brother.

Mom sighs. "I have to deal with this." As she heads into the kitchen, she yells, "Luca, you threw up everywhere!"

Salvatore turns to Theo. "You might want to help her clean up."

Theo's jaw tightens. It's obvious, even from here. "I'm supposed to keep watch on Cecilia."

"Aren't you supposed to keep watch on everyone in the family? Go tend to your duties."

Theo clearly wants to object, but after a moment, he leaves to help my mom.

Now, it's just Salvatore and me.

"So—" I start to say as he leans in and tries to kiss me again. I sit back before he can touch me. "Woah. What are you doing?"

"It's all right, dear. We're almost married. We can sneak a kiss." He tries again, and this time, I stand up.

"Stop. I'm not kissing you." Ever, I want to say. "We're not married yet."

He stands up and starts stalking toward me. I try to stay away from him, but when my back hits the fireplace, I know I'm stuck. Salvatore knows it, too.

With a smug smile, he descends on me.

His hands touch my waist while his lips start to come close to my face. I can't breathe. I can't do this. I can't do this. God, please help me.

"What are you doing?" Theo. God answered my prayer.

Salvatore immediately pulls back. "What are you doing? You're supposed to be in the kitchen helping Giulia."

"She didn't need my help and told me to come back in here." Theo walks up to Salvatore, towering over him. "Is there a problem here?"

"Of course there's no problem." He slicks back his hair. Well, the little bit of hair he has left.

"Good." Theo remains standing there, staring Salvatore down.

"I think you should leave," I say.

Salvatore smiles. "Yes, I think you should," he says to Theo.

I look directly at Salvatore. "I was talking to you."

Salvatore looks shocked as he turns to me. "But ..."

"Leave," Theo growls. "Cecilia asked you to. I'll walk you out." Theo grabs Salvatore's arm and practically drags him from the house.

I stay where I am, feeling a mixture of relief and fear and confusion.

"Are you okay?" Theo asks as he returns.

"Oh. So, you are talking to me," I snap, unable to help myself.

A flash of guilt crosses his face. "I just want to make sure you're okay."

“I’m fine, Theo. What else would I be?” *You don’t love me, I want to say to him. I’m nothing more to you than a job. Oh, and the man who almost just assaulted me is the man I’m supposed to marry in a few weeks. I’m the complete opposite of fine.*

Of course, there’s no way I’m telling Theo any of this. He’ll just shut down like he always does.

“I’m sorry I was cold to you,” he says. “But you and your family are my responsibility. Nothing more.”

“I heard you. Loud and clear.” I walk away before he can say anything else, even though all I want is for him to give me a reason to stay.

AN HOUR LATER, Antonio bursts into my room. I sit up in bed, shocked at the sight of him.

“Cecilia,” he barks, “what did you do?”

“What did I do? I have no idea.” I stand up, crossing my arms. I’m not about to remain sitting down while Antonio berates me.

“You. Salvatore. He told me what happened. How you were incredibly rude to him today.”

I scoff. “I wasn’t rude to him. He tried to touch—”

“He will be your husband!” Antonio shouts. “I don’t care. Just be nice to him. I need him as an ally. I can’t lose him because you don’t know how to be polite to him.”

“You seriously care more about a potential investor than your own sister?” I whisper.

He shakes his head, turning away from me. “We’re not having this discussion again.”

“I think we need to. Ever since you became the boss, you’ve acted differently. This isn’t you, Antonio. You’re not the man who fought tooth and nail to save his family from Franco. Leadership has changed you. I don’t like it.”

“Maybe I’ve just changed in the past five years. Did you ever think about that? When I was on my own because our uncle tried to kill me?”

“Yes, I did. Every day. I worried about you every day. For five years. I thought about you every day, Antonio. How you were doing. If you were okay. I missed you every day.” My words come out as a sob. “Why can’t you extend me the same courtesy?”

“I missed you every day, too,” he admits, his expression softening. “Our entire family.”

“So, then, why are you doing this?”

And just like that, his guard is back up. “Because I have to. Because Salvatore can provide me the kind of money I need to make a difference with my men. I need to become such a powerful leader that when Nina and I have children of our own, they’re born into a safe place. A world where they don’t need to be afraid because their dad is the most powerful man in the entire world.”

“So, I’m just the collateral, huh? For you to get your perfect future with your perfect wife?”

“We were close once. And I clung to that every day when I was in hiding. But you act like I’m the only one who’s changed.” He points at me. “You’ve changed, too, Cecilia. You’ve developed this inappropriate crush on Theo, and it’s blinded you. You can’t see a good thing when it’s right in front of you.”

“And Salvatore is a *good* thing?” I can’t hide the malice in my voice.

“Yes, he is. He will bring more prosperity to this family. He will make me so powerful I’ll be a god.”

“You do that, Antonio.” I walk around him to open my door. “Go be a god. But see who you leave in your wake. You’re going to hurt this family more than you realize.”

He stares at me hard before huffing and leaving my room.

I shut my door gently before sliding down and curling into a ball on the floor.

How have things become this?

How have I lost my brother, Theo, and my future, all in the span of a week?

CHAPTER 7

Theo

The little ranch house on the quaint street instantly fills me with warmth.

It's the house I grew up in. No loud, large city. Just the quiet suburbs.

After the incident with Cecilia and Salvatore, I was livid and knew I needed to get out of town for a bit. I saw Salvatore trying to kiss Cecilia, and it took everything in me to not bash his head into the fireplace mantel. And then, Cecilia didn't even want my help. I can't blame her. I've pushed her away too many times.

It just hurts knowing there isn't anything I can do to save her. I tried talking to Antonio—he brushed me off. The only other option would be to kill Salvatore, and I'm not a murderer.

My mom's face shines through the window of the front door after I knock. She smiles brightly as she opens the door, motioning me inside. "Theo. This is a pleasant surprise." She gives me an all-consuming hug. "I haven't seen you in a while."

I follow her inside. The house is just as I remember—the warm brown walls, the shaggy carpet my mom hasn't changed since the '90s, and the delicious smell of a candle burning.

My mom, Sarah Williams, is a tall woman with light brown hair and the kindest eyes I've ever seen. Ever since I was a kid, people compared me to her, and I always thought it was the best compliment.

“Sit down, sit down,” she says, nodding at the couch. I take my seat, sinking into the plush couch the same way I did when I was a child. “How are things? Usually, you just call me to check in. Why the surprise visit?”

I have feelings for a woman much younger than me, one I've known since she was a kid. It's fucking messed up, but I don't care. And now, she's getting married to some asshole, and there's nothing I can do about it.

But instead of saying any of that, I smile tightly. “I just needed to get away for day. Clear my head.” Try to, anyway.

“Something bothering you?” She gets up and heads into the kitchen. I can hear pots and pans banging around before the sound of the water tap turning on.

Nothing I can tell my mother. “Just wanted to see you.”

A few minutes later, she returns with two cups of tea. After handing me one, she sits down across from me. I take a sip of the warm beverage. Just like my childhood.

“How's work? Are you still working as a guard?”

“I am.” I'm purposefully being vague. If my mom knew the truth, she'd have an opinion, and I'm here to forget about Cecilia, not talk about her.

“Who was the family again? They're rich, right?” She takes a sip of her tea, smiling like she wants the metaphorical tea.

“I can't talk about them, Mom,” I say, setting my cup down. “You know that. It's for their safety.”

“Right. They're just so mysterious. You've been working for this family for years now, and I still don't know anything about them.”

“That's the point. Just something at work was bothering me, and I needed to get away. But I'm not here to talk about that. I'm here to make sure things are going well for you.”

Her smile disappears, and she shifts in her seat. “I don't need my son taking care of me.”

“I want to. You know that. You need my help, Mom. After Dad ... I know it hasn't been easy for you.”

Her eyes flick to the pictures on the end table. My dad's smiling face shines back through the photo. He's in his uniform, looking proud. “I miss him, but I'm not an invalid. I can take care of myself.”

I stare at my dad's picture. He was in the Navy, and when I told him I wanted to join the military, he wasn't too happy with me. We hadn't spoken in years. Then he died last year.

“If you need help with any bills ...” I offer.

She's shaking her head before I'm even done talking. “No. Not at all.”

“Are you sure? You know I'll take care of you.” I want to. I can't seem to take care of any else in my life. Giulia. Cecilia. No one needs my help, apparently.

“I know, Theo. But I don't want it. Your dad left me a nest egg. I'll be fine. I want to make sure you're okay, too. Are you still having an issue with your PTSD?”

I duck my head. I can't tell my mom about my last attack in the Moretti household. I should be getting better. I can't worry her. “I'm fine, Mom.”

“So, we're just going round and round in circles, are we? I'm fine. You're fine. We're both fine.”

“That's the way of our family. I get it from you.”

She winks. “You get it from your father.”

I turn to his picture again, taking in his proud smile and uniform. I wasn't around to make sure he was okay either after he got hit by a car. I wasn't there to stand at my mom's side as he died. I was too busy with the Moretti family doing my job.

Soon, I say my goodbyes and head back into the city, bracing myself to see Cecilia again. The weight of all my inaction sits heavily on my shoulders.

IT'S dinner time in the Moretti household, and I'm stationed near the back wall as usual. When Cecilia comes downstairs, my heart constricts. She looks so withdrawn. In a way I've never seen. She was a happy person when she was younger. It seems I'm not the only one with the weight of the world on my shoulders.

She avoids looking at me as she takes her seat next to Mia. The twins are already digging into their food before Giulia even has a chance to sit.

"So, I'm watching this show, right?" Mia says, talking through a mouthful of food. Giulia gives her a disapproving look, and Mia swallows. "It's all about finding love on a beach. It's so stupid, but it also looks like so much fun. I'd love to audition for it."

Giulia frowns. "Audition?"

"Yeah. It's a reality show. To find love."

The laughter that escapes Cecilia makes everyone jump.

Mia turns to her. "What's so funny?"

"You can't find love on a reality show, Mia," Cecilia says. My eyes follow her hand as it holds the cross around her neck. "Love doesn't exist, remember? And besides, you'll have to marry someone for political gain, just like me. If Antonio isn't letting me off the hook, then he's definitely not letting you off the hook."

Mia slumps in her chair with a pout on her face. "This is no fair. I hate how everyone else gets to make decisions for us. I'm a modern-day woman. But I feel like I'm stuck in the 1800s. How is this fair?"

Giulia calmly scoops up more potatoes to put on her plate as she answers. "Because that's the way of it. That's how our family does things."

That's how the *Mafia* does things is what she means.

"I never get to have any fun," Mia mutters.

"Just be thankful," Cecilia says. "You won't have to marry an old man."

That makes Mia go quiet.

The doorbell rings. Everyone looks up in confusion.

“I’ll get it,” I say, heading to the door. When I open it and see Salvatore’s face, I want to slam the door on him, but I resist the urge to. “Mr. Fontana. What are you doing here?”

“I’ve come to see Cecilia. She and I didn’t get to finish our conversation from earlier. Now, step out of my way.”

I step in front of him as he tries to barge inside. “Hold on, Mr. Fontana. Cecilia is not expecting you. She doesn’t want you here.”

The sneer that crosses Salvatore’s face is pure ugliness. “And how do you know what Cecilia wants? You’re just her bodyguard. I’m her fiancé. Now, let me in.”

I don’t want to of course but I have to do my duty. “I’ll inform Giulia you’re here.”

“That’s interesting,” he says before I can walk away. “That you call your employer by her first name. Is there something going on between you and Mrs. Moretti that I should know about.”

That’s fucking it.

I step outside, shutting the door behind me. Salvatore quickly steps back. “Listen here,” I say to him in my most lethal voice. “You will not be starting any rumors about Giulia or any of the other family members who live here. They are good people. Giulia hired me and has been a great boss. She asked me to call her by her first name. Nothing more.”

“Then why are you so passionate about the matter?”

I stare at him in surprise. “What?”

Salvatore’s eyes widen. “Unless it’s not Giulia you have feelings for. It wouldn’t be my fiancé now, would it?”

“Of course not.”

Salvatore shakes his head, a savage grin on his face. “I don’t believe you. I think you’re taking your guard duties a little too seriously. Every time I try to get Cecilia alone, there

you are. You never leave her side. If you do have feelings for her, then you're fucked. I'll come for you."

"I do not have feelings for Cecilia," I state in a calm voice. "And don't threaten me. You won't like the outcome."

He raises an eyebrow. "Wouldn't I? You don't scare me, boy. If anyone should be afraid, it's you. I have the power of a group of men at my side. I'm in the good graces of Antonio Moretti. You should be scared."

I continue to stare him down. Neither of us backs down.

It's not until the door opens and Giulia pops her head out that I step back. "What's going on?" she asks. Her eyes widen when she sees Salvatore. "Oh. Salvatore. You're here."

"Yes, I am." He clears his throat and straightens his tie, pretending to act like the perfect gentleman. "I wanted to see Cecilia."

"We're having dinner at the moment," she tells him pointedly.

"Oh." He just stands there, waiting expectantly to be let inside.

Giulia looks at me before sighing. "All right. Come in." She opens the door for him. Salvatore gives me a smug grin as he walks by, and it takes everything not to punch him.

"She's in the kitchen," Giulia explains, pointing down the hallway. Salvatore is off, walking incredibly fast for an old man.

"Giulia," I murmur, drawing her attention to me. "I don't trust him."

"Neither do I." She keeps her voice low. "But there's nothing I can do. This is what Antonio wants."

"You're his mom. Can't you talk to him? He'd listen to you."

Her eyes flash with anger. "Antonio is a grown man. He won't listen to me. I can't command him do anything he doesn't want to do."

“I understand. But Cecilia isn’t safe with him.”

“And you know this how?”

I sigh. “I saw him cornering her in the living room the other day. He tried kissing her. She looked uncomfortable. I stepped in. I was the only reason she wasn’t assaulted.”

Giulia’s expression darkens. “I ...” She swallows hard. “I want to protect her. I do. And I appreciate you stepping in, Theo. But Salvatore will be Cecilia’s husband. It’s his right to touch her.”

I’m shocked. “Giulia, I heard things happen between you and Franco behind closed doors.” She turns away from me. “I know Franco abused you for years. You’re just going to let the same thing happen to your daughter?”

“No,” she says in a haggard voice. “This is the last thing I want. But my hands are tied. I live and die by the men in my life. It’s the way in this business. In this ... life.”

I’m really starting to hate Mafia life.

“If I could save my daughter, I would in a heartbeat. But that would mean going against my son. And I can’t do that.”

I watch her walk away, feeling the last shred of hope for Cecilia slip through my fingers.

WHEN I ENTER THE KITCHEN, I see Salvatore, once again, sitting near Cecilia, and she’s looking like she wants to throw up. Salvatore eyes me as I take my place in the corner. I give him a tight smile. He’s not getting rid of me any time soon.

“I wasn’t expecting you,” Cecilia says to Salvatore. “Not. At. All.”

Salvatore either doesn’t understand her snappish tone or chooses to ignore it. “My dear, we will marry. I want to see you ever day.”

“Oh.” She shares a look with Mia, who expertly stands up and leaves the room. I don’t blame her. I don’t want to be in the same room as Salvatore either. But by Mia leaving, that

means Cecilia has one less person to protect her. Cecilia frowns as she turns back to Salvatore. “I actually have an early morning tomorrow, so I shouldn’t have any visitors.”

Salvatore doesn’t take the hint. “I wanted to continue our discussion from the other day. I want to make sure you haven’t been filling your head with those romance movies. They’re not good for women.”

“I think they’re fine,” she replies.

Giulia is at the sink doing dishes. The twins are long gone. Probably in their rooms getting into mischief.

Salvatore chuckles. “Of course, you do, dear. It’s because you don’t have a mind of your own.”

“And that’s something you want from me?” she asks in a tight voice. “To have a mind of my own?”

“Heaven’s no!” He throws his head back and laughs. “That wouldn’t be appropriate.”

Cecilia looks like she wants to punch Salvatore as well. “How are you helping my brother? He’s gone to all this trouble to get your money, so I hope you’re paying him well.”

“Not until after we’re married.” He touches Cecilia’s nose. She jerks back.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I don’t start working with Antonio until after you and I are married. That’s how our deal works.”

Cecilia stares at the table. “So ... my brother isn’t getting anything from you until we’re married.”

“Yes. Exactly.”

That must be why Antonio is pushing so hard for Cecilia and Salvatore to marry. I can tell by Cecilia’s expression, she realizes the same thing.

Giulia wipes her hands on a towel. “It’s getting late. Salvatore, I’ll walk you out.”

He looks like he wants to complain, but when Giulia squeezes his shoulder, he relents and follows her to the door. Once Salvatore's out of the room, I approach Cecilia.

"Are you ok?" I ask her.

She tenses. "Why do you care? You're just my bodyguard."

"I care," I say in a soft voice.

She pauses for a moment before leaving the room. She doesn't look at me once.

Pow, pow, pow.

The gunshots are muffled in my ears, thanks to my earmuffs. The gun is solid in my hand as I stare down at my mark. I got three perfect head shots.

I lower the gun, breathing heavily.

I needed to blow off some steam after my shift tonight, so I headed for the shooting range. Every time I fire my gun, I imagine it's Salvatore's face.

Once I'm done for the night, I head out to my car, giving Jimmy, who's standing behind the counter, a nod before I leave.

"Have a good night, Theo," he says.

"You, too." I wish I could have a good night, but I know it will only be filled with thoughts of Cecilia in my mind, which will only torment me.

As I reach my car, two men slink out of the shadows. They blend in so well to the darkness, I don't notice them until they're on top of me.

The first one punches me in the stomach, doubling me over. The other one goes behind me and slams something hard into my head. I land on the ground with a groan.

The two men begin to go to town on me. Punching and kicking. Shit. I haven't been beat up since my time in the

academy when a couple of guys decided to haze me. This is a lot worse.

If I don't do something, they might kill me.

When the first one brings his foot back to kick me again, I reach out and grab his ankle. With a hard tug, I pull him forward. He yelps as he lands on his back. The one behind me hesitates, giving me an advantage.

I manage to sit up and grab his legs, too. He punches me in the head, and it hurts like a motherfucker, but I cling on. Snarling, I manage to bring him to the ground, too. With the last little bit of strength I possess, I stand up and limp over to my car. My hands are shaking. The two men are getting back up. I need to get away now.

I slide into my seat and slam the door as the first man hits my car. I turn the car on and back away before they can come at me. Looking in my rearview mirror, I see them standing there, dressed all in black. Who are they?

Something tells me they didn't target me randomly. They were probably paid by Salvatore to get rid of me. I know it in my gut.

I'm badly injured. Fuck. I might even have internal bleeding. My vision is becoming woozy, and I have to slam on my breaks. I need a hospital.

With my last bit of energy, I manage to dial 9-1-1.

CHAPTER 8

Cecilia

Theo's words filter through my mind. *I care*. Does he really? Or does he just care for me as my bodyguard?

Theo hasn't shown he has feelings for me because he doesn't. It's impossible. It's a foolish dream on my part.

And top of all of that, I now know why Antonio is pushing so hard for my wedding to Salvatore. My brother doesn't get any of Salvatore's money until the nuptials take place. I knew Antonio was using me to gain power with Salvatore—it just hurt to hear coming from Salvatore.

I call Antonio, but he doesn't answer, so I try his wife, Nina, next. She had the decency to answer my call.

"Cecilia?" she asks, surprise in her voice. "Why are you calling?"

"Make sure your husband answers when I call him."

"Oh. I can tell him that."

"Thanks." I blow out a rough breath, rubbing my hand over my face. "How has Antonio been doing?" I want to be petty and not ask, but Antonio is still my brother. He's been going through a lot of change lately. The least I can do is not stoop to his level.

"He's tired. Busy, a lot. Cecilia," Nina says, lowering her voice. "I know things have been tense between you and Antonio. I know he's making you marry someone you don't want to, and I've told him it's wrong. He's just really feeling

the pressure to make an impression as boss, and unfortunately, it's making him lose his way when it comes to you."

I sit down on my bed, all the energy leaving me. "I appreciate you understanding where I'm coming from and that you've spoken to Antonio about it. You're a good person, Nina."

"So are you. And so is Antonio. You know, before he killed your uncle, when he was still in hiding, he would talk about his family. Tell me stories about his sisters. Mainly his favorite sister. You."

The tears hit my eyes before I can stop them. "Oh, yeah?" I try to keep my voice from sounding choked.

"Yeah. He missed you the most. And after, when he had you guys back in his life, he was the happiest to have you back."

"Then why is he doing this to me?" I ask, scrubbing my hand over my eyes.

"I think he doesn't know what to do. He's trying to be the boss, and it's made him lose his way as a brother. But I know the Antonio who loves you is in there. You just need to dig deeper to find him."

"Ok, thanks," I say quickly. "Tell Antonio to call me." I hang up before the tears can spill from my eyes. And I cry like I haven't cried since I lost my dad.

Someone knocks at my door. My mom pokes her head in, sees me crying, and comes over to comfort me. "Cecilia. Honey?" She wraps me in her arms, being the supportive mom I need right now.

She lets me cry until there's nothing left. "Are you ok?" she asks, rubbing my arms.

"I'm not ok with any of this. But I'm not giving up. I need to convince Antonio to not for me to marry Salvatore. I have to try."

Mom gives me a pitying smile. "I'm proud of you for standing up for yourself. But, honey, I'm going to temper your

expectations. Mafia men tend to only listen to other Mafia men and not the women in their lives.”

I pull away from her. “Not Antonio. He’s not like the others. He can’t be. Because if I believe that, then that means Antonio is okay with throwing me to the wolves for power. I think he’s lost and needs to be reminded of who his family is. Who he fought so hard for. It was us. It was me. It was to save us from Franco. I have to talk to Antonio and remind him.” I stand up, but Mom grabs my hand, stopping me.

“Cecilia, there’s a reason I came into your room. It was to tell you something.” The worried look on her face sends sheer panic through my heart.

“What is it?”

“It’s Theo.” She lets out a sigh. “He was attacked last night and is in the hospital. He’s just out of surgery, and he called me to let me know he wouldn’t be able to make it in. I thought you’d want to know.”

Time slows around me. “Attacked? What ... what do you mean?”

“He didn’t give much detail. He sounded a little out of it, given what he went through. I’m sure he’ll tell us more once he’s better. For now, our other guard, Sam, will take over.”

“I need to see him.” The words are out before I can stop them.

Mom frowns. “See him? Honey, Theo’s in the hospital. He’s probably not up for visitors. He just got out of surgery.”

“So? He needs someone there; I’m sure of it.”

“Cecilia, Theo has a family,” she says pointedly. Her words are like a slap in the face. “They’ll check on him. You’re not his family. He works for us. Nothing more. You shouldn’t go see him.”

“Why not?”

There it is again—that pitying look. “Honey, is there something going on between you and Theo I need to know about?”

My heart almost rips out of my chest. “What?” I shake my head frantically. “Nothing. Nothing is going on between us. Theo sees me as his job, nothing more. Don’t worry. I just want to make sure he’s okay. Can’t I do that, at least?”

She stares at me for a beat too long before answering. “Salvatore wouldn’t like it.”

I huff. “I don’t care what Salvatore likes or doesn’t like. He doesn’t own me. He can’t dictate where I go and who I’m around.”

“Not yet,” she reminds me. “But soon. And a man like Salvatore Fontana is not a man whose bad side you want to be on.”

“Whose side are you on?”

She sighs as she grabs my hands and squeeze. “Yours. Always yours. But I’ve been dealing with Mafia men a lot longer than you have. I’ve experienced the brutality from them firsthand. I just want you to be careful.”

“Do you mean Franco?” I ask in a low voice. I always wondered if there was abuse going on between my uncle and mom, but I never asked, and no one ever told me.

“Yes,” she finally says, looking me straight in the eye. “I mean Franco. I’ve ... been working through what he did to me. All your older sisters know, and so does Antonio. I’ve kept it from you, Mia, and the twins because I didn’t want you to have to carry the burden of what I went through.”

“And what did you go through?” My heart pounds so hard, I almost can’t focus when my mom answers.

“He raped me,” she says pointblank.

I gasp. My knees almost buckled out from under me. “He ... what?”

“Multiple times. He also hit me, but he did it in places I could hide the bruises. I was so ashamed at first.” She blinks hard. “I didn’t want to admit what was happening. But I couldn’t kick Franco out. He had too much power. So, I took everything from him, so he wouldn’t put it on any of you.”

I sit down hard next to her. “Why did you never tell me? Why didn’t Emilia or Gemma or ...”

She holds up her hand. “Don’t blame your sisters. It wasn’t their story to tell. But I’m telling you now. I know what powerful men can be like, and you do *not* want to get on Salvatore’s bad side. Trust me on that. You don’t want the life I experienced for the past twelve years since your dad died.”

“But Dad loved you. He was so kind to you.”

“He was.”

“So ... that means real love exists. Which means I shouldn’t have to marry Salvatore. You and Dad are proof happiness can exist in a marriage. You have eight children together. That means something.”

Her eyes darken as she ducks her head. “Six children.”

“What?”

She sucks in a shaky breath and looks at me. I can tell it’s taking everything out of her to do so. “Your father and I had six children. Lucia and Luca are ... Franco’s kids.”

My entire world drops out from under me. “But ... you got pregnant soon after Dad died. Weren’t you two ...”

“It was a lie. Your father was too sick to be intimate with before he died. And then Franco moved in, and that’s when he ... did what he did. A month later, I found out I was pregnant with the twins. I just told everyone they were your father’s because ... I didn’t want to face the truth. But I’m facing it now.”

“Do the twins know?”

“No. And I don’t want them to find out till they’re older, if ever. It could ruin their chances in life if the truth comes out. It could hurt them. So, don’t say anything. I’ll tell them when I’m ready.”

I nod slowly, taking in everything my mom just told me. There’s so much I want to say, but there’s really only one thing that matters. “I love you, you know that?”

Tears slip down her cheeks as she smiles. “I do. And I love you. Which is why I’m telling you to be smart about this. If Salvatore found out you went to see Theo in the hospital, he might get the wrong idea about you two.”

“I don’t care. Theo’s hurt. I never knew the full extent of what happened between you and Franco, so I wasn’t able to help you.”

“I wouldn’t have let you.”

“Doesn’t matter. Theo was attacked. He’s in the hospital. I can do something about that. I can be there for him. I’m going.” I stand up before she can stop me.

“I can’t stop you. Just be safe.”

I give her a hug, and she wraps her arms around me, pulling me close. We stay together like that for a while. My mom has been through a lot, and it will be a lot to process, but I really can’t sit by knowing Theo’s in the hospital, so I have to go.

I take the family car to the hospital by myself. Mom insists I take Sam with me, but I tell her he’s better off taking care of her and the rest of their family.

Once I arrive, I find a nurse’s station and ask which room Theo Williams is in.

The nurse behind the counter tells me he isn’t accepting visitors unless it’s from family.

“Oh,” I say. “Well ... I’m his wife,” I blurt out.

The nurse glances at the computer. “His file doesn’t say he’s married. Who are you?”

“Oh, did I say wife?” I laugh—it’s strained and awkward. “I meant his sister. I’m his sister.”

She raises an eyebrow. “Sorry, honey. I don’t believe you. No visitors.”

“Can’t you at least call his room and tell him Cecilia is here to see him? Do that for me, at least. Please.”

She sighs and nods, grabbing the phone. “Fine. I can do that.” She calls and explains I’m here, and after a few moments, she hangs up. “He’s in room 232. Down the hall.”

“Thank you.” I rush down the hall to his room, but I pause once I reach the closed door. Theo is on the other side. He obviously told the nurse it was okay for me to come in, but is he just being nice? Does he really want to see me? Or am I being a nuisance?

Only one way to find out.

I knock on the door as I open it. Theo is in the bed, his face battered and bruised. He has a bandaged wrapped around his torso. His eyes soften when I come in, giving me silent encouragement to approach.

“Cecilia.”

“Hi,” I whisper, grabbing my cross and holding it tightly in my hand. “My mom told me you were attacked. What happened? Are you ok?”

“No. I had internal bleeding because of what those men did to me. Thankfully, the paramedics got me here fast enough, and I was brought into surgery. The doctor told me after I woke up that they were able to fix everything. I’ll just be sore for the next few weeks, but I’ll recover fine.”

I walk over to his bed and rest my hands on the rail. “Who attacked you?”

“Just some men. I’ve never seen them before in my life. But ... I think I know who sent them.” He leaves the implication heavy in the air.

“You mean Salvatore.”

“I do.”

I turn my cross over and over. “But why would he do that? You’re my bodyguard. Why hurt my bodyguard?”

Theo huffs, then winces. “Because he doesn’t want me getting in the way.”

“Getting in the way?”

“Of him. And you.” He looks away from me as he says it.

“But that’s crazy. You’re my bodyguard. Nothing more.”

“Right.” He still won’t look at me.

I shake my head. “Salvatore doesn’t just to get to hire men to beat you up. That’s horrible. I’ll tell him to back off.”

Theo grabs my hand, making me gasp. “No.” When I look at him, his eyes are staring at me intently. “You think Salvatore will listen to you? He doesn’t respect you. I’ve seen the way he treats you. Heard the way he talks to you. If you confront him, it will make things worse.”

“But he doesn’t get to get away with this.”

“What’s done is done. Salvatore made it clear where I stand.”

“Well,” I say, some of my anger deflating, “I’m just happy you’re alive and okay.” Without even thinking about it, I lean in and kiss his cheek. His stubble his scratchy against my skin, but I don’t care. It feels glorious.

Theo sucks in a breath. I pull back slightly, my face still close to his. “Sorry,” I whisper. “That was inappropriate—”

I get cut off when Theo kisses me.

At first, I don’t believe it. This can’t be happening. This isn’t real. Theo sees me as his job, nothing more. So, then, why is he kissing me right now? And why aren’t I kissing him back?

I shove my surprise away and do just that. I kiss him back.

The kiss is simple and sweet and lingers.

When we part, Theo and I take a moment to look at each other.

“You kissed me,” I whisper, touching my fingers to my lips.

“I know.”

“Why did you kiss me?”

“Because I wanted to.”

I drop my hand and turn away from him, barely able to breathe. No. This isn't real. Theo can't like me. This is my dream coming true, but I still can't believe it.

"Cecilia?" he asks as I start to head for the door.

"Theo, I ... I don't know what to think. You're hurt. You're not thinking clearly."

The intense look he gives me makes me shiver. "I'm thinking more clearly than I haven in a long time."

"But you told me you only see me as your job. That's what you said. Isn't that right? Or am I wrong?"

He doesn't answer.

I huff. "Right. I knew it. You're delirious from surgery. You didn't mean this. You don't get to get my hopes up and dash them. This isn't real." I hurry out of the room before Theo can say anything else that might mess with my mind.

What just happened? Did he really kiss me, or did I imagine it? Have I been crushing on Theo for so long I'm now imagining things? I must be. That's the only logical explanation.

Because surely Theo doesn't have feelings for me. That would be crazy. Because if he did have feelings for me ...

I don't let my mind go there. I've worked hard to protect my heart from how I feel about Theo. I'm not about to let myself fall back in love with him only to marry Salvatore and never see Theo again.

When I get back home, I'm a frazzled mess.

And when I see Salvatore sitting in my living room, I become an angry mess. My mom is with him. I keep my distance as I face off against him.

"What are you doing here?" I ask him.

Salvatore looks equally angry. "Where were you? I came here to see you, and your mom told me you were out. Out where?"

“Church,” I say immediately, holding up my cross. “I like to go there to pray.”

Salvatore doesn't seem pleased by my answer. “Church. All right. Well, you're here now. That's all that matters.”

I want to snap at him that he's the one who showed up at my house unannounced and uninvited. He doesn't get to be angry with me that I wasn't home.

But Salvatore isn't a man who ever believes he's wrong.

“Okay. What do you want?” I ask.

Salvatore turns to my mom. “Giulia, would you give Cecilia and me a moment alone? There's a private matter I'd like to discuss with her.”

Mom instantly shakes her head. “No. Sorry, Mr. Fontana.”

“Salvatore,” he says through gritted teeth.

“You and my daughter,” she continues as if he never spoke, “are not married yet. I'm not comfortable with you being alone.”

Salvatore's eye twitches, but other than that, his expression doesn't change. “That's too bad.”

“It really is,” Mom murmurs.

A loud thump and cry from upstairs makes everyone turn to look. Lucia comes running into the living room. “Luca was jumping on the bed and fell off and got hurt.”

Mom sighs, exchanging a look with me. “I ... is he seriously hurt?”

Lucia shrugs. “Seems like it.”

Mom looks torn between wanting to check on Luca and stay with me. I tell her it's okay. “You can go,” I say. “I'll be fine.”

She frowns as she slowly gets up. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, I'll be fine. If Mr. *Fontana* wants to talk, then we can talk.” I give Salvatore a sweet smile, but he just looks more annoyed.

With one final look at me, Mom leaves the room with Lucia at her side.

I turn to Salvatore. “What did you want to discuss?”

“This.” He stands up, walks over to me, and grabs my face, trying to pull me in for a kiss. I just barely dodge his lips, so they end up touching my cheek. “Now, don’t be like that, Cecilia.”

“Don’t touch me.” I shove him back, but despite how old he is, he’s still taller than me. He doesn’t go far. He grabs my face again and tries to kiss me.

“No,” I say, pushing him back, but he doesn’t relent. Finally, I’ve had enough of this.

I bring my knee up and hit him straight in the balls. Salvatore grunts as he slides to his knees.

I don’t wait for a moment longer to leave the house. Mom is too busy with the twins. And after all she told me about her and Franco, I don’t want to burden her with this, too.

There’s only one person I know who will protect me against anything, even if I don’t understand where his mind is.

Theo.

I hurry back to the hospital and find him still in bed when I enter his room.

“Cecilia?” he asks, sitting up straighter in bed.

“I’m in trouble,” I tell him.

CHAPTER 9

Theo

Cecilia's face is flushed, and her eyes are wide as she tells me she's in trouble.

"Trouble? How?" I ask. I haven't stopped thinking about our kiss for the past hour. I finally crossed that boundary, and there's no going back. I'm tired of pretending I don't have feelings for Cecilia.

She rushes to my side. "Salvatore. He tried to kiss me, and I pushed him away, but he wouldn't stop. So, eventually I ... kneed him in the groin."

I stare at Cecilia in shock. Good Catholic girl Cecilia just told me she kneed Salvatore Fontana in the balls. If I weren't so hurt and so angry, I'd laugh. "Okay, then what happened?"

"I ... came straight here." She ducks her head, her cheeks blushing. "I didn't know what else to do. I know I'm in trouble. Salvatore will be so angry. But I knew out of all the people in my life, you'd be the one who wouldn't judge me. I've seen how you look at Salvatore. With utter hatred. I figured you wouldn't judge me for what I did."

"Why didn't you go to your mom? Where was she?"

"She was with us." Cecilia blows out a rough breath. "But then the twins needed her, so she left the room. I told her it was okay. I didn't think Salvatore would try something like that. But when I told him no and he kept coming at me, I just panicked. I hurt him, he fell to the ground, and I left. I didn't even tell my mom I was leaving."

I sit up straighter in bed, despite my injuries telling me to rest. “Your mom should never have left you alone. Where was the other guard?”

“I don’t know. Sam doesn’t really keep an eye on us as well as you do. And don’t blame my mom. It wasn’t her fault. So, what do I do, Theo?”

I think about it for a few seconds, but there’s only one way to completely solve this problem. I grab Cecilia’s hand, making her gasp. “I could kill him for you.”

She stares at me, frozen, before jerking away. “What? You’re not a murderer, Theo. I could never ask that of you.”

“I’m not. But for you, Cecilia, I’d do anything to keep you safe.”

“What are you talking about? You don’t care about me. I’m just a job to you.”

“So, that kiss meant nothing to you?” I ask. I throw the blanket off and struggle to my feet. I need to stand to say this, even though my body protests the entire way.

“Of course, the kiss meant something to me,” she says. “It meant everything to me. That’s why you can’t do it again. You don’t get to play with my emotions. I can’t bear it.” She grabs her cross. “I think I’d die inside.”

I shuffle over to her. “Cecilia, I’m not playing with your emotions. In fact, I was denying my own emotions for a long time. I was denying how I felt about you.”

“And how do you feel about me?” she whispers.

I cup her face with my hands and lean down to give her another kiss. Cecilia is frozen for a moment before kissing me back eagerly. She throws her arms around my shoulder and presses her body closer to mine. I draw her toward me. I need to feel more of her. I haven’t allowed myself this fantasy, but now that it’s coming true, there’s no going back.

“There,” I say once I pull back from the kiss. “That’s how I feel about you. I care for you. Cecilia.”

“I thought you only saw me as a little girl.”

“When you were younger, yes. That was how I saw you. But since you became an adult, I’ve seen the women you’ve grown into, and I can’t deny my feelings for you grew. The past year has been agony for me. I’ve had to stand back and watch you live your life, knowing I would never be a part of it. But I had those feelings, Cecilia. I have those feelings for you.”

She sucks in a quick breath. “Why are you telling me this now? Why not a year ago? I was twenty. An adult. We could have ...”

I shake my head. “Because I was trying to be a better man. You have to see how it looks. I’ve been your guard since you were a kid. It’s not right, but I’m tired of pretending as if I don’t care for you because I do, Cecilia. I really fucking do,” I growl. Her cheeks flush again. “But now with Salvatore ... I can’t stand by and watch you get hurt.” I gasp as a sharp pain spears my abdomen.

“Sit down,” she says, guiding me over to the bed. I slump down onto the thin mattress.

“I’m ok,” I tell her after she gives me a worried look. “Still recovering. Cecilia, listen.” I grab her hands and tighten my grip on them. “I had to stand by and watch Franco hurt your mom.”

“She told me the horrible things he did to her. I can’t even believe it. You knew?”

“To some extent. I didn’t see all of it, but I knew he was hurting her. I asked her if there was something I could do, and she told me no. Franco was too powerful, and I was just a bodyguard. You see, Cecilia, there are things in my past I’m not proud of. Other times I didn’t stand up as I should have. I took the easy way out. But with you, I’m done doing that. I’m going to fight for you. Salvatore doesn’t get to put his hands on you unless you want it.”

She crinkles her nose. “No. Not at all. That’s the last thing I want. You know I don’t want to marry him.”

“Good. I’ll protect you if you ask me to. I’ll make sure he doesn’t put his hands on you ever again.”

“I want that, Theo. I want that more than anything. But I don’t want you to kill someone for me. I could never live with that.”

“So, what do you propose?”

“I’ll tell my brother what Salvatore tried to do to me,” she says. “I can only hope he’ll call off the wedding.” She pauses. “But what about you and me? Theo, I’ve had feelings for you for years. I never thought you returned them.”

“And I never thought you liked me either.”

She huffs. “You’re telling me you never saw the crush I had on you?”

“I guess,” I say, shrugging. “But I just assumed it was a crush from a kid. I didn’t know you still liked me after becoming an adult. I was caught up in my mind, full of guilt for how I felt. I didn’t give much thought to what you were feeling, and for that, I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize.” She leans down, but before her lips touch mine, she pauses. “Is this ... ok?”

“Of course, it’s ok.” I grab the back of her head and pull her in for a kiss. I can tell she’s inexperienced with this, which isn’t surprising, but the enthusiasm she has for it makes me smile as I kiss her. I can show her all the ways to kiss ... and more.

I’m walking a dangerous tightrope. I’m kissing Cecilia Moretti, a girl very off-limits to me, but right now, I don’t fucking care. I just want to enjoy the kiss. The release of a year of pent-up frustration.

Cecilia is mine. She might be engaged to Salvatore Fontana, but she is mine. I just need to figure out how to keep her safe without killing Salvatore.

Cecilia is right—I’m not a murderer. But I’ve stood by too many times to count, and I’m tired of it. The anger inside me

is bubbling to the top, and if someone crosses me the wrong way, they might be on the receiving end of that anger.

She pulls back. “I don’t want to go back home.”

“Then stay with me longer.”

“My mom will be wondering where I am.” She grabs her phone out of her skirt pocket. Her eyes widen. “She’s called me over ten times now. She texted me, letting me know Salvatore is not happy with me, but he refuses to say why. She doesn’t know why I’m not at home. And ... and Antonio is there now.” She puts her phone away. “Great. I wanted to talk to my brother before. Try to convince him to let me out of the marriage to Salvatore. But now, that Salvatore’s with my brother, he’s probably spinning a tale to make himself look good and me look like the villain.”

“I won’t let that happen. I’m going back with you.”

“You are? You can barely stand, Theo.”

“I’ll do it for you. You shouldn’t have to face Salvatore and Antonio on your own.”

“Thank you.” She gives me a peck on the lips. “I can’t get over that. Kissing you. I can’t believe you really have feelings for me.” Her eyes become intense. “Promise me you won’t break my heart. Don’t mess with me, Theo.”

“I would never. I know it’s wrong. I know I shouldn’t have feelings for you, and we shouldn’t be kissing right now. But I’m tired of standing to the side and not doing a damn thing. I want you, Cecilia. I want you to be mine. Salvatore sent men to attack me to keep me away from you, but he doesn’t know it only made me realize I have one life to live, and I’m not going to waste it by not doing something. So, I promise you, Cecilia, I have no desire to break your heart. My feelings for you are real.”

She snuffles as a couple tears spill down her face. She wipes them away. “Ok. I believe you. Just keep me safe from Salvatore.”

“Whatever I have to do.”

“And I’ll convince my brother I can’t marry Salvatore, and hopefully, he’ll finally listen.”

I hope for that, too.

Cecilia helps me stand up, and together, we leave the hospital to head back to her house to confront two very powerful Mafia men.

THE FRONT DOOR opens for us before we even reach the top step. It’s Antonio, and he doesn’t look happy.

“Cecilia, come in here, now.”

Cecilia shares a look with me, and I nod at her to go in. I’ll be right behind her. Always.

Antonio leads Cecilia into the living room, where Giulia is sitting, her hands twisted together, and Salvatore is pacing, his hands in fists. Antonio motions for Cecilia to sit down, but she shakes her head.

“I’ll remain standing, but thank you.” She remains in front of me, not making it too obvious that things have changed between us but showing she’s not going to leave my side.

“So, what happened?” Antonio asks. “I got a call from Mom and Salvatore to come over, but no one is explaining what’s going on. Salvatore only told me you ran from him. None of us knew where you were.”

“I was visiting Theo in the hospital,” Cecilia explains. “He was hurt. Two men attacked him. I wanted to make sure he was ok.”

Antonio’s eyes flit to me. “And are you? Ok?”

“I’ve been better,” I grit out. “But I’ll survive.” I look pointedly at Salvatore as I say this.

He huffs. “Why are you looking at me like that?” he asks. “I’m the one who was personally insulted. Cecilia wasn’t doing her duty as my wife, and then she ran off to him!” He points at me. “I want this man fired. Now.”

Giulia stands up. “Hold on. Let’s not get too hasty. What do you mean Cecilia wasn’t doing her duty as your wife? Need I remind you, Mr. Fontana—”

“Salvatore,” he spits out.

“That,” Giulia continues, “Cecilia is not your wife yet. So, how could she perform her wifely duties?”

“I’d like to know that, too,” Antonio says, crossing his arms.

Salvatore turns to Cecilia with a smirk on his face. “Shall I tell them or you?”

Cecilia frowns. “Tell them what? That you tried to kiss me without my consent?”

“What?” Giulia asks as Antonio stiffens.

“No,” Salvatore grits out. “About how you assaulted me. She kicked me. I’m an older man. I fell when she kicked me. I could have been seriously wounded.”

“Like you seriously wounded Theo?” Cecilia snaps back.

“Cecilia,” I say softly to her. “Be careful.”

Salvatore huffs. “Yes, do be careful. That’s my wife you’re talking to. She shouldn’t have been alone with you. That never should have happened.”

“Theo is our guard,” Giulia explains.” Cecilia is safe with him.”

“I want him fired,” Salvatore spits out.

“Why?” Antonio asks.

“Because ... because,” he stammers. “I think your guard has feelings for my wife that should not be allowed.”

Antonio turns to me. “Is this true, Theo?”

To protect Cecilia I have to deny my feelings for her, even if it feels like my heart is getting punched. “It’s strictly professional, Antonio. You know this.” Cecilia and I talked on the way over, and I told her I’d probably have to act like I

don't care for her, at least until we can find a way to be together.

He looks at his sister. "Cecilia?"

"Theo is just our guard, Antonio. You know this. The problem isn't Theo. It's him." She points at Salvatore. "He tried to force himself on me. Why is no one talking about that?"

"You attacked me," Salvatore replies. "That's the truth. It was all unprovoked. Giulia can attest. She came into the room and found me on the floor in pain with Cecilia was gone. Wasn't that right, Giulia?"

Giulia's mouth drops open slightly as everyone turns to look at her. I can see Cecilia pleading with her eyes to get her mom to tell the truth. Giulia sighs. "I ... I wasn't in the room. I didn't see what happened."

Cecilia lets out a fast breath. "Mom ... you believe me, don't you?"

A look passes between them—something I don't quite understand.

"Of course, I believe you, honey," Giulia says. "But ... Salvatore was on the ground when I came into the room. He's not lying about someone hurting him."

"Someone being your daughter," Salvatore says. "She kicked me. Attacked me."

"So, why do you want Theo fired if Cecilia hurt you?" Antonio asks.

Salvatore's eyes are blazing. "Because she hurt me to ran off to be with him." He gives me a disgusted sneer. "That is uncalled for. You need to fire your guard. And I suggest we move up the wedding. Cecilia has proven she can't be trusted. She needs a husband to rein her in."

"No," Cecilia practically shouts. "Please, Antonio. That's what I wanted to talk to you about. I don't want to marry him. Please don't make me."

Antonio doesn't look at her as he keeps his eyes trained on Salvatore. "You're not the one in charge here, Cecilia," he reminds her. "I am. And ... I need this wedding to take place."

"No." Cecilia buckles forward, almost like she's been hit, while Salvatore smiles smugly.

"This wedding is happening," Antonio announces.

"Reconsider," I say before I can stop myself.

Antonio whirls to face me. "What did you say?"

I'm in it now. Everyone turns to me. Cecilia looks hopeful, Giulia looks resigned, Antonio looks angry, and Salvatore looks smug. "Reconsider. Your sister is begging you to not force her to marry a man she doesn't want to marry. I've seen you two since you were kids, always playing together, laughing together. Why are you doing this to her?"

Antonio's eyes widen, like he's taken aback until his eyes narrow. "Theo, you are overstepping. I can have you fired for that."

"No," Giulia cuts in. "He's my guard. I'm the one who hired him. I'm the only one who gets to fire him, and I don't want Theo gone. He's the best guard this family has ever had. So, no Antonio, you will not threaten to fire him."

Antonio stares at his mom for a silent moment before nodding. "Fine."

Salvatore's smile disappears. "Wait. What?"

"Theo won't be fired," Antonio announces. "But this wedding is still happening. I don't know what went on here. It's a he said/she said situation. That's all." He doesn't look at Cecilia as he leaves the room.

"Why don't you believe me?" she calls out after her brother. "It's me, Antonio. It's Cecilia."

Antonio's back tenses as he walks away. The door slams shut behind him.

"Well, that was entertaining," Salvatore says, slowly clapping his hands. "Cecilia, you are my wife. You will do as I

say.”

“We’re not married yet,” she snaps back. “I won’t do anything until we’re married.”

Salvatore sniffs as he walks by, pausing right next to me. “Watch your back,” he says so only I can hear. “If I catch you alone with my wife again, there will be problems.”

I glare at Salvatore as he leaves.

Once he’s gone, the room doesn’t feel any lighter. It only feels heavier from the weight he left behind.

CHAPTER 10

Cecilia

Theo and I have to pretend we didn't kiss.
And it's hard.

All I want is to feel his arms wrapped around me again, but I know that's impossible. We may have had a breakthrough between us, but that didn't change anything. I still have to marry Salvatore, and we're still not allowed to be together.

I can't stop thinking about the confrontation with Salvatore and my brother. My mom said she believed me when it came to Salvatore, but she didn't exactly stand up for me as I'd hoped.

I find her in her room later that night. The twins are asleep, so I don't need to worry about them getting in the way. She's flipping through a magazine as I enter.

"Mom? Can we talk?"

She sets the magazine down and pats her bed. "Of course. Now that half of you are out of the house, I have more time for conversations."

I sit down beside her. "Why didn't you stand up for me against Salvatore?" She blinks, clearly surprised, but before she can answer, I continue to talk. "You told me what Uncle Franco did to you. You know what it's like to be forced into—"

She holds up her hand, cutting me off. "That's enough. I don't need a recap of what I went through."

"Sorry."

Mom sighs and looks at me straight on. “Listen, Cecilia. I believe you. I do. I know your version of what happened is the accurate one. I know you hurt Salvatore because he was trying to kiss you. And I don’t blame you. I really don’t. Trust me. There were so many times I wished I could hurt Franco.” Her voice drops to a whisper. “There were even times I thought about killing him.”

I gasp. “Mom. I ...”

“I know. That doesn’t sound like me, does it? But it’s the truth. I thought about killing him or having him killed. I was close once.” She gazed off into the distance. “He was beside me in bed.” Her nose curls up into a sneer. “He was snoring. He had just ... Well, you know. I was lying there, exhausted. Tired. It was soon after the twins were born. He didn’t even give me the chance to let my body heal before he ...” She shakes her head. “Anyway. I was so angry. He was entitled when it came to me. He thought he owned me. And in a sad way, he did. I didn’t have the power to stop him politically. He had too many allies in the city.

“But,” she continues, “for just a moment, I knew I had the power to kill him. I had this butterfly clip in my drawer my mom gave me.” She reaches into her drawer and pulls it out, handing it to me. “I knew I could use the pointy tip”—she taps the end of it where the butterfly’s antennae are— “and use it against him. I could put it right in his ear as he slept, and that would be that.”

I clutch the butterfly clip tighter. “So, why didn’t you?”

She sighs, grabbing the clip back from me and putting it away. “Because I knew the fallout would be worse. If Franco was dead, there was no one to protect our family. Antonio was still a kid at the time. He couldn’t take over yet. Who knew what could befall this family if Franco was gone? I was worried men would come into our home and not just hurt me but hurt you.” She cups my cheek. “Hurt all my children. I couldn’t stand the thought. The devil you know. Franco was what I knew. And I was too scared to learn what monster would take his place once he was gone.”

“But now that Antonio is the boss, things should be better for our family, right? So, why is he insisting on this marriage when he knows it’s hurting me?”

“Antonio spent five years trying to get back to us and save us from Franco. I think he’s worried that if he doesn’t do all he can to stay in power, another Franco will rise up and hurt us as a family again.”

I slump against the headboard. “Which means he’s using me as collateral damage to save the rest of us.”

“I think that might be. It’s not right. And trust me, Cecilia, when I was standing in that living room looking at Salvatore’s smug face, all I could think was that I wanted to protect you from that. I worked so hard to protect you from that. But it was futile. Men like Salvatore win.”

“Franco didn’t. Antonio did.”

Mom’s smile is sad. “Antonio did win eventually. But Franco had eleven years of winning. Men like that don’t go down easy. I hate that Antonio is putting you through this for the sake of the business, but he is, and you have to make the most out of it. Provoking Salvatore isn’t going to help. It’s only going to make things worse.”

“Things are already worse,” I mutter, crossing my arms. “I’m marrying a man I hate and the man I—” I stop, but it’s too late. Mom heard me. I can tell by her expression—part surprise and part disappointment,

“So, this is still about Theo.”

I look away from her. “It’s not about Theo. Theo and I are ...” What? We kissed a few times. That’s it. He was also willing to kill Salvatore for me. That’s a man who cares for me deeply, and I the same for him.

“Theo and I are nothing,” I finally say. “And we never will be.” That’s the sad reality.

“I don’t like it. But I can’t fault you for wanting happiness in your life. So, please, Cecilia, be careful with Theo. Salvatore is ready to kill him. I saw the hatred on his face when he looked at Theo.”

“He did already try to kill him. Salvatore sent those men after Theo; I know it.”

She grips my hands. “Then all the more reason to be careful. I know this isn’t the life you wanted. But your older siblings have done their duty to this family, and now, it’s your turn.”

I leave after that. Mom means well, but what she said to me is heartbreaking. I can’t be with the man I love because I have to play by the rules of more powerful men. Because those men get to have what *they* want. It’s disgusting and sickening, is what it is.

I run into Luca in the hallway, which draws me out of my stupor. “Oh. What are you doing up?”

“I was thirsty,” he says, scratching his messy hair. “What are you doing up?”

“I was talking to Mom.”

He shrugs. “Cool.”

Before he heads back into his room, I stop him. “Hey, Luca. How have you been? About ... Franco? I know you were struggling. I’ve been caught up in my own thing, and I haven’t asked in a while.”

His expression darkens for a moment. “I miss him. But I do think things have been happier around here since he died. Mom is happier. So, that’s good, I guess.”

“Yeah, that is,” I say softly. “Just remember Mom is here for you. Be nicer to her. Stop getting into so much trouble.”

“I’ll try.” He goes back into his room before I can say anything more.

I sneak into Lucia’s room next door to see her sound asleep. The twins have no idea who their real father is, and if Mom has her way, they’ll never find out. If my life I crazy now, I wonder what it’ll be like for them when they’re older. Who will they have to marry to do their duty to this family? Will they ever find out they’re the product of rape?

I hurry into my room as the tears come and cry myself to sleep.

THE NEXT MORNING when I come down for breakfast, I see Theo at his usual post. “Shouldn’t you be resting?” I ask. Mom is busy making eggs benedict, and she doesn’t notice me talking to Theo. Mia and the twins are still asleep.

“This is my job. Where I’m meant to be.” He lowers his voice even more as he says, “And besides, I didn’t want to go too long without seeing you.”

I blush. “I wanted to see you, too.”

We smile at each other like two dorky teenagers in love. It’s not until my mom clears her throat behind me that I back away from Theo. When I turn to her, I notice her disapproving look. She sets the food on the table with more gusto than usual. “Breakfast is ready.”

I resist the urge to give Theo another look as I take my seat. When the twins sit down at the table, I can tell Luca is trying his hardest to not cause chaos like he usually does. That’s progress.

We eat in silence.

Once we’re done, I offer to do the dishes.

“How come?” Mom asks, already taking plates to the sink.

“Because you could use a break,” I tell her. Because I really just want to see Theo alone.

She looks between Theo and me. “Cecilia,” she warns.

“Nothing. I just want to do the dishes. It will help take my mind off Salvatore.”

She sighs and finally nods. “All right. It would be nice to sit down for a little while. Don’t take too long.” She heads into the living room while the twins run upstairs and Mia remains seated on her phone.

“Mia.” She doesn’t look up. “Mia,” I say louder.

“What?” she mutters, eyes still on her phone.

“I’m going to do the dishes.”

She shrugs. “So?”

My eyes land on Theo, and I can tell he’s trying hard to suppress a smile. “So, can you leave?”

“Why? You’re just doing dishes,” she responds. “I’m on my phone. I’m not bothering anyone.”

“Didn’t you have a driver’s test to study for?” Theo asks, making Mia finally look up. “I just remember you talking about studying for it.”

Mia rolls her eyes. “Yeah. You’re right. I do. But who drives in New York anyway?” she grumbles to herself as she leaves the room.

“Thank you,” I mouth to Theo.

“No problem,” he mouths back with a wink. I have to keep myself from squealing with excitement like an idiot.

The only problem with my plan to get Theo alone is that I now have to do the dishes.

As I work on them, I feel Theo’s hands graze my hips, startling me so much that I drop a plate in the sink, and it cracks. “Shoot.”

“Sorry,” Theo says, his lips close to my ear. “I just needed to touch you again.”

I gasp and go still. Is this really happening? This is happening. Everything I had ever dreamed of is about to come true. Theo is flirting with me. Theo is touching me. It’s almost overwhelming.

I turn around slowly to face him. “You wanted to touch me?”

“I did.” He smiles slightly. “You don’t know how long I’ve wanted to touch you. For an entire year, I had to hold myself back.”

“A year? Talk about nine years for me.”

He chuckles as he leans in and kisses me. I kiss him back, my soapy hands gripping his shirt. Theo doesn't seem to care. He only kisses me harder while he presses me against the counter. I keep the water running in the sink, so my mom doesn't think it's weird when everything goes silent.

Theo's lips are dominant on mine. Firm but gentle. Sweet but passionate. It's making my head spin.

I slide my hands around his neck as he tugs me closer to him. Before I know it, he picks me up and sets me on the counter. "Theo?" I whisper.

"You're okay."

"Should we be doing this with my mom in the other room?"

A dark twinkle enters his eye. "No. We shouldn't be. But I'm beyond caring." He kisses me deeply, and I'm lost to it. Everything starts to slip around me. It's just Theo and me.

He slides his hands to my waist and squeezes, making an intense arousal fill me. I've never really felt that before except when I would think about Theo alone in my bed. I never tried to touch myself because I was taught masturbation was a sin, but I contemplated it so many times.

But now, I'm getting the real thing. Theo touching me.

My legs part as if on instinct, and he settles between them. Our kiss becomes more frantic and desperate. This is years in the making for me and months for Theo. Neither of us is stopping now.

Theo slowly brings his hips forward, rocking them against mine and making me gasp against his lips. His pant buckle presses against my most intimate area, and the sensation of pleasure is like nothing I could have even dreamed of.

I know it's wrong. I know it's sinful.

But I don't care.

I rock my hips back to meet his. Theo growls low in his throat as he kisses me harder. His hands roam up and down my

body. I'm lightheaded. I'm on fire. I'm alive for the first time ever.

"Theo," I gasp as he kisses down my throat. It's hot and sexy and everything else combined. I grip the back of his hair. He kisses back up to my lips and consumes my mouth like he's a man dying of thirst in the desert.

He rocks his hips faster against mine. Every motion makes his buckle press harder against that secretive, sensitive spot I never allowed myself to touch, but I always knew was there.

A sensation builds in my lower body. I've never felt it before. But I can tell right away how addictive it is.

"Cecilia," he groans against my ear, and that does it.

I grasp Theo to me tightly as the sensation within me bursts and release washes over me. Theo watches me with surprise before he grins and kisses me again. I tremble as he holds me.

"What was that?" I whisper.

"That, Cecilia, was an orgasm."

I still can't believe it.

I also can't believe it when I hear the front door open and Antonio announces himself.

I push Theo away and jump off the counter, but my legs wobble, and Theo has to help me stay standing. "What's Antonio doing here?" I ask as Antonio walks into the kitchen with Mom on his heels.

Theo, with a confidence and ease I can only dream of, walks away from me like nothing even happened. I turn away from my brother and mom and shut the water off.

Mom walks over to me. "The dishes aren't even done," she comments. "And one of them is cracked." She picks the plate out of the sink. "What happened?"

"It slipped," I say lamely.

"Dishes don't matter," Antonio says. "I have important news. Salvatore wants to bump the wedding date up."

“What?” I almost scream. Forcing myself to take a deep breath, I lower my voice. “What? But the wedding isn’t for another month.”

“There’s still a lot of planning to do,” Mom says.

“I know,” Antonio replies, leaning against the table. “But he insisted. He wants the wedding to take place within two weeks.”

This time, my knees do buckle under me. Theo catches me before I hit the ground. He lets me go the moment I’m upright.

“What?” I stare at Antonio in shock. “Two weeks? No!”

“I know it’s fast,” he says, “but—”

“No,” I interrupt him. “No. What’s fast is a car going above the speed limit. What’s fast is a cheetah. This new timeline isn’t just fast. It’s impossible. There’s too much to do. You have to tell him to put it back to the original date.”

“My hands are tied,” he says. “I need Salvatore as an ally, and if this is what needs to be done to keep him as an ally, then so be it.”

“No.”

“Cecilia,” he warns.

I don’t care. “No,” I repeat myself. “You are my brother. Not my boss. You are not going to force me into this wedding. I refuse to. I’m not doing it.”

The sudden look of anger that crosses Antonio’s face is something I’ve only seen directed at Franco. He rushes over to me. Theo tenses but doesn’t interfere.

“No?” Antonio asks in a low voice. “You don’t get to disobey me, Cecilia. You may be my sister, but you are doing this for the good of our family.”

I touch his cheek, and he jerks back, surprised. “Antonio, I know you fought hard for this family. You fought hard for years. I know you’re just scared of something bad happening to all of us again. But you are doing something bad to me now. If you force me to marry Salvatore, I will resent you forever.”

He flinches. “I will never see you again. You will no longer be my brother. You will no longer be the person who kept me safe when we were young. You’ll be an enemy in my eyes. Do you understand that? Because you need to know that just because you are boss, you don’t get to boss others around. There are consequences for your actions. Are you willing to lose me to gain the respect of your men?”

Antonio stares at me long and hard before he speaks. “If it means making sure my wife is safe from anyone who could do her harm, then yes. I’m willing to risk that.”

I jerk back. “So, that’s it, huh? Your wife verses your sister. I get it. I do. But you just threw twenty-one years of friendship down the drain. You’re not my friend, and you’re most *certainly* not my brother.”

Antonio’s eyes harden before he turns away from me. “The wedding will be in two weeks. Make sure everything is finished and ready to go by then.” He walks away.

Lucky for him. He gets to walk away from the mess he’s made of my life while I have to live it.

CHAPTER 11

Cecilia

Sitting in church, listening to Father Enzo go on and on about sin and hell makes shift in my seat. Theo gave me my first orgasm yesterday, and I haven't been able to stop thinking about it. If Father Enzo knew, he'd surely say I belonged in hell. I'm supposed to wait for marriage. I was always all right with that idea. But now that Salvatore will be the first man I sleep with, it feels like punishment. I should be able to enjoy my body before I'm forced to wed an old man.

I want Theo to make me feel like that again. I need him to touch me like that again. My skin itches for how badly I want it. He woke something up in me, and now, I'm not sure I can put it away.

"Cecilia," Mom murmurs, tapping my leg. It's only then I realize I've been bouncing it. She nods toward Father Enzo, who's still talking about sin and hell. "Focus."

It's hard, especially with Theo sitting in the pew behind me. I glance over my shoulder at him. He's watching the sermon. How he can look so calm and collected after what we did yesterday is a mystery to me. I feel like a complete mess. I guess it's because Theo has had more practice at relationships than I have, which makes me feel slightly jealous. Even though I have no reason to. He's made it clear he likes me. It's just that all of this is so new to me.

His eyes flick to mine, and a little smile passes his lips before he slips his stoic expression back into place. He nods toward my mom, and I turn back in my seat before she can catch me ogling Theo.

“Adultery,” Father Enzo says, his voice ringing out loud and clear. I snap to attention. “Adultery is one of the worsts sins a person can commit.” He looks out at the crowd, but I swear, it’s like he’s looking right at me. I guess I’ve committed adultery in my own way. I don’t want to belong to Salvatore, but I technically do because my heart belongs with Theo.

Sweat begins to bead across my body as Father Enzo continues his sermon, condemning adultery and everyone who practices it.

It feels like it takes forever for his sermon to end, and once he’s done, everyone in the church scatters. Mom turns to me. “Cecilia, are you all right? You look hot.” She touches my head before I can move away. “You’re a little warm. Are you okay?” Am I okay? Of course not. All I want is to be with Theo, which is new and intimidating and thrilling, all while dealing with Catholic guilt and being forced to marry Salvatore. I am most definitely not okay.

“I’m fine,” I squeak out. “Ready to go?” I can’t stand the sight of Jesus staring down at me from the cross with judgment in his eyes.

She frowns. “Don’t you want to make confession with Father Enzo? You do it every week.”

“Uh ... I’m good.” The reality is, I have a lot to confess to. Kissing Theo. Touching Theo. Having an orgasm because of Theo. But I’m so happy with him; I don’t want Father Enzo to ruin it for me.

Mom looks like she wants to say more but doesn’t. “All right. We can head home.”

Mia jumps up, already on her phone. “Thank God. I don’t like being here a second longer.”

“Mia,” Mom scolds, but Mia ignores her. The twins are being good for once. Luca isn’t causing chaos; instead, he’s sitting in the pew like a good kid. I guess he took my words to heart about being nicer when it comes to Mom. There’s hope for him yet.

As we walk down the aisle toward the church doors, I hear something behind me. A woman speaking. “Sorry. I didn’t see you there.” I glance back to see a woman—probably in her thirties—next to Theo. She’s gazing up at him as if he’s the most handsome man she’s ever seen. I can’t blame her for the that, but the blaze of jealousy that passes through me cannot be ignored.

“It’s all right,” Theo says. He catches my eye and starts to walk toward me when the woman grabs his arm.

“Actually,” she says, “I couldn’t help but notice you were sitting by yourself.” She’s pretty, I’ll give her that. It makes me hate her more.

Theo gives her a gentle smile that twists my heart in two. “I was, but I’m on duty. I’m with other people.”

“Oh?” She tilts her head to the side. “That’s interesting. I’m Diana.” She holds out her hand to him.

“Uh, Theo.” He shakes it. “But I really have to be going.”

“Okay. Uh, here’s my number.” She grabs a pen out of her purse and writes on Theo’s hand. The audacity. “Call me anytime.”

Theo doesn’t reply except to give her another smile as he catches up to me. I’ve been standing in the aisle looking like a weirdo, I’m sure. Not moving, just staring.

“Diana?” I ask once he reaches my side.

“It’s nothing. I didn’t ask her to do that.”

I nod before walking ahead of him. “That was nice of her.”

Mom looks back at me as she reaches the doors. “Cecilia, hurry up.”

“Have a nice time with Diana,” I tell Theo. He sighs but doesn’t say anything. I know it’s petty of me. I know he didn’t do anything wrong. I’m not mad at Theo. It just makes me insecure knowing a woman closer in age to him is interested in him. He shouldn’t be fighting so much for me when we can’t even be together. His life would be so much easier if it weren’t

for me. It's because of me that Salvatore sent men to attack him. I don't want Theo getting hurt or getting into trouble.

The car ride is silent until we reach our house. The twins run out of the car like their butts are on fire, with Mia following them. Mom gets out and turns to me. "Cecilia? Come on."

I don't want to leave. Instead, I want to talk to Theo alone, but something about my mom's expression tells me she won't have that. So, I have no choice but to head back inside, Theo right behind me. Always right behind me, and I can't even reach back out and touch his hand.

When I get inside, Mom heads straight into the kitchen while the twins and Mia head upstairs, leaving Theo and me alone.

We immediately turn to each other, and Theo has me in his arms before I can even blink. "I've been wanting to do this all day," he says right before kissing me. I sink into his arms, feeling the strength of them, the weight of them around me. I've never felt safer than this moment.

"Oh, Theo," I sigh as he kisses down my neck. We're playing with fire with my mom in the other room, but I don't care. "I need to feel you. I want to feel how you made you feel yesterday."

"God, Cecilia," he growls against my ear. "You have to be quiet. We don't want your mom coming in here."

"I will be."

Spinning me around, he pins me against the wall. I gasp as he kisses me. His hands move up and down my body, squeezing and touching, I melt into him.

The arousal between my legs is like a waterfall. I've never been so aroused.

"Why didn't you talk to the priest?" he asks, kissing along my jaw. "You always go to confession."

"Because I didn't want to confess to what I'm feeling."

“And what’s that?” He presses his head against mine, his eyes locked with mine.

“That I want you again. That I want you forever. I didn’t want him to make me feel bad about something I shouldn’t feel bad for.”

He kisses me with so much passion I can barely breathe. “You don’t need to feel bad. Not at all. You said you want me to make you feel good again?”

“Yes,” I gasp as he presses his body against mine.

“Cecilia,” he murmurs into my ear as he brings his hands down to my waist. But he doesn’t stop there. Theo continues to trace his fingers down, down, down, until he touches my thigh. I shiver at the contact. Then he moves his fingers a few inches, and he’s right ... there.

He presses his fingers against my underwear, right on top of my most intimate area. Then he pushes my dress up higher as he grinds his hand against me. Every movement of his hand hits that perfect, pleasurable spot just right.

Theo stares intently into my eyes, which only makes me feel more on fire.

I can’t believe I’m letting him touch me like this. We’re not married. We’re not even supposed to be looking at each other. But it’s Theo. The man I love. None of this can be wrong.

I bring my leg up around his waist on instinct as he begins to rub his thumb against me. My underwear is sticking to my skin. I drop my head back and close my eyes, letting Theo’s touch wash over me.

How have I waited so long to feel this? If just this simple touch alights my body, I wonder what it would be like to be with Theo, alone and naked together. Having sex. The thought makes me flush.

“Theo,” I whisper. His fingers are relentless as they pleasure me, and he’s not even touching my actual skin. The fabric of my underwear is soft against my body. The combination of it and Theo’s fingers makes me lightheaded.

“I know,” he growls back. “You need to feel it again. So, come for me.”

My hands slap against the wall to steady myself. The sensation in my core is growing. It’s thrilling, knowing anyone could walk in on us at any moment. I don’t care. It’s just Theo and me. Theo and me. This is who I should be married to. The man I want to spend the rest of my life with.

Between that realization and Theo’s fingers on me, the sensation inside me reaches its climax, and I topple over.

I clutch Theo’s shoulders as he holds me. I want to cry out his name as my orgasm washes over me, but I keep my lips shut. Theo kisses me, helping me stay quiet.

My legs tremble as Theo helps me lower the one around his waist. I almost stumble, but he catches me, holding me close to him.

“Theo ...” I rest my head on his chest. His heartbeat is erratic under my ear.

“Cecilia,” he murmurs, kissing the top of my head.

“I don’t want you to let me go,” I whisper.

He tightens his arms around me. “I’m not going to let you go.”

“But what about Salvatore?”

“Don’t mention him. Not at a moment like this. It’s just you and me.”

“You and me,” I agree.

I could stay in this moment with Theo forever, but then the doorbell rings. There are only so many people it could be, and not many of those options are good ones.

Theo pulls away from me with a groan. “I have to answer it, or you mom might come in here.”

He’s right, even though my body aches for more.

I can tell exactly who it is from his expression the moment Theo answers the door. Disgust. Salvatore.

“Bodyguard,” Salvatore says as an insult as he barges into my house. He stops when he sees me. “Cecilia. I wasn’t expecting you to be down.”

“Well, I am.” I cross my arms and glare at him. If he and are to getting married, I’m going to make it very clear how much I hate him.

Salvatore looks between Theo and me. “Didn’t I say you two weren’t supposed to be alone together?”

“This is my house, Mr. Fontana,” I snap.

“Salvatore,” he grits out.

“Okay. Theo is my bodyguard. We’re going to be around each other. It’s the way of it. If that bothers you, then call off the wedding. We don’t have to get married.”

He huffs, walking over to me. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Theo tense. “You would like that, wouldn’t you?” Salvatore says. “What? So, you can run off with your bodyguard? How cliché.”

“No. I don’t want to marry you because *I* don’t want to marry you.”

Salvatore sneers. “You better be a virgin on our wedding night.” I gasp. “Or there will be problems.” He turns to Theo. “And you. You keep your hands off my wife.”

“Not your wife,” Theo says, somehow managing to look calm. I want nothing more than to hit Salvatore, and I’m not a violent person.

“Cecilia and I will be married in two weeks. You don’t stand a chance. And if I find out you’ve touched her, you won’t like the outcome.”

Theo stands to his full height, towering over Salvatore. “And if you threaten me again, you won’t like the outcome.”

Salvatore doesn’t back down. He only huffs, glaring at Theo. A moment later, he stalks out of the house. Theo shuts the door with a little bit more force than usual.

“I hate him,” I say.

Theo wraps me in my arms again. “We’ll find a way out of this.”

“How? If you kill him, there will be consequences. If we run away together, there will be consequences. How did we get out of this without causing more trouble in the long run?”

“I’m not sure,” Theo replies. “But we’ll figure it out.”

“Soon. Because I have a cake tasting tomorrow for my wedding. And I really don’t want to go. I just want to be with you, Theo.”

“And I just want to be with you.”

I rest my head over Theo’s heart and pray we’ll make it through.

“WHAT ABOUT THIS ONE?” Mom asks, taking a bite of a red velvet cake. I do the same.

“It’s good.” I set my fork down. Normally, I’d love to have an excuse to eat cake, but I’m not in the mood. Choosing a cake for my wedding with Salvatore is the last thing I want. I almost want to be petty and choose a really gross cake just to upset Salvatore.

“Just good?” Mom huffs. “Well, I think this cake is better than just good.”

Theo is standing cross from our table, doing his normal duty. I wish I was choosing a cake for our wedding.

Making eye contact with him, I scoop up more cake and take a bite, making a point of licking the fork. His eyes darken as he shifts on his feet. I’m not sure where this bold temptress came from, but she’s here. I’m tired of playing by everyone else’s rules. I just want to be with Theo.

I just want to be happy.

I take another bite and shut my eyes. After I open them and look at Theo, I can tell he’s affected by it. I saw the look in his eyes when he kissed me before. That look is there again, just ten times fold.

I want him to grab me and kiss me right on top of all of this cake, but I know that will never happen.

“Cecilia?” Mom’s voice makes me jump. I almost forgot she was here. “Why are you looking like that?”

I set my fork down. “Like what?”

She looks over her shoulder at Theo, then turns back to me, a disappointed frown on her face. “Be careful.”

“What?” I open my eyes to be as innocent as possible.

“You know what.”

I pick at a lemon cream cake. “Mom, I’m not doing anything, ok?”

She shakes her head but doesn’t make any more comments.

Once we’re done with the tasting—red velvet it is—we head back to the car. After Mom gets in, Theo grabs my arm before I can slip into the car and murmurs into my ear, “I need you, Cecilia. That little teasing game didn’t go unnoticed. I’m tired of touching you where I can’t *really* touch you. Come over to my house tonight.”

I gasp. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. Say you’re going to church to confess because you didn’t before. I’ll take you to my apartment instead.”

“Yes.”

He lets me go, giving me a smoldering look before walking to the driver’s seat. I slip into the backseat with my mom.

“What did you and Theo talk about?” she asks, trying to sound casual and failing.

“I was just telling him I want to go back to church today.” My body is sweating. Can she notice?

“Church? We just went yesterday.”

“I know. But I didn’t confess anything to Father Enzo. But now I have something to confess, so Theo’s going to take me.

That's okay, right?" I grab my cross, rubbing it hard between my fingers.

Mom sighs. "I guess. I would never stop someone from going to church. Just ... be careful, Cecilia. Don't do anything you'll regret."

That's the thing. I could never regret being with Theo.

Salvatore said I had to be a virgin on my wedding night. I'm starting to think that might not happen.

And I don't even care.

Let him judge me. Let everyone judge me.

I'm getting my chance to be with Theo, and I'm taking it.

CHAPTER 12

Cecilia

After Theo drops my mom off at home, he takes me to church—a.k.a., his apartment. I'm practically bouncing for joy that I finally get to see where Theo lives. I've always imagined it. a cute little New York apartment. Maybe industrial. Maybe it's decorated in all black. Theo looks like a man who loves the color black. Maybe, maybe, maybe ... So many maybes. But now I'm getting the chance to actually see it for myself, and that maybe is going to become reality.

Theo reaches over and squeezes my knee on the drive. It's like we're a real-life couple. Just a typical boyfriend taking his girlfriend to his apartment.

"Theo," I say, placing my hand on his, "what are we exactly?"

"What do you mean?"

I try to keep myself from blushing. I feel like a little girl asking this, but I need to know. "Are we boyfriend and girlfriend? Is that what you would call us?"

"Do you want to be my girlfriend?"

"I asked you first."

He tosses me an easy smile. His smiles feel so special to me because he rarely does it. "Yeah, I'd be happy for you to be my girlfriend."

"Then I want that, too," I blurt out.

"Why didn't you tell me that?"

I stare out the window as I reply, “Because ... you have a lot more experience than I do. I’ve never done this. I didn’t want to sound dumb.”

“Hey, Cecilia, look at me.” I do. “You’re not dumb, ok? It’s not stupid to talk about these things. In fact, if there’s one thing I’ve learned about relationships, it’s that you need to talk about these things. What we have may be unconventional, but I know it’s right. And I know I want to be with you, no matter what. So, yeah, we’re boyfriend and girlfriend. You can talk to me about anything. Ok?”

“Ok.” I lean over and kiss his cheek.

“What was that for?” The smile in his voice warms my heart.

“For being you. There’s a reason I liked you for so long. I could sense what a good person you are.”

“I hope I live up to your standards.”

“And more.”

We’re silent the rest of the drive, content just to be with each other. No talk about my impending marriage or Salvatore or Antonio. Just us, on a drive to Theo’s apartment. Like a normal boyfriend and girlfriend.

Theo pulls into a parking garage below a skyscraper. “Here we are.” He leads me upstairs to his apartment, which turns out to be ultra-sleek and modern. Not exactly what I’d expected for Theo.

He catches my look. “You don’t approve?”

“No, I do. I was just expecting something more ...”

“Grungy? Cabin-like? What?”

I laugh, shaking my head. “No, it’s perfect. Despite knowing you for years, you still surprise me.”

“Well, your mom pays me a good salary. I can afford a nice apartment like this.” He kisses me. “Now, enough talk. You were teasing me at the cake tasting today. It’s time to pay up.”

“Oh, is it? I thought I was supposed to be confessing to my sins.”

“That, too.” He nips at my lips. “What do you have to confess, Cecilia?” He walks me to his couch and lays me down on it. I don’t put a fight. This is exactly where I want to be.

“I have to confess ...” I trail off as he takes off my shoes in such a sensual way, I shiver.

“Yes?” He roams his hands up my fingers until his fingers reach the ends of my dress. I remember how good it felt to have his fingers on me on top of my underwear. I wonder how good it will feel below it, skin to skin.

“I have to confess I like you,” I whisper as his fingers reach under my dress and tickle the skin of my thighs.

“Is that all?” He reaches my panties. My arousal is already strong, and I clench my legs together to find some kind of friction.

“I have to confess I can’t stop thinking about you.”

“Good.” He reaches under the waistband of my panties and slowly starts to peel them off. “Is this ok?”

“Yes,” I gasp out.

“Anything else to confess? You’re a good Catholic girl and I’m taking your panties off right now.” He rips them down my legs and tosses them to the ground. I drop my head back and slightly part my legs. This is so visceral. So real. My core is throbbing. I’m in desperate need of Theo’s touch. “I think there’s more you need to confess to.”

“There is.” I shift my hips around. “I like how you touch me.”

“Yeah?” His fingers hover over my most sensitive area. So close and yet just out of reach. “What’s your favorite thing about me touching you?”

“How good you make me feel. I’ve never felt it before. You make me feel seen.”

“Then let me make you feel seen.”

He finally touches me, and I almost explode. Theo’s fingers glide across my folds toward that perfect, little nub that brings all the pleasure. I gasp, my hips bucking up involuntarily. Theo chuckles as he continues to touch me with his hand. Skin to skin, finally.

“Anything else?” He rubs his thumb around my nub. The throbbing within my core grows stronger until it’s almost unbearable. Theo pushes up my skirt, so it bunches around my waist. He’s staring at my lower naked body, and I don’t feel any shame. I thought maybe I would but with Theo, there’s never anything wrong.

It’s only ever right.

“Um ...” It’s hard to think with him touching me. He rubs me with a firmer finger. “I have to confess that ...”

“Tell me,” he growls, pressing his thumb harder against me. I gasp as my hips buck again.

“I need to confess I love ... this.” I stretch out on the couch as he pleasures me with his fingers.

“What’s this?”

“This.” I nod toward his hand. “I love having an orgasm.”

He chuckles. “Who doesn’t?” He increases his speed and rubs me faster. I don’t even think I’m breathing.

“I was raised to feel shame over this,” I say, my voice breathy. “But you don’t make it shameful.”

His eyes flash as they meet mine. “I’m glad.” He leans over me slightly, pressing on my nub harder. “Then let me show you something else.” He continues touching my clit with his thumb as he reaches his index finger toward my opening. My arousal reaches its peak.

With his eyes locked with mine, he inserts his finger into me. There’s no pain. Only pleasure.

My lips part as he begins to bring his finger in and out of me.

“Theo,” I gasp, clenching my legs around his forearm. “It’s too much.”

“No, it’s not. You can handle this.” He’s relentless in his touch, and I’m powerless to stop it.

But that’s the thing—I never want this to stop.

Soon, my breathing comes out in panting breathes. I’m not even sure how I’m alive right now.

Theo keeps his gaze on me, and it makes me feel seen. Beautiful. Loved.

With that thought in mind, I fall over the edge.

“Theo!” I cry out as my orgasm hits me. He continues to touch me as I ride it out. Once it fades away, he removes his finger from me. “Wow. That was ...”

“There’s more,” he growls, kneeling on the floor. I watch him in confusion as he grabs my hips and sits me up on the couch.

“What ...” I gasp when he grabs my hips and sets me on the edge of the couch. He flips my dress back up and parts my legs. “Theo?”

“You said you loved how I touch you. I want to make you feel so good, Cecilia. So fucking good.” Before I know it, he lowers his face between my legs ...

... and licks over my folds.

My hips really cannot stay in place with this new sensation.

Theo begins to lick and kiss all over my folds and sensitive nub. Every time his tongue swipes over it, I almost think this is it—the moment I die. Because pleasure like this is only in my dreams.

But then he licks me again, and I’m brought back to reality, and I realize that what’s happening is no dream. It’s real. Theo is pleasuring me with his mouth.

And it’s the best thing I’ve ever felt.

He looks up at me as he continues to pleasure my nub. I can feel another stirring sensation in my core. He's drawing forth another orgasm.

I want to drop my head back, but I keep my head up to meet his gaze. It's so intimate; I don't want to look away.

Theo grips my hips tighter as he increases the pressure of his tongue. Lick, lick, lick. My clit can't take anymore. It feels like it's been ravaged through a war in the best way possible. My body's on fire. Every element to my skin feels alive. I can see myself beyond my body.

It's powerful. It's pleasurable. It's love.

And I can't hold on any longer.

With one more lick to my bundle of nerves, I call out Theo's name as I come. I don't feel any regret for acting this wanton. Theo is the man I want to be with. The man I *should* be with. How can it be wrong?

After my orgasm passes and I slump onto the couch, Theo pulls away from me. The intensity in his eyes almost arouses me all over again.

"That was ..." I trail off.

"Good?"

"If I didn't already have God in my life, I would say you just helped me find him."

He laughs as he sits on the couch beside me. "I'm glad. I only ever want you to experience pleasure, Cecilia. You don't deserve to be miserable forever."

I straighten my dress out and turn to him. "Neither do you." My eyes flick down to his waist, where I can see a bulge in his pants. I know what it is. Theo is turned on. I may have grown up Catholic and sheltered, but Gemma insisted I know things, so whenever she'd come over for family dinners, she'd pull me aside and give me mini sex-education classes. One of those times, she told me about how men get erect.

I made Theo feel this way. Me. That's a powerful feeling.

“Can I ...” I nod at his waist.

His eyebrows raise. “I didn’t know you’d want to.”

“I want to. I’m curious.”

Theo’s eyes darken, causing a shiver to run up my spine. “Then let me show you. Undo my pants.”

I do, even though my fingers shake. Theo takes my hands and steadies them.

“You don’t need to be nervous,” he tells me.

With a deep breath, I unbuckle his pants and pull them down. With his help, I slip his underwear down next.

When I get my first look at his erection, I almost gasp. It’s a lot bigger than I had been expecting. But the more I look at it, the more I realize something.

“You’re beautiful,” I tell him.

Theo chuckles. “That wasn’t what I was expecting.”

“Can I touch you?”

“God, yes,” he growls.

Feeling bold, I reach over and grip his penis in my hand. Theo lets out a rough breath. Unsure of what to do next, I start moving my hand up and down.

“You can also touch the tip,” he instructs, his words sounding strained.

“Is this okay?” I do as he says and move my hand around the tip of penis. Theo sucks in a quick breath.

“More than okay.”

“I want you to like this.”

He places his hand over mine. “Trust me, Cecilia. I like this. Do what feels good to you because I’m probably going to like it either way.”

I keep my eyes locked with his as I move my hand around his erection. I stroke and squeeze. I notice that whenever I squeeze, Theo’s breath comes in at a faster pace. Soon, I’m

rubbing him with a firmer grip. I thought this would feel awkward, but the way Theo encourages me on makes me feel special.

“Cecilia, I’m going to come,” He groans, dropping his head back. “You should let go if you don’t want me to come on your hand.”

I think about it for a second, then increase the pressure of my grip on him. I’m seeing this all the way through.

With a jerk of his hips, Theo orgasms. His seed lands on my hand, but I don’t care. I’m fascinated.

Theo finishes and gently removes my hand from his erection. With a chagrined smile, he gets up, grabs a tissue, wipes himself up, then hands me a clean tissue to use for my hands.

Once we’re cleaned up, we rest on the couch together.

“What are we going to do?” I ask, my ear above his heart. It beats in a steady rhythm. “About Salvatore? About my wedding?”

Theo tenses. “My offer still stands. I can kill him for you. It’s the best option to keep him away.”

“I know. But I don’t want you to become a murderer on my account. That’s not fair.”

“Life has never been fair for me, Cecilia. I’ve stood by too many times. You don’t know this about me, but ... there was a time when I was in the academy I saw a girl get raped. Mara.” His eyes darken, but this time, it’s not from lust. He’s looking back into a dark memory. “I tried to help her. I got the assholes who were doing it to her to get off, but when I tried reporting them, nothing came of it. The guy who did it, Noah, his father was a high-ranking colonel. He wasn’t gonna get anything more than a slap on the wrist. Mara left the academy before I could do more. She made it clear she didn’t want my help. I think she just wanted to move on and forget. Her military career was ruined. Her body defiled. I desperately wanted to help her.” His voice becomes ragged.

“I really tried,” he continues. “But at the end of the day, I was only eighteen. And I was going up against men much more powerful than me. When I left the army, I thought that was that. I’d never have to put up with that kind of bullshit again. And then your mom hired me. It sounded like an easy job, you know? Just stand guard and keep this family safe. But then I saw what your uncle Franco was doing to her. I saw the bruises. I saw the intimidation.

“And,” he continues, “there was still nothing I could do. Franco was too powerful. I couldn’t take him down, even though I wanted to. That was for your brother to do. But it pained me every day to have sit back and watch it all happen and not do a damn thing about anything. Hell, I can’t even pay my mom’s bills for her because she doesn’t want me to. Cecilia, I don’t want you to ever feel powerless like I have. I won’t allow Salvatore to get his hands on you. I’ll kill him if I have to. No matter the outcome. No matter who comes after me. I’ll do it. For you.”

“Theo,” I say softly, placing my hand on his cheek. “I love that you want to protect me so much. And I want you to. I want you at my side. But I can’t stand the idea of you killing someone for me.” I take a deep breath. “I have a better idea. Why don’t we just run away? We can start planning it. My wedding isn’t for another week and a half. I know it’s not a lot of time, but—”

He kisses me, and I sink into his touch.

Once he pulls back, Theo smiles. “Let’s do it. Let’s run away. Leave all this shit behind. I have a lot of money saved up we can use. I just need to put some things in place. We need to run away without Salvatore finding out because if he does ...”

“He’ll try to stop us. He might even try to kill you again.”

“That’s a risk I’m willing to take if it means you don’t have to marry him. But, Cecilia, this means that when I take you home today, you have to act like everything is normal. You can’t let on what we’re planning.”

“I won’t. I promise.” My heart is beating so fast, I can barely hear Theo’s next words.

“I’ll get everything in order. It’ll be easier for me than for you. Not as many eyes on me.”

“You made sure Salvatore isn’t having you followed, or ...” I look toward his windows. “Watching you?”

“No, I made sure. I swept my apartment and car this morning, and when we were driving here, I didn’t see anyone tailing us. Don’t worry. I know how to be on the lookout for those things. Trust me. You just act normal. If Salvatore shows up, tell him what he wants to hear.”

I sigh. “That’s not going to be fun.”

Theo pulls me in close and kisses the top of my head. “I know. But we’re going to get out of this.”

“When we run ... my brother and Salvatore are going to be searching for us. We have to be careful.”

“I know. I’ll make sure we get away without them following us. And hopefully, once things calm down, your brother will come around. He’s a mob boss. His ego will be hurt. But you’re his sister. Even if Antonio’s angry with you, he won’t hurt you.”

“But he might hurt you.”

“If it means you’re safe from Salvatore, I’d gladly die for you, Cecilia.”

His words make me tear up.

Theo is giving me hope for the first time in months.

I just hope we can actually pull this off and make it out alive.

CHAPTER 13

Theo

I put the plan in motion.

My first step is to get fake IDs for Cecilia and me. If we're running away together, we need to make sure Antonio and Salvatore aren't hot on our heels.

Before I started working for the Moretti family, I never would have known anyone who was a part of any shady business, but I've worked for the family for the past nine years, and I've met some people along the way.

And one of those people is a man named Freddie.

He owns an electronic store that sells cheap TVs and computers. I met him a few years back when I had to pick up a computer for Franco and realized Freddie offered more than just cheap electronics.

The bell above the door jingles as I enter his tiny store. Freddie, wearing a faded, old t-shirt, looks up as I approach the counter. His stringy black hair doesn't make him look any more reputable.

"Theo?" He straightens up. "What can I do for you, man?"

I glance around the store. It's empty. "I need something from the back room."

"Yeah? Like a computer or ..."

"Like a fake ID."

Freddie whistles through his teeth. "Tall order, man. I haven't done that in a while."

“No? Something tells me that’s not true. I need two fake IDs. Don’t make me beat it out of you.”

“Ok, ok,” he says quickly. “Fine. But it will cost you.”

“I never doubted it.” I slide a picture of Cecilia over to him and one of me, too. “One for each of us. And make it quick. I want it by tomorrow.”

“No can do. It’s gonna take me at least a couple days to get it all sorted. But I can get them to you by the end of the week.”

I nod. “All right. Good enough. Make them look legit. No sloppiness, you hear.” I slide over some cash.

Freddie starts counting it. “Yeah, I hear. See you in a couple days, Theo.”

I shake my head as I leave. Getting into my car, I groan a little. I’m mostly healed from my surgery, but sometimes, the soreness returns. My escapades with Cecilia yesterday probably didn’t help.

I still can’t believe we did that. This past year when I couldn’t stop thinking about Cecilia, I never imagined I’d get to go down on her or she’d give me a hand-job, but here we are. Soon, it will just be her and me forever in each other’s arms. I know I love her. I just don’t know when to say it.

Next stop, I go to the bank and take out some money, enough to get us by for a couple of months until I can get a new job elsewhere. Private guards make good money, and they’re in high demand. It shouldn’t be hard.

But just in case, I start calling some of my old contacts about possible jobs in other states. Possibly in other countries as well. I’m not sure how far Cecilia and I will have to run to escape Salvatore’s wrath, but something tells me we’ll need to run far so he doesn’t catch us.

I go over to my mom’s house in case this is the last time I get to see her for a while. She answers the door right away.

“Theo.” She pulls me into a deep hug. “I wasn’t expecting you.”

“Yeah, I just wanted to see how you were doing.”

She shakes her head as she motions me inside. “I’m doing okay, but you already knew that. And no, you don’t get to pay my bills for me. I don’t need your help.”

“Got it, got it.” I sigh. “Mom, I love you, you know that?”

“Of course, I know that.” She frowns, eyeing me over. “You don’t normally say that. What’s going on?”

I try to laugh, but it’s strained. “Can’t a man say he loves his mom without there being an issue?”

“Is this about your job? I never agreed with you working for those people. If somethings wrong ...”

“Mom. Stop. Nothing is wrong. Just ... if I have to leave, know that I chose to leave. I wasn’t forced to. I wasn’t threatened. I wasn’t killed.”

“Theo, what are you talking about?”

I grab her arm. “Mom, this is serious. I’m moving.”

“What?” She jerks away from me. “What do you mean, you’re moving?”

“That’s all I can say. But you might not see me for quite some time. I know it’s not ideal. I know you have a ton of questions. I can see it in your eyes. But I’m just asking you to trust me on this, okay?”

“Is someone threatening you?”

“No.” Yes. Salvatore. But it’s better if she doesn’t know much. “I can’t say where I’m going. I’m not quite sure yet. But by the end of next week, I’ll be gone. Once I’m somewhere safe, I’ll call you. I need you to not do anything. Don’t call my employers. Don’t tell anyone about this. I know I’m asking for a lot.”

She huffs. “You are asking for a lot.”

“Just trust me, all right?”

She stares into my eyes, searching for something. When she seems to get it, she nods. “All right. You’ve been doing your own thing for years now. Why would I get in the way of that? Just promise me you’ll be careful.”

“Of course. I’m leaving with someone, and I would never risk them getting hurt.”

For a moment, nothing happens. Then my mom blinks, and tears start to spill down her face. I pull her into a hug. “It’ll be okay,” I tell her. “I’ll call. Don’t worry.”

“I’m not,” she says, trying to sound brave. “When you went to Afghanistan, I was terrified. But you survived. And I know you’ll do it again. I’m just going to miss you.”

“I love you.” After that, I leave. My heart is heavy, but I push the feeling aside. My mom will be fine. Cecilia won’t be. Not without my help.

And I can’t imagine my life without her.

WHEN I SHOW up for my shift at the Moretti house the following day, Antonio is there. He’s standing in the foyer, almost like he’s waiting for me.

“Theo,” he says, nodding me over.

“Yes?”

“I just want to make sure things are going well over here.”

I frown, looking around. I can hear Giulia in the kitchen. Cecilia and her other siblings must be upstairs. “Things are going well. Why wouldn’t they be?”

“Salvatore thinks there’s something going on between you and my sister. Is that true?”

“Of course not. I’m her guard. Nothing more.”

He nods. “That’s what I told him, but he seems to think there’s more. Now, I know my sister has had a crush on you. I’ve talked to her about it before, but now, with things being tense between us, she won’t even look at me anymore.”

“Can you blame her?”

Antonio freezes, his eyes hardening. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I mean,” I say, crossing my arms, “you’re marrying her to a man old enough to be her grandfather. You’re choosing money over her. Of course, she doesn’t want to talk to you.”

“I’m not choosing money over her,” Antonio hisses. Suddenly, he looks tired and leans back against the wall. His father’s pendant is around his neck, and he grabs it in one hand, similar to how Cecilia holds onto her cross. “I’m choosing safety for this family. Franco almost destroyed everything. I had to fight for five years to kill him. But I’m still fighting his legacy. I can’t risk someone else swooping in and taking over and hurting my family again. Do you think I like doing this to Cecilia? To my favorite sister? Of course not. It’s the last thing I want.”

“Then why not tell her that?”

“Because I need to be strong.” He sighs, dropping his head. “No one can see any weakness from me. Salvatore made it clear that between Cecilia and Mia, he wanted Cecilia. Lucia is too young to marry. So, it was either Cecilia or Mia who was going to be collateral damage to save the rest of our family. Unfortunately, it ended up being Cecilia. Now, it has hurt my heart every fucking day that I’m doing this to her. But it’s what’s best for this family. That’s what my father would have done. Family first over the individual.”

I look at Antonio for a moment. “Do you really believe that? About your father?”

“Don’t talk about my father like you knew him.”

I raise my hands in surrender. “All I’m going to say is you don’t have to be like your father or Franco. You can be your own leader. You can make your own rules. If you really don’t want to marry Cecilia to Salvatore, then don’t. You can always find someone else who has the money to help support your business. You’re young, Antonio. Twenty-three. Being a leader at that age is a lot to take on. You have the rest of your life to gain power.”

“Not in this business,” he says, shaking his head. “In this business, if you don’t show strength from the beginning, there’s someone waiting in the wings ready to kill you.”

“You spent the past five years looking over your shoulder. I don’t think you need to keep doing that. Let Cecilia go. Don’t make her marry Salvatore. You can call it off.”

Antonio huffs. “And what? Make an enemy of Salvatore? That won’t be good.”

“He might have more money, but you have more men. And a lot of men respect your name. That goes a long way.”

“And so does money.”

I stifle a sigh and press forward. “Antonio, I am asking you to end this arranged marriage between Cecilia and Salvatore. You think that’s what’s best for your family. I think it will only hurt your family in the long run.”

“How so?” he asks softly.

“Salvatore is already putting a wedge between you and Cecilia. This marriage will divide your family in half. How can you protect them if that’s the case?”

Antonio looks down at his feet, his blonde hair, so similar to Cecilia’s, falling into his eyes. At this moment, he looks younger than he is. Vulnerable. Cecilia isn’t the only one who’s been struggling lately.

“You’re a lot like her, you know,” I say.

He glances up. “Cecilia?” I nod. “People always said they thought we were twins growing up.” Antonio straightens to his full height, his mask slipping back into place. “Despite how much I don’t want to do this, my hands are tied. Salvatore is a powerful man. The wedding is happening.”

It’s like he just stomped on my heart with his dirty shoes. “Antonio—”

“No.” He raises his hand. “I came here to make sure nothing was going on between you and Cecilia. I need your word that that is true.”

I can tell him everything. How Cecilia and I are in love and planning to run away together. But Antonio would surely stop it.

Even though he shouldn't be, Antonio is the enemy.

"There's nothing going on between Cecilia and me," I say, lying through my teeth. "Salvatore doesn't need to worry. Cecilia just has a school-girl crush on me is all. I don't feel the same way."

Antonio nods once. "That's all I needed to know." He starts to walk toward the door and then stops. "Theo, I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell Cecilia what I said today. No use in giving her false hope."

"I will. But, Antonio, you really should work on mending your relationship with her. Not just for her benefit but for yours."

He doesn't look back as he walks out of the house.

Giulia enters the foyer, wiping her hands on a dish towel. "I overheard," she admits. "You didn't just lie to Antonio right now, did you?"

I only stare at her. I can't completely lie to Giulia.

She nods with understanding in her eyes. "I hope you and Cecilia know what you're doing." With those words, she leaves the room.

I'M PUTTING the trash away in the backyard when the door opens, and Cecilia comes out. "Dinner's almost ready. I thought I could sneak a moment with you before." She rushes over to me, plants her hands on my chest, and kisses me.

I respond before pulling away and nodding at the glass doors. "Someone could see us."

"How's the plan coming along?" she asks, ignoring my comment.

"It's coming. We'll be able to leave a few days before the wedding. Salvatore won't even know."

"Good. Gemma and Viktor were coming over for dinner tonight, so I thought it would be a good time to say goodbye to them without saying goodbye, you know? And Emilia and

Francesca are coming to New York this weekend for the wedding, so I'll get to say goodbye to them then. I doubt Mia will miss me. She's always caught up in her own world. The twins are so young, and they have each other. But my mom ...” She bites her lip. “I know it's going to be hard on her when I'm gone, judging by how she acted when her other kids moved out. She was a mess every time.”

I pull her closer, resting my hands on her waist. “Your mom is a strong woman. She'll be okay. And I think she'll be okay knowing you're happy and not married to a man you hate.”

“Maybe. But reputation is important to my mom. Us running away will reflect badly on the family. Mia will probably be the most affected by it because she's the next one to get married. But I can't live my life married to Salvatore. I'd rather die. So, if hurting my family's reputation means saving my own life, then I'm going to do it. I don't care if it's selfish.”

“I'll make this work,” I tell her. Somehow. “And Antonio?” I ask slowly, being careful.

She tenses. “What about Antonio?”

“Are you going to say goodbye to him?”

“No. He chose his side, and it's definitely not mine.” She stands on her tiptoes and kisses me again. “Now, I don't want to talk about my brother.”

We get lost in our kiss, and I lean Cecilia up against the fence and deepen our kiss. It's risky to be doing this outside where anyone could see us, but I think we're both past caring. Our plan is in place to run away together, and that's all we care about.

Until the backdoor opens.

We wrench apart. I turn to see who it is.

It's ... Gemma.

Her eyes are wide as she looks between Cecilia and me. “Oh, man. I just got caught up in some drama, didn't I?” She

smiles wickedly. “Good thing I love drama.”

“Gemma,” Cecilia says, walking over to her. “I didn’t think you’d be coming for a little while.”

She shrugs. “Traffic was surprisingly good today. Viktor and I managed to get here a little earlier, I came out here because I needed to throw this away”—she holds up an empty coffee cup— “and Mom told me Theo was throwing away the trash, so I should use the outside bin. Little did I know I’d stumble upon something interesting.”

“You can’t say anything,” Cecilia hisses. “Can I trust you?”

“Me? You know I was always the rebellious one in the family.” Her eyes flick to me and back to Cecilia. “I take it you’re not marrying Salvatore.”

“No. Theo and I have a plan. We’re going to run away together.”

Gemma whistles. “Cool. Well, if you need any help, Viktor and I will gladly offer it. As you know, he also loves some good drama and a rebellious spirit.”

“Thank you, Gemma.” Cecilia hugs her sister. “Thank you.”

“What’s family for? Antonio is being a little punk-ass, which I hate, so I don’t blame you for wanting to stick it to him. But one word of caution? This won’t go over well.”

“We know,” I say.

“Just be careful. And as I said, Viktor and I are here to help. I didn’t want you to have to marry Salvatore to begin with, so I’m fine with this. When are you planning to run away.”

“This weekend,” Cecilia says. “Before the wedding.”

Gemma shakes her head, smiling slightly. “Who knew you, Cecilia, out of all of us, would be the one to do something this daring? What can I say? I’m impressed.”

“What do you think Emilia will say about it?”

“Oh, she’ll be scandalized,” Gemma retorts, walking over to the bin and throwing her coffee cup away. “But I know she’ll help you out if you need it.”

“Good,” Cecilia replies, looking back at me. “Because we might need it.”

“Now, I’m hungry,” Gemma says. “So, let’s go eat.”

We enter the house and enter the dining room, where Giulia, Mia, the twins, and Viktor are already seated. But there’s someone else there, too.

Salvatore.

He stands up, his gaze intent on Cecilia. “Where were you?”

“Oh,” Gemma cuts in, “she was helping me with something. Now, let’s eat.” She walks over to her seat next to Viktor.

Salvatore remains standing, glaring at me. “I have an announcement to make.”

I tense. This cannot be good.

Salvatore keeps his eyes on me, a smug grin on his face, as he says what he needs to say. “I’ve decided to bump the wedding up again.”

“I’m sorry?” Giulia asks, glancing at Cecilia. “But there’s still a bit more I need to plan—”

Salvatore waves a hand, cutting her off. “Don’t worry about that. I’m just anxious to marry Cecilia. I’ve decided to move the wedding from next week to tomorrow.”

Everyone is silent.

Cecilia staggers on her feet and falls to the ground. I catch her in time before she can hit her head, but her eyes aren’t open.

“Cecilia?” I ask, gently setting her down. “Cecilia?”

She’s unconscious.

CHAPTER 14

Cecilia

When I wake back up, Theo and my family are staring down at me with worry. For a moment, I think I didn't just get news that will change my life forever.

But then my gaze shifts to the right, and there's Salvatore, looking down at me with his typical smug grin. He just told me the wedding is happening tomorrow. The plan Theo and I put together won't take effect until this weekend. How can I get out of this without raising Salvatore's suspicions?

Theo helps me sit up. "Are you ok?"

"I'm fine," I whisper. "I just ..." I look at Salvatore. "You're seriously moving the wedding to tomorrow?"

"I am."

"But," I say as I stand up, "the wedding is for next week. We can't change everything at the last minute."

"Yes, you can, and you will. The church had an opening for tomorrow, so that's the day it will happen."

Gemma crosses her arms. "That seems unfair. My mom and Cecilia have been planning this wedding, and you're just going to change it up on them?" I give Gemma a grateful look, but she doesn't notice because she's too busy glaring at Salvatore.

Viktor leans back in his seat, chuckling. "There's always something going down at the Moretti family household."

Gemma shushes him before turning back to Salvatore. “Why are you doing this?”

Salvatore looks at me squarely as he answers, making it clear this is for me. “Because I can, and I want to. End of discussion. The wedding is tomorrow.” He turns to my mom. “You might want to alert your other family members to get here on time.”

“I need to call them,” Mom says. “Dinner is over. Salvatore, go home. You just made my life harder, and I’m not happy about it.” She scrambles out of the kitchen to make her phone calls.

“I’ll walk you out,” Theo says to Salvatore.

I follow them to the door, hoping to see Theo slam the door in Salvatore’s face, but before Salvatore leaves, he leans in close to me and whispers, “You thought you could get away with seeing him? I had you followed, you know. You’re my wife.” He leaves after that threatening message.

I turn to Theo. “He had us followed. He knows about us. We have to leave. Now. Tonight.”

“Hold on.” Theo pulls me in close to him. “Things aren’t ready yet. Freddie can’t even get me the new IDs until tomorrow anyway. We need to continue as normal and tomorrow, we’ll make our escape.”

“But ... I’m getting married tomorrow, Theo. If I don’t show up for that wedding, Salvatore will be all over us.”

“Which is why you need to go to the wedding,” he says stiffly.

“What?”

“You need to appease Salvatore. Once he thinks you’re his, he’ll lower his guard. That’s when we can run away.”

“But I’ll have to marry him.”

A darkness appears in Theo’s eyes. “I’ll make sure it won’t be for long.”

“Theo,” I say slowly, feeling a dread enter my heart, “what are you saying.”

He kisses my head. “Just trust me.”

Of course, I trust him. But I’m terrified about the lengths Theo is willing to go to save me.

I STARE DOWN at my wedding dress on my bed. I can’t believe I have to go through with this, but Theo said I need to, and I’m choosing to believe in him. He has a plan. We’ll get out of this.

My mom knocks on my door. “Do you need help putting that on?”

I nod. After getting into my dress, I look at myself in the mirror.

“You’re beautiful,” she tells me.

I am. The dress is perfect. It’s just not for the right man.

“Mom, I can’t do this,” I whisper.

She squeezes my shoulders. “You can. I have some good news. Emilia and Francesca just landed, so they’ll be here for your wedding.”

I wish they didn’t even bother because I’ll be leaving with Theo tonight, but I keep my mouth shut. Salvatore cannot find out. “I’m glad,” I say instead. “It’ll be nice to have them around.”

“I know this isn’t what you wanted, but I’m proud of you for staying strong. I’m sure your faith was tested, but you pulled through.”

“Does God really want me to marry such an old man?” I ask, holding my cross tightly.

Mom sighs, resting her chin on my shoulder. “I can’t say what God wants. I can only say what Antonio wants. And what Antonio wants is for you to marry Salvatore.”

“Why does it always have to be about Antonio? Why does he get everything? The power, the beautiful wife. Why do I get

nothing. I don't get love. I have to marry an old man. And I have no say in my life?"

"Because he's a man, and this is a man's world. I'm not happy either. Goodness knows I would never have chosen Salvatore for you. But it's happening, and you're strong to go through with it."

I meet her eyes in the mirror. "You really think I'm strong?"

"One of the strongest. All my kids are. You've all been through so much in your lives, losing your father at such a young age. Emilia was strong because she married a man she'd never met for this family. Gemma was strong because she survived getting kidnapped. Francesca is strong because she delivered Emilia's baby and saved Antonio when he was in trouble. I didn't make things easy on her, unfortunately. And even Antonio is strong. He survived five years on his own without our support, all while Franco was trying to kill him.

"And now, you," she continues. "You're marrying a man you hate. If that doesn't take strength, I don't know what does."

"If my siblings can do it, I guess I can, too."

Mom rubs my shoulders. "Now, let's get to the church. I assume you want to get this over with."

"I do."

When I walk downstairs and Theo sees me in my wedding dress, his eyes widen. "You look ..." He stops when he sees my mom at my side. "Shall we get going?" The softness in his eyes hardens, and a determined look overtakes them. I want to ask him what he has planned for later today, but I'm too scared.

Theo drives us to the church. I notice his eyes in the rearview mirror every now and again, looking back at me. I should be wearing this dress while marrying Theo, not Salvatore.

Mia is in a simple blue dress, while the twins are in matching black outfits. Mom looks stunning in her gold dress.

I'm meeting the rest of my siblings at the church.

When we get there, I see Emilia waiting on the front steps by herself. I get out of the car and approach her. She's gorgeous in a gauzy pink dress.

"Emilia," I say as she pulls me into a hug.

"Cecilia, when Mom called last night to let me know the wedding was moved to today, I felt bad." She pulls back. "I know this isn't what you planned." Her eyes flick to Theo behind me as Mom, Mia, and the twins head inside the church.

"Gemma told me," Emilia whispers.

"Of course, she did," I mutter. "Are you going to judge me for going against my duty?"

"I would never. I don't approve, but ... I also don't think you should have to marry Salvatore. I can see how unhappy you are right now. Like you're walking to the gallows instead of your wedding. Just know I'll be here for you, no matter what. Ok?"

"Thank you."

She holds onto my arm as we go inside. "I have to take my seat now," she says. "Marco's waiting for me. I'll see you in there." She walks into the main part of the church.

Theo and I stay back. "What are we going to do?"

He gives me a simple kiss. "Trust me. Go through with the wedding. Get Salvatore's trust. Then, tonight, we'll leave."

"He won't be happy about his bride running off."

"Just trust me," he repeats before heading into the church.

Antonio finds me a few minutes later. "Ready?" He holds out his arm for me. He'll be walking me down the aisle because our father is dead. A part of me wanted Theo to walk me down the aisle, but I knew that would only make Salvatore furious. And today, I need to appease him.

I glare at Antonio. "No. I'm not ready."

He sighs, dropping his arm. “Cecilia, I’m sorry, okay? I don’t like doing this to you, but I need you to do this for me. For this family.”

“You owe me big time after this,” I grumble, sliding my arm through his.

A quick smile flashes across his face. It reminds me of when we were kids, and everything was easy and fun. We had no worries. “I promise.”

The church doors open, the music starts, and Antonio and I walk down the aisle. Salvatore is at the end, standing next to Father Enzo with smugness radiating off him.

My heart pounds faster and faster the closer I get to him. This is it. I have to marry Salvatore. I’m just trusting Theo to get me out of it.

Antonio hands me over to Salvatore, which only annoys me further. Why does Antonio get to hand me over like he owns me? I should have a say in my life. I should be the only person to have a say in my life.

Salvatore’s cold, clammy hand wraps around mine as I stand before him. Father Enzo begins the ceremony. Salvatore licks his lips as he stares at me. I want to vomit.

When Father Enzo reaches the part of the ceremony where we have to make vows to each other, I’m not sure I can speak.

“Do you, Salvatore Fontana, take Cecilia Moretti to be your lawfully wedded wife?” Father Enzo asks.

Salvatore stands up straighter. “I do.”

Father Enzo turns to me. I can feel the entire room look at me, waiting to hear me speak. “And do you, Cecilia Moretti, take Salvatore Fontana, to be your lawfully wedded husband?”

I try to open my mouth, but it’s not happening. I glance out at the crowd and find Theo seated behind my family. He nods once.

“She does,” Salvatore says. “She agrees to marry me.”

“I need to hear Cecilia speak,” Father Enzo says.
“Cecilia?”

I turn back to Salvatore and say the words that burn my throat, punch my stomach, and crush my heart.

“I do.”

Salvatore smiles triumphantly, and all I want to do is to smack that grin off his face.

“I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

Salvatore grabs my face and leans in. I tighten my lips as he pecks them. He’s not getting more than a dry kiss from me. Salvatore tries kissing me harder, but I don’t give him anything.

Someone in the audience clears their throat. Salvatore pulls back, scowling. He’s not happy about my disobedience. I don’t really care.

We walk out of the church together and drive to the reception hall. I didn’t even get the chance to see Theo. But he’ll be there, waiting for me.

“What was that?” Salvatore asks once we’re alone, except for our driver. “What kind of kiss was that?”

“I’m sorry. It was my first kiss,” I lie. “I guess it didn’t meet your standards.”

He huffs. “You and I both know that wasn’t your first kiss. How many times have you kissed that guard of yours?”

“Whatever do you mean?”

Salvatore gets right up in my face, and I have to resist the urge to jerk back. “You better be a virgin on our wedding night. Do you understand me? If you don’t bleed for me, then I’ll kill your favorite little guard.”

I gasp, terror seizing my heart. “You’re a monster, you know that.”

“But I won.”

I fight back the tears that wait to spill over. Patience. Patience. Theo will get me out of this situation.

We reach the reception hall and go inside, where all our guests greet us. I see a handful of men hanging around the corners of the room. “Who are they?” I ask.

“My men,” Salvatore says. “They’re keeping an eye on things tonight. In case anything goes wrong.”

I remain calm. This isn’t good. I can see over twenty men. How will Theo get me out of this? The longer the day goes on, the more impossible it feels.

Salvatore drags me onto the dance floor for our first dance. He places his hands on my hips tightly. I keep my hands steady on his shoulders. We sway back and forth. He’s not getting much else from me. I refuse to.

As the night goes on, Salvatore becomes more and more irritated with me, probably because I’m not fawning at his feet.

The entire time, I sneak glances at Theo, who remains against the wall, keeping an eye on me. We’re going to get through this. I have to believe it.

As the night nears the end, Salvatore stands up and announces he and I will be leaving now. “It’s our wedding night,” he says in a suggestive tone. A lot of the men in the room whistle and cheer. I want to die of embarrassment. All my older sisters give me sympathetic looks, which only somehow makes me feel worse.

Because the reception hall is in the ballroom of the Four Seasons Hotel, Salvatore and I don’t have to go far to reach our room for the night. He takes my hand and leads me upstairs to a fancy suite almost as large as my living room and kitchen combined.

“Wow,” I say, looking around. I need to stall for time. Theo has to come save me. As Salvatore shuts the door behind me, I notice a man standing out in the hall—one of Salvatore’s men keeping watch. Theo has to be careful. How will he get me out of this?

Salvatore stalks over to me, grabs my waist, and tries kissing me again. I fight it.

“No,” I say, pushing him away but he shoves me down onto the bed. “No!”

“Listen here, Cecilia,” he says into my ear, his breath hot and smelly from the alcohol he drank all night long, “you’re my wife now. You will perform your duty for me. Now, open your legs.” He forces my legs apart, but I kick him in the face before he can touch me again.

He jerks back. “You little bitch.” He throws himself on top of me, and we wrestle for dominance. I refuse to let him touch me. I’d rather die before that happens.

The door the suite bursts open ...

... and there he is. Theo.

He runs over to Salvatore, throws him on the ground, and starts beating him up. The door is slightly open, and I can see Salvatore’s man lying on the ground. I run over to close the door, so no one else can come in.

“You can’t win,” Salvatore says, his voice muffled from Theo breaking his nose.

“Cecilia isn’t a trophy to win,” Theo snarls back, hitting Salvatore square in the face. The old man’s head snaps back. “There’s only one way you’re not going to follow us.” Theo stands up and grabs his gun from his jacket pocket.

“Theo?” I say, rushing over. “Are you really going to ...”

“I am. It’s the only way.”

We share a look, and I nod, letting him know it’s okay.

Salvatore’s eyes widen when Theo points the gun at him. “What the fuck are you doing? If you kill me, my men will kill you. Think about what you’re doing.”

“I am,” Theo seethes. He has a silencer on his gun. When he pulls the trigger, only a muffled sound comes out.

Salvatore’s head jerks back as he slumps over, dead.

“Oh my god,” I whisper.

Theo puts his gun away. “We have to hurry. When his men see him, they won’t go to the police with this. They’ll come after us. Salvatore wasn’t wrong. They’ll try to kill us.”

“Then we need to get out of here.” I grab Theo’s hand. He’s shaking slightly. “Hey. It’s okay. You had to do what you had to do. I don’t blame you. In fact, I love you for it.”

Theo sucks in a breath, his head whipping toward me. “You love me?”

“Of course, I do. I’ve loved you for years.”

He pulls me into a rough hug and kisses the top of my head. “I love you, too. So fucking much.” He lets me go. “Now, we need to get out of here. Salvatore only had one man stationed outside the door, but this hotel is crawling with his men. We need to be careful.”

“I’m not exactly subtle with my dress.”

“It will have to do. I couldn’t bring clothes for you without looking suspicious. We need to go *now*.”

We hold hands and leave, both of us facing an uncertain future. But one thing I know is—we’ll do it together.

CHAPTER 15

Theo

I crack open the door to look down the hallway. The body of one of Salvatore's guards is lying in the hallway. Slipping my hands under his arms, I pull him inside the room.

"Is he dead, too?" Cecilia asks.

"No. I didn't want to have to kill more than I needed to." As I drop his body next to Salvatore, he wakes up and groans, opening his eyes. "Shit," I growl. "We need to get out of here fast."

The guard scrambles for the gun, which is in a holster around his waist, but I kick it out of his hand before he can use it.

"Grab that," I order Cecilia, nodding at the gun.

"I've never held one before," she says.

"Cecilia, I need you to trust me. Be strong."

"Ok," she whispers, running over to the gun and picking it up gingerly.

I grab the guard's hands and press them against the bedpost. "Give me the sheets off the bed."

Cecilia does as I ask, tossing them over to me.

The guard finally seems to notice Salvatore's dead body because he lets out a groan. "You're not going to get away with this."

I keep quiet as I tie his hands to the bedpost. "You're not going anywhere." I stand up and take Cecilia's hand in mine.

“You really think you can outrun Salvatore’s reach?” he asks. “He might be dead, but you still have to go through his men.”

“Shut up,” I growl as I punch him in the face. His head snaps back. “Salvatore is gone. I suggest you find someone else to follow.”

“Who? Antonio Moretti?” He scoffs. “He won’t be happy with you when he finds out you killed his best chance at gaining influence.”

“What do you know about that?” Cecilia asks him. “Antonio will understand.”

“Will he?”

Cecilia turns to me. “We need to leave. Now.” Even though her words are full of determination, her eyes are uncertain. The guard has gotten to her.

We leave the room and walk as silently as possible down the hallway. No need to attract more attention than necessary.

I push the button for the elevator, and the doors open moments later, revealing three of Salvatore’s men. They pause when they see me. Their gazes turn to Cecilia in her wedding dress ...

As one, they pounce on me.

“Theo!” Cecilia gasps.

“Run!” I shout as I face off against the first attacker. He comes at me with his fist, but I dodge out of the way. I manage to get a solid punch into his jaw, which sends him stumbling back.

The other two men grab my arms and pin them at my sides while the one I hit straightens back up and gets out his gun. It can’t end like this. Not when Cecilia and I never even got a chance.

But then a shot fires off, and the man with the gun grunts as he hits the wall. Blood blossoms from his chest. I turn and see Cecilia pointing the gun at him.

She quickly lowers it, her eyes tight and her cheeks flushed.

I use that to my advantage.

I headbutt the man behind me, and he groans as a crack fills the air. Presumably his nose just broke. The other man stumbles back, and I kick him in the chest, sending him flying across the hallway.

While both men are down, I grab Cecilia's hand and run into the elevator, pushing the button to shut the doors faster. The doors close as one of them smacks into it.

Cecilia leans against me, breathing heavily. "I just shot a man. Oh my God. What ..." She grabs her cross. "Theo ... I ..."

I pull her closer against me and kiss the top of her head. "You did good. I know you're in shock right now. But that needed to happen. He was going to kill me, otherwise. I'm so fucking proud of you."

"Theo," she gasps out, burying her head into my chest. I hold her tighter. "What are we going to do? Those men will see what floor we get off on."

"We'll take our chances in the lobby. I'm hoping they won't outright fire on us in a hotel full of innocent people."

"We need to tell my family. Antonio will help."

"Will he?"

She hesitates. "Ok. Fine. We need to tell Marco, Viktor, and Leo. I know they'll help us."

"They all work with Antonio, though. They won't want to go against their alliance with him by helping us."

"Maybe not. But I know for fact my older sisters will help us. All three of them. They can convince their husbands to help. They can get us out of the city before more of Salvatore's men come after us." She pauses. "And before Antonio comes after us," she says softly.

"He'll be angry we ruined his plans."

“He can deal with it. He might be the boss of the Moretti Mafia, but he’s still my brother.”

We reach the lobby floor, and the doors open.

“This is it,” I say, grabbing her hand.

On the other side of the doors is ... just people. Not Salvatore’s men. Just innocent people at the hotel. A few give us confused and curious glances as we run out of the elevator.

“Congratulations!” a woman says to us.

“Thanks,” Cecilia calls out over her shoulder.

We stop running once we reach the main lobby. People are milling around, and I recognize a few of Salvatore’s men here and there, but fortunately, there are only a handful.

I also see Viktor and Marco in the lobby, talking to each other. Now is the time to see if they’ll help.

They see us before we reach them.

“Hey, lovebirds,” Viktor says. “I see you actually went through with it, Theo.”

Marco frowns. “Through with what?”

“Oh, Gemma told me,” Viktor explains. “These two. They’re in love.”

“What?” Marco’s voice is like ice. “Why haven’t I heard about this?”

Viktor shrugs. “Don’t know what to tell you, man.” He turns to me. “So, I’m assuming since Cecilia isn’t in her honeymoon suite with her new husband that something happened to him.”

I lower my voice. “I killed him.”

Marco freezes as Viktor throws his head back and laughs.

“You did what?” Marco asks. “You’re just asking to die.”

Viktor finishes laughing and wipes a nonexistent tear from his cheek. “I love it. The good bodyguard going rogue. So, what do you need from us? Because I can tell you need our help.”

“We do,” Cecilia says, squeezing my hand. “We need to get out of here without more of Salvatore’s men coming after us. Can you get us out of the city?”

Marco sighs deeply, shaking his head. “I can’t believe this. Cecilia, you were supposed to marry Salvatore. I’ll have to inform Antonio about this.”

“Can’t it wait?” she asks. “Please, Marco. I know you’re a stickler for rules. You and Emilia both. But you know she’d help me. I don’t know what Antonio will do now that he’s boss. He might kill Theo. Please, get us out safely.”

Before Marco can give an answer, a shout comes from across the room. Another one of Salvatore’s men has spotted us.

“Uh-oh,” Viktor says. “Time to go.” He looks at Marco. “What will it be, big guy? We all know you have the most power in this room, next to Antonio. You can get them out of the city.”

Marco stares hard at Cecilia before nodding. “Fine. Let’s go. Viktor, cause a distraction.”

Viktor rubs his hands together as a dark grin spreads across his face. “Gladly.”

He runs over to Salvatore’s man and punches him in the face. Everyone in the lobby turns to look at them instead of Theo and me.

“We have to hurry,” Marco says, leading us outside to his rental car. “I can’t believe this,” he growls once we’re in the car, and he’s driving. Cecilia and I are in the backseat. Nothing will separate us again. “What were you two thinking?”

“We’re in love,” Cecilia says. “And you know it wasn’t right for Antonio to marry me to Salvatore. You know that, Marco.”

His grip on the wheel tightens. “Fine. I agree. When Emilia told me ...” He shakes his head. “I’m not sure what Antonio was thinking. He’s still young and learning how to lead. But instead of coming to me for help, he wanted to do it

on his own. Look where it got him. His own sister going against him.”

“Please tell me this won’t ruin your alliance with him?” Cecilia asks, leaning forward.

“We’ll have to wait and see,” Marco responds. “But it would take a lot to ruin my alliance with Antonio. I would never abandon Emilia’s family. And that includes you, Cecilia.”

“Thank you,” she breathes out. “Marco, thank you so much.”

“So, what was your plan? To wing it?”

I clear my throat. “We had a plan, but then Salvatore moved the wedding up to today. It ruined everything. I had to think spur of the moment.”

Marco meets my eyes in the rearview mirror. “I hope you know what you’re doing, Theo. Because it isn’t just Salvatore’s men you need to worry about. It’s Antonio’s, too. He won’t be happy about this.”

“We’ll come to that if we have to,” I say.

I really hope it never does.

Marco drives us to a private airplane strip. “You can use my private plane,” he explains, getting out of the car. “My pilot is always ready to go at a moment’s notice. I have a place in Italy you can use for the time being. Antonio doesn’t know about it.”

“Did Salvatore know?” I ask.

“Salvatore was a powerful man in his own right,” Marco explains, walking us over to his plane. “But even he had limits. He might have known about my private properties. He might not. But this is the safest place I can think of to send you guys on such short notice.”

“Antonio will question you,” I say. “What are planning on telling him?”

Marco runs a hand over his neck. “I plan on telling him the truth. That I helped out one of my sisters.” He gives Cecilia a warm smile. “That’s what Emilia would want, so that’s what I want, too.”

Cecilia hugs him. “Thank you, Marco.”

He doesn’t say anything as he steps back. “But Antonio will probably find out where you’re staying sooner or later. I won’t be able to keep him from looking into it. So, my advice, stay there for a few days, then move on. I’ll wire you some money.”

“I hired someone to make fake IDs for us, but I didn’t get the chance to grab them,” I say.

Marco places a hand on my shoulder. “I’ll get them for you and send them your way. But right now, you need to go.”

Cecilia and I hurry onto the plane.

After Marco talks to the pilot, he leaves, and the two of us set off into the sky.

CECILIA and I don’t relax until we make it to Italy, and even then, it takes us getting to Marco’s getaway house before we fully calm down.

The house, unsurprisingly, is beautiful. It’s a cross between modern and classic Italian style, overlooking the ocean.

Cecilia doesn’t stop walking until she reaches the bedroom and falls onto the bed. “What did we just do?”

I lie down beside her. “We escaped. We’re not out of the woods yet, but hopefully, we have some time to close our eyes and get some sleep.”

“Yeah.” She shakes her head. “I can’t believe any of that happened. On one hand, I’m ecstatic I don’t have to live my life with Salvatore. But on the other hand, I know the real problems are just beginning. Salvatore’s men will want revenge. And Antonio ... I don’t even know what he’s going to do. I thought I knew my brother, but ever since he took over ... he’s like a stranger to me.”

“It will be okay.” I pull her into my arms, and we remain like that for a while.

Cecilia eventually lifts her head and meets my eyes. “I want to forget about today. I just want to be with you, Theo.”

“I want to be with you, too.”

She shakes her head. “No. Theo ...” She takes my hand and places it on her breast. I suck in a breath. “I want you to make love to me.”

“But we’re not married. I thought you wanted to wait for marriage.”

“I’m done with rules. I think we’re past that anyway. Besides, God didn’t save me from Salvatore. You did. And all I want is to be with you.”

“Are you sure?”

“Theo, stop talking and kiss me.”

I do just that.

I roll Cecilia onto her back as our kiss becomes more passionate. She grips my shoulders, pulling me closer. I roam my hands along the side of her body, and Cecilia gasps when I press my hips to hers.

It’s finally happening. The moment I get to be with Cecilia for the very first time. I don’t take it lightly. I know how much it means to her to have sex for the first time, and I’m going to cherish that.

I sit back and help her slip off her dress inch by inch until her gorgeous body is exposed. She’s wearing a simple lacy white bra and underwear, and it takes everything out of me to not pounce on her and fuck her like a savage.

She needs gentle and slow right now, and that’s what I’ll give her.

Cecilia slips off my jacket and shirt, kissing along my arms and chest as she goes. I let out a shuddering breath. She smiles up at me as she undoes my belt buckle. Once I’m only in my underwear, I lie back down on the bed and roll on top of her.

We resume kissing, taking our time, even though there's an urgency to the kiss. Cecilia begins to arch her body up against mine. Her skin on my skin is the best fucking feeling in the world.

"I need more," she whispers against my lips. I take her bra off and lean down to capture one of her nipples in my mouth. She cries out, arching against me. While I spend time pleasuring her breasts, I bring my other hand down and slip off her panties so I can touch her pussy.

She moans when my fingers brush against her clit. She's already wet for me.

I kiss back up her chest, letting my lips linger over the cross around her throat. "I've wanted to do this to you for a long time." I swipe my fingers up and down her slit, getting her wetter. Cecilia's legs clamp down around my arm.

"I need you," she gasps. Her cheeks are flushed, and her lips are parted. She's never looked more beautiful than right now.

I press my hand against her folds, rubbing her harder. Her breathe starts to come out in pants. I know she's getting close.

When my thumb flicks against her nub, Cecilia cries out and grabs my arms, her body shuddering. I cover her mouth with mine so I can kiss her while she rides out her orgasm.

Once she's done, I pull my hand away and push my underwear off. I settle between her legs, wrapping my arms around her body. I need her as close to me as I can get.

"I love you, Cecilia," I growl against her lips.

"I love you, Theo."

"Are you ready?" I angle my cock up to her entrance. I'm so fucking hard; it's difficult to even think.

She brings her legs higher around my waist. "I'm ready."

With a thrust of my hips, I enter her. She gasps as she clings to me. I see some discomfort in her expression, so I take my time entering her, letting her get a feel for my cock.

After a few seconds, she nods. "I'm good."

"Good." I smother her mouth in a kiss. Cecilia kisses me back with a desperation she's never shown me before.

Then, I begin to move. At first, my thrusts are gentle, moving my hips in a circular motion as I grind into her slowly. She gasps every time I move, her legs pressing harder against my hips.

We kiss harder as we start to find a rhythm that works. Our breath mingles. Our eyes are locked on one another as we pull back from the kiss. Our bodies move as one.

She digs her fingers into my back as I increase my pace. I won't be able to last much longer. I've been dreaming of fucking Cecilia for the past year, and now, it's a reality.

"Theo," she moans as I grind my hips harder against hers. She bares her neck to me, and I kiss it, sucking and licking and nipping. She bucks her body up to mine.

I grip her hips tighter as I begin to thrust into her harder and harder. The only sound in the room is our bodies moving as one and our breath coming out in pants.

"Cecilia," I growl. My arms tighten around her. My head presses firmer against hers. My eyes stare straight into hers.

"I need ..."

"I know what you need." I thrust harder into her, and that does it. Cecilia moans my name as she comes. Her hands grip my arms, looking so small against me. It makes me feel more powerful. It makes me feel stronger. It makes me feel worthy of her.

With that in my mind, I come, my release filling her.

Our bodies shudder together until we both go still.

I kiss her gently, remaining inside of her. "I love you so fucking much."

She smiles and her face lights up with pure happiness. I haven't seen her look this way ... ever. "I love you too, Theo."

She clasps our hands together and brings it to her heart. “You have all of me. You always will.”

No matter what happens, we will always have this moment.

And I could die happy because of it.

CHAPTER 16

Cecilia

The next morning, I'm refreshed, happy, and alive. Theo and I made it out. We still have a journey ahead of us, but for now, we can just be together. I don't even care if I'm technically living in sin. With Theo, nothing feels wrong.

I'm making breakfast when Theo comes up behind me and starts kissing my neck. I lean into him.

"Good morning," he says in his deep voice. I shiver at the sound.

"Morning. I'm making French toast. Marco had some supplies in the fridge."

"Good thing for Marco." Theo's hands squeeze my waist. "I was hoping to wake up to you in bed this morning."

"I was hungry," I admit.

"Last night's activities tired you out, huh?"

I blush slightly. Even though I'm no longer a virgin, flirting with Theo is still a new concept for me. "They did. Now, I'm going to eat."

I reach to turn the burner off when Theo beats me to it.

"You don't need to eat right now," he growls, grabbing my waist and hoisting me onto the counter.

"I don't, huh?" I ask, already wrapping my legs around his waist.

"You can if you want to, but I have other plans for you this morning."

I sling my arms around his shoulders. “Like what?”

He leans into my ear. “Like fucking you on this counter.”

I gasp as my core throbs. Theo knows just what to say to make me feel like I’m on fire. “Okay,” I finally say.

Theo captures my lips with his. It’s passionate. Like fire come to life. Like ice melting. I still can barely believe I’m really here in Italy with Theo, making out on a kitchen counter after we making love the night before.

I’m desperate to feel him inside me again. I got a taste last night, and I’m insatiable for more.

Reaching between us, I push Theo’s pants down, discovering he’s not wearing any underwear. He groans when I touch him. I love the powerful feeling I get every time Theo gets lost to my touch.

He growls as he pushes my nightgown up. Marco really was prepared with food and clothes available.

Just like Theo, I don’t have anything under my nightgown. Theo slips his fingers against my folds, and I almost lose it.

I grip his shoulders, pulling him tighter against me. The smell of the French toast is strong in the air, mixing with the scent of our lust.

I open my legs wider, ready and willing for him to enter me. I’m still a little sore, but I don’t care. I need this. I need to be consumed by Theo.

Theo presses his forehead to mine and stares intently into my eyes as he enters me. We moan together. My hands slap down onto the counter to hold myself steady as Theo begins to rock his hips against mine. With every little thrust, he enters me deeper and deeper. I never knew feeling this full could be such a good thing.

I gasp as we make love—or, as Theo called it, fuck. It’s surreal to be doing this. That we’re fucking on a kitchen counter. I’m surely going to hell for this.

Theo grabs my hips, grunting every time he thrusts his hips forward. I love the sounds he makes when we’re being

intimate. It's like they're only for me and they'll only ever be for me.

I arch my back and moan when he rips the top of my nightgown down to kiss along my breasts. I grip the back of his hair. I need this. I want this.

The French toast in the pan is sizzling, but I don't care. We could set this house on fire, and I wouldn't care.

It's just Theo and me.

It doesn't take long for both of us to come.

"Theo!" I call as my body shudders. My inner walls clench down on his erection.

"Cecilia," he groans into my neck, his release filling me.

We stay together even after we've calmed down.

I laugh. "I think my French toast is ruined."

"Let's get married."

I blink and pull back slightly. "What did you say?"

"Let's get married, Cecilia. You and me. Let's do it."

"Are ... are you sure?"

"You're a widow now. You're free to marry. And if we're married, then hopefully, that will stop some of the hurt coming our way. Your brother might not be as angry if I make an honest woman out of you."

I slip off the counter, pulling my dress down. "Or it will make him angrier knowing he can't marry me off to someone else without ... killing you," I whisper.

He straightens his pants and walks over to me. "Come on. Marry me, Cecilia. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Married to you. What do you say?"

What do I say? I say I love Theo more than anything. I'm just terrified of him getting hurt.

But what's life without a little pain?

Theo is asking me to marry him, and that's my dream come true right there.

"Yes," I say. "Of course, I want to marry you, Theo."

He scoops me into his arms and slings me around. "Then let's get married."

THAT'S how Theo and I find ourselves in a Catholic church an hour later, asking the priest to marry us. I'm back in my wedding dress. A part of me considered wearing something else because I didn't want to taint our day with this bad memory, but I knew when I chose this dress that I envisioned myself marrying Theo in it. It was always meant for him.

Fortunately, the priest speaks English and agrees to marry us, even though we'll still have to legally get married in the US. This ceremony is more for us than anything else.

Theo and I stand before each other with the priest next to us as he performs the wedding ceremony. A few people who attended church today are our witnesses.

I don't even hear the priest's words as I look into Theo's eyes. This is so different from when Salvatore. With Salvatore, I felt nothing but revulsion. With Theo, I only feel love.

When the priest asks us if we take each other as husband and wife, I don't hesitate to say, "I do." I say it with all the pride and happiness in my body. Theo does the same.

And just like that—we're married.

Theo kisses me, and all feels right in the world.

An older woman stops us before we can walk down the aisle. "That was beautiful," she says in accented English. "I always seeing couples who are young and in love." She squeezes my hands. "You are so pretty. And he's so handsome." She waggles her eyebrows.

Theo chuckles. "Thank you, ma'am. I'm glad we could make your day a little bit more exciting."

She touches his arm, smiling in a flirty way. Even older woman can't resist Theo's charms. "You did. Be happy together."

The doors burst open, and a group of men dressed in black swarm into the church. They all have guns in their hands.

And they're all pointed at Theo and me.

"Get down!" Theo shouts, throwing himself on top of me. I land on the ground with a hard thud, letting out a gasp.

The older woman turns to look at the men as they fire. I stare in horror as bullets rip through her body. The priest runs forward, but he's gunned down as well.

The woman looks completely shocked as she meets my gaze. A half-smile is on her lips. She falls down next to me. Her eyes, which were open and warm a moment ago, have nothing in them now. No happiness. No cheer. No life.

"Theo?" I ask. "Who?"

"Who do you think?" he growls. "Salvatore's men found us. We need to get out of here."

I hear the footsteps as the men get closer.

"How did they find us?" I whisper.

"I don't know," Theo whispers back. "But we need to get out before they kill us. Move." Theo gets off me and nudges me to start crawling. I remain low as I walk along the pew beside me, using it as extra protection.

Theo is right behind me. As we reach the other end of the pew, Theo looks over the top of it, then instantly drops back down. "They're down there," he says in a low voice. "By the looks of it, they've killed everyone in the church. They all have machine guns. I need to get one to even stand a chance. Stay here." He positions me so I'm covered by the pew.

Then he starts crawling back the way we came. From my vantage point, I can see one of the men standing near the end of the aisle. He has his back to us.

“Come out, you two,” one of the men says in a gruff voice. “You’re going to pay for what you did to Salvatore. We’re going to kill your bodyguard, little girl. And then we’re going to take you for ourselves.”

Somehow, I’m both sweating and shivering at the same time.

I look around the pew to watch as Theo gets closer to the guard. He’s right on the man’s heels. With a sudden motion, he grabs the man’s ankles and pulls him to the ground.

They struggle for the gun, and I hold my breath as I watch. Theo can’t die. This isn’t how any of this was supposed to go.

Theo punches the man and grabs the gun, quickly shooting him in the head. The only problem with this is that the noise draws the attention of the rest of Salvatore’s men.

They run in his direction.

I crawl back over to Theo. I’m safer at his side than anywhere else.

Theo stays crouched behind the pew and angles the gun over it.

Then he lets loose.

He starts firing bullets into Salvatore’s men. One after the other, they fall.

One manages to dodge out of the way. I see him fall behind a pew, but I don’t know exactly where he is. When I hear footsteps coming up beside me, I turn and see the man.

“Theo!”

Theo turns, but before he can shoot the man, I’m grabbed by my hair and hoisted into the man’s arms.

“Drop your weapon,” he growls at Theo. “Or I kill the girl.” He points his gun at me.

“You don’t want to do that,” Theo says.

“Why not?”

“Because it will only piss off Antonio, and you don’t want to do that. Trust me. Salvatore and he had a deal. We broke it. But that’s still Antonio’s sister. You kill her; you’re fucked.”

The man snorts. “I don’t care about Antonio. He doesn’t frighten me. And neither do you.”

“You should be scared of me,” Theo says. “I just killed all your buddies.”

I’m holding still, letting Theo and the man talk, when I get an idea. It’s terrifying having a gun to my face, but it’s even more terrifying to think about living my life without Theo.

So, I bring my foot up and kick back, hitting the man in the shin. He grunts and loses his concentration.

Theo uses it to his advantage, shooting the man and killing him instantly. I drop onto my hands and knees, gasping for air. That’s it. He’s the last one to go down.

Theo drops the gun and runs over to me. “Cecilia? Cecilia, are you all right?”

I let out a sob and cling to Theo. “What happened?”

“Why did you do that?” He shakes me gently. “Are you stupid? He could have killed you. Why did you kick him?”

“Because I don’t want to live without you.”

Theo stares at me for a moment before pulling me into a tight hug. “God, I love you, you know that?”

“I do. I love you so much.” I cling to him. “What are we going to do now? How did this even happen?”

“They obviously found out where we are. Marco must have told them. Which means Antonio will know and will be coming after us. He doesn’t want us together.”

“I know. Theo, I’m worried. Why would Marco turn on us?”

“Because his allegiance is to Antonio. He was just doing his job.”

“But Antonio wouldn’t want me hurt,” I say. “And these men mentioned they’d ... you know. Hurt me.”

Theo’s eyes darken. “I will never let anything like that happen to you. You hear me?”

“I do. But if Antonio wouldn’t hurt me hurt, then how did Salvatore’s men find out? I doubt Antonio would send them after me.”

“I don’t know. And I don’t care. Right now, we need to get out of here. We have to head back to the house and change. You’re ... you’re covered in blood.”

I look down, and what I see makes me gasp. Theo’s right. My beautiful white wedding dress is drenched in blood. It must have happened when the old woman was shot.

“Oh my god,” I whisper. My hands start shaking. “Theo?”

“Let’s get out of here. The police will surely arrive soon. That much gunshot? They’re bound to.” Theo grabs my shaking hand, and together, we run out of the church.

We make it make to Marco’s house within minutes. Theo starts throwing clothes into a suitcase for us.

I hurry into the bathroom, get out of my blood-soaked wedding dress, then take a fast shower.

I’m trying to be quick, but once I step out of the shower, I stumble to my knees. My vision is filled with blackness. I can’t even breath properly. It feels like a giant weight is sitting on my chest.

Theo finds me like that, and he runs to my side and scoops me into his arms. “Cecilia?”

“I can’t breathe.”

“Are you hurt?”

I shake my head. “I don’t ... I don’t think so.”

“Ok.” He rocks me in his arms. “I think you’re having a panic attack. I know what those are like. You’ve seen me have one—remember?”

All those weeks ago at our big family dinner. Luca dropped a plate on the ground, and Theo seemed to have a reaction. I didn't understand then. But I think I understand now.

“What ... what do I do?”

“Just let it ride out,” he murmurs into my ear. “Let it ride out. I got you. I know how scary these can feel. Almost like you're dying. But you're not. You're alive, and you're here with me.”

Theo holds me until my breathing gets back under control. And even then, he still continues to hold me.

“Why did you have a panic attack?” I ask him.

“I was in the Army, as you know. Bad memories. Loud sounds can bring them back.”

“But you didn't have a panic attack in the church.”

He tightens his arms around me. “That was because I couldn't. I knew I needed to save you. I didn't have time to think or feel. I reacted. But I know what it's like to be in scary situations. I know how debilitating they can be.”

I cling to him. “Do they ever get easier to deal with?”

“That's hard to say. The memories remain. I don't think it ever leaves you.”

“God,” I whisper, curling into Theo's side. “I saw that woman die today. One second, she was congratulating us, and the next, she ... she was on the ground next to me. Dead.”

“I know. Salvatore is still trying to hurt us from beyond the grave. It's not fair that innocents have to die because of it.”

“I know we need to get out of here,” I say. “But ... I can't move.”

“I got you, Cecilia. I'll always protect you. From everyone.”

We remain on the bathroom floor a lot longer than we should, but finally, I manage to get up. Theo helps me get dressed because I'm still shaking.

My phone rings. “Oh no,” I whisper, staring at it on the bedside table. “My phone. I never got rid of it. You don’t think they tracked us, do you?”

Theo scrubs a hand across his face. “Damnit! I completely forgot. In the craziness of everything, I forgot to tell you to get rid of your phone.”

“It’s my mom,” I say, picking it up. “Should I answer?”

“Honestly, probably not. But it’s too late now. If Salvatore’s men know we’re here, then Antonio does, too. He’s on his way.”

I answer the phone. “Mom?”

“You’re alive? Thank goodness,” she says on the other end. “Antonio is coming to get you, Cecilia. Okay? Just stay put. He’ll make sure you’re fine.”

“Mom, Salvatore’s men already found us. How did that happen?”

“I’m not sure. But just stay where you are. Antonio will come save you.”

I grip the phone tighter. “And what about Theo? Will he be safe?”

Mom doesn’t answer right away. “I’m not sure,” she finally says. “Antonio was so angry when he found out what Theo did. Killing Salvatore was a bad idea. Just get home safe, okay?”

The front door bangs open, making me scream. Theo rushes to my side, his gun already pointed at the bedroom doorway.

And in walks Antonio, not looking happy one bit.

CHAPTER 17

Cecilia

Antonio is alone, which somehow makes me even more nervous. I hang up the phone, even though Mom is still trying to talk to me.

Theo steps in front of me. He lowers his gun but doesn't put it away fully. Antonio's eyes flick to it, but he doesn't comment on it.

"So," he says, leaning against the wall, arms crossed. "What have you two done?"

"I couldn't marry Salvatore," I tell him. "You know that. I told you repeatedly, and you didn't listen. So, Theo saved me. Please don't be angry."

"Oh, I'm not angry," Antonio says.

"You're not?"

"No. Angry isn't a good enough word to describe how I'm feeling. I'm fucking livid," he growls. "Not only did you disobey me, Cecilia, but you ran off with Theo after he fucking killed Salvatore. Did you not think what this would do to our family?"

"Of course, I thought about our family," I say, stepping around Theo. He grabs my arm, but I shake him off as I face Antonio down. "Of course, I did. You make it sound like what I did was selfish."

"It was selfish!" Antonio shouts. "It was so fucking selfish."

“No!” I point at him. “What was selfish was you making me marry a man I did not want to marry all so you could impress your men. You tried forcing me into a marriage for your own whims. How is that not selfish?”

“Because I did it to save you!”

I scoff. “How? How did you save me? You sent me off to be raped every day! Because that’s what would have happened if Theo hadn’t killed Salvatore. And I know you know it, so don’t try to deny it, Antonio.”

“I arranged your marriage with Salvatore because it benefited our family. It put me in better standing so I could make sure no one ever hurt you or anyone else in our family ever again. Not after what Franco did.”

I’m shaking my head before Antonio’s even finished. “No. No, you married me to Salvatore for your own gain. If you’d tried harder, you could have found someone nicer and younger for me to marry who would have offered you the power you were looking for, and you know it. Try to deny it, Antonio, but you still blame me for not reaching out when you were in hiding.”

“I never blamed you,” he growled.

“No?”

“No!” He pauses, breathing heavily. “No, I ... Fine. Yes, I had some resentment. I didn’t want you reaching out because I didn’t want Franco to hurt you. But did I wish you would have? Yes. For me. Yes, I wished it. You were my best friend, and I missed you.”

“And you were my best friend,” I say, all the fight suddenly leaving me. “You know that, Antonio. It was always us against the world. How could you do this to me?”

“Because I wanted the power Salvatore could bring me,” he says, no longer shouting. “And maybe you’re right. I didn’t think about what you wanted. But our family has always been about doing our duty. You were supposed to do your duty.”

“No,” I say softly. “Our family never should have been made to feel like we have a duty to anyone else but our own

selves. Emilia should have never had to leave when she was only eighteen to marry Marco without ever seeing him. Yes, it worked out for them in the end, but it never should have happened. Gemma fell in love with Viktor and almost wasn't allowed to be with him because he was the enemy, but Marco was able to overlook that. So was Franco. Francesca was forced to marry Leo because he put her in a compromising position. Yes, they fell in love, but it was wrong to force her.

"You," I continue, "married Nina only for political gain."

"I love my wife," Antonio growls.

"I know you do. Now. But you married her for political gain. And it was wrong you had to do that at all. Don't you understand what I'm saying, Antonio? None of us should have ever been forced to do things we didn't want to do. You were subjecting me to a life of misery with Salvatore. And you know that wasn't fair."

"Life isn't fair, Cecilia," Antonio says, shifting away from the wall. Theo tenses beside me, but I hold out my hand, silently letting Theo know Antonio won't hurt me. "Did you even consider what running away with your bodyguard does to Mia?"

"What about Mia?"

"Her marriage prospects will be slim now. Because of you. Because you couldn't just do your duty. No man will want to marry her now that your actions have stained her. You've doomed her to a life where she won't have any say because she won't have a husband."

I scoff. "This isn't the 1500s, Antonio. Mia will be fine without a husband."

"Not in our culture. You know that."

I deflate a little. Did I really ruin Mia's chances of a marriage by running away with Theo? Too late now to regret it. "I love Mia. I love all our siblings. But I wasn't going to marry Salvatore. I would have been raped every day. I would have been miserable every day. I would have killed myself."

Both Antonio and Theo look at me sharply. I've never voiced it out loud, but it's true. If I had to live my life with Salvatore, I would have ended it before I could waste another minute on this earth with that vile man.

"You don't mean that," Antonio says.

"I do mean that. That's what you were doing to me, Antonio. *You*. No one else. You were sending me to an early grave. Theo saved me. So, if you think you can just come in here and boss me around, think again. I'm not your employee. You're not my boss. You're my brother. And you don't own me. You tried so hard to not be like Franco, and you fell into his trap. Power is a weakness many men have. It's one you share."

Antonio's eye twitches while the rest of him remains still. "I am not Franco."

"Keep telling yourself that."

He lets out a rough breath and turns away from me. "You've forced my hand, Cecilia. You've made your choices. Your decisions. Fine. I can't change that. You didn't want to be with Salvatore. Well, he's dead now. You're free of him. I won't force you to marry anyone else because no one else will have you."

"Good." I cross my arms. "Because Theo and I are already married."

Antonio spins around so fast he's almost a blur. "You're what?" he asks in a low voice.

"We're married," I repeat, speaking in a tone like Antonio is dumb. Is it petty of me? Sure. But then again, Antonio is still my brother. Some habits are hard to break.

"What the fuck have you done?" Antonio shakes his head. "If you'd just remained single, fine. I could work with that. But marrying your bodyguard ... You're just flounging my rules altogether. When this gets out, it'll make me look like a boss who can't even control his own damn sister."

"So, don't control me," I say. "Let Theo and me go. We'll run away. We'll be the disgraces. So, what? All I want is to be

happy. All I want is to be with Theo. If we're gone, then I won't be around to hurt Mia's chances. People will forget about me. Mia can still get married in the future. She's not out of luck. Just let us go."

Antonio stares at me with a hard expression for some time before speaking. "I can't."

I feel all the fight leave me. "Why not?"

"Weren't you listening, Cecilia? You married Theo. You've made me look like a fool to my men."

"But they don't know—"

"But they will find out!" he cuts me off. "If you run off with him, there's no hiding the truth. You two are married. And I can't look like a fool. So, there's only one option to make sure my men respect me and know I'm not a pushover."

"What?" I snap.

It's Theo who speaks. "Your brother wants me dead."

All the life leaves my body for a moment before reality snaps back into place. "No," I whisper. "No." I grab Antonio's arm. "You can't. You can't kill Theo."

"But I have to," Antonio says in a tired voice. He pulls my hand away. "Theo cannot continue to live."

"You can't!" I cry. Before I know it, I'm hitting Antonio. He stands there and lets me do it. "You can't!"

Theo grabs my arms and pulls me away. "Cecilia," he says to me. "Stop."

"No." I wrench away from him. "I'm not going to let you die. Don't tell me you're just going to stand there and let Antonio kill you?"

"Of course not. But we need to talk about this." He turns to Antonio. "Is there anything else you can do?"

"Would you be willing to divorce?" Antonio asks.

"No," comes Theo's immediate reply. "I love Cecilia. I have no shame for what we've done. For the things I've done."

“You don’t feel bad for killing Salvatore?”

“Not one bit,” Theo hisses. “He wanted to abuse your sister. I couldn’t stand back and let that happen.”

“So, you just decided to fuck my sister instead.”

I gasp. “Antonio, stop. Theo loves me. I love him. Salvatore wasn’t a good man. We were planning to escape before the wedding. Salvatore wasn’t supposed to die. But he moved the wedding day up. We were out of options. Theo had to kill him to save me.”

“How convenient,” he retorts.

“Just stop!” I shout. “We are bickering like we’re kids again. We have to stop this. You are not going to kill Theo. He and I are going to run away together, and you will not stop it.”

“You don’t get to boss me around, Cecilia,” Antonio says. “What I say goes. And right now, I have a lot of things to fix because of your fuck-up. Now, we’re going back to New York. Both of you. Let’s go.” He turns and heads for the front door.

“We could run,” I say to Theo. “Right now.”

Theo shakes his head. I notice the grim determination in his eyes, and I don’t like it one bit. “No more running, Cecilia. Antonio will make sure you’re safe from Salvatore’s men. And I’ll own up to my crimes.”

“But you’ll die.”

He holds me close to him. “If it means I got to spend even an amazing day with you, I’d die a thousand times over. And I got that. If dying is what protects you ... I have to do it.”

“But if you’re dead, nothing will stop Antonio from marrying me to someone else.”

“You heard what he said. Not many Mafia men will want you after this. And that’s a good thing. You can just live your life for yourself.”

I grip his arms. “But I don’t want to live by myself. I want you with me.”

“Let’s just get to New York.”

“Promise me you’ll try to find a way out of this.”

“I promise.” He kisses my head before stepping away. “Antonio is waiting.”

Antonio takes us to his private plane. The three of us are the only ones on board except for the pilot and co-pilot.

“Our family is waiting to see you when we get back,” Antonio tells me. Theo and I are on one side with Antonio across from us. “They all offered their opinions. Most are not happy with me, if that makes you feel any better. Even Nina isn’t happy with me.”

I snort. “I’m glad. Our sisters always knew how to put you in your place. It’s a good thing your wife knows how to as well.”

“One thing I don’t get,” Theo says. “How did Salvatore’s men know where to find us?”

“I tracked your phone,” Antonio explains, looking at me. “It was easy to do. Marco didn’t tell me anything until I confronted him about it because I could tell it was one of his properties. As for Salvatore’s men ... I had to give them something. They weren’t going to stop. So, I said you were in Italy, and that was all I knew. I wanted to come get you before they tried to kill you.”

“Too late on that,” I say, my tone snarky.

Antonio sighs, shaking his head. “Yes, well ... I really didn’t want them coming after you. I swear. But I think some of my men are trying to go against me. There’s one man in particular I think wants my spot. Oliver Martin. He’s hated me from the beginning, ever since I hit him upside the head with my pendant.” His hands close around our father’s pendant. “I’m guessing he told Salvatore’s men where to find you.”

“You need to get your men in line,” I say.

His eyes flash. “That’s what I was trying to do with your marriage to Salvatore. But you had to go and ruin it.”

“You had to go and change.”

Antonio crosses his arms as he leans back in his seat. “What does that mean?”

“You changed after becoming boss. Don’t deny it,” I say quickly as he opens his mouth to cut me off. “We were best friends when we were kids. I worried about you every day when you were in hiding. You promised me you’d never make me marry someone I didn’t want to marry. What changed?”

For a second, I think Antonio won’t give me a real answer but then he says, “The pressure. There’s so much pressure on me to be this amazing leader. For our family. For Mom. For you,” he adds. “The pressure has been getting to me. It hasn’t been easy.”

I reach across the table and grab his hand. “Then why push me away? Why not talk to me about this? I could have helped.”

“How?” He sounds angry, but doesn’t pull his hand away. “How could you have helped?”

“By being there for you like when we were kids. All you needed was for me to just sit beside you. That was enough. I could have done that again for you. But you didn’t come to me. You decided to take it all on your own.”

“I have Nina.”

“Of course, you do. And Nina is great. But she hasn’t known you since you were a kid. She didn’t help you get through our dad’s death. She didn’t help you get through years of Franco. I did. I could have helped you, Antonio. But instead, you turned away from me. And you hurt me. And you’re hurting me again. If you kill Theo, I will never forgive you.”

He hesitates before pulling his hand back. “Then you won’t forgive me. But what’s done is done. My men will never respect me if I let Theo live. It will signal to everyone I’m soft.”

“No.” My voice is ragged from trying to get through to Antonio. “It will tell everyone you’re strong because you’re not afraid to show mercy.”

“I’ve made up my mind, Cecilia. We’ll deal with this when we land.”

I slump back against my seat. I tried. I screamed and cried my heart out, and Antonio still won’t listen. What will take him to listen?

When the plan finally lands in New York hours later, I’m restless. The moment I step off the plane, I feel the urge to run. I want to grab Theo’s hand and get out of here before Antonio does something that will completely obliterate my life.

But the sight of my family makes me stop. Everyone is here. My older sisters. My younger sisters. Luca. My mom.

Emilia rushes to my side and pulls me into a hug. “Are you okay? We heard about Salvatore’s men.”

“No, I’m not. Antonio wants to kill Theo,” I whisper.

She gasps and lets me go. Then Emilia stalks over to Antonio, says, “You can’t kill Theo,” and slaps him across the face.

It makes everyone stare in stunned silence.

Antonio rubs his jaw. “What the hell was that for?”

“For being stupid.”

“Yeah,” Gemma chimes in, walking over to stand by Emilia. “You’re being stupid. I’ll just have to hit you myself.”

“No—” Antonio starts to say, but Gemma is already slapping him across the face. “Okay, seriously?”

Gemma shrugs. “Yep.”

Francesca walks over next, and Antonio watches her warily. “You’re not going to hit me, too, are you?”

“No.” she says, her voice soft but confident. “It wouldn’t be good for me. The baby.” She places her hands on her stomach. She’s around three months now, only just barely showing. “But I stand by my sisters when I say you’re being stupid. I don’t agree with this. Just let Cecilia and Theo go. Let them be happy.”

Antonio turns to Mia. “Do you have something to add, too?”

“I do. You’re being stupid. Cecilia has been in pain these past few months, and it’s because of you.” I stare at Mia in shock. She’s never voiced these things to me before. I never knew she noticed.

Antonio looks at the twins. “What about you two?”

Luca shrugs. “Don’t be mean to our sisters.”

Lucia nods. “I agree with that.”

Antonio turns away from all of us. “I appreciate all your opinions, but what’s done is done. Come on, Theo.” He grabs Theo’s arm and leads him over to a car that will surely lead to Theo’s death.

CHAPTER 18

Cecilia

I race after Antonio to the car. “I’m coming with.”

“No, you’re not,” Antonio tells me as he puts Theo in the car. “You don’t need to see this.”

“You’re not killing Theo without me getting the chance to say goodbye.”

Antonio waves his hand toward Theo. “Then say goodbye.”

I reach into the car and grab Theo’s face. “Please fight. Find a way out of this.”

Theo kisses me, putting all the fear, anger, and passion into it. “I will. But I’m not sure I can get out of this one, Cecilia. I saved you. That’s what matters. I’ll die happy knowing you’re safe.”

A sob escapes me. “Please, don’t give up. Please.” I turn to Antonio and see a softness in his eyes. “Please, Antonio. Don’t do this.”

“I ... I have to, Cecilia. I have to show my men I can’t be trifled with.”

Emilia comes over to me and wraps her arms around my shoulders. “There’s another way,” she says. “A way for you to show your men you’re to be taken seriously while also keeping Theo alive.”

Antonio shrugs. “I’m all ears.”

“Have a fight. If you win, banish Theo. Make him leave New York. He and Cecilia won’t ever see each other again.”

“No,” I cry.

Emilia hugs me closer. “But he’ll be alive. And if Theo wins the fight, then let him and Cecilia be together.”

“I can’t lose a fight,” Antonio says through gritted teeth. “It would make me look weak in front of my men.”

“What? And killing an unarmed man makes you look strong?” Gemma asks, sauntering over. “We all know that doesn’t make anyone look strong. I think a fight is a good idea.”

Antonio scoffs. “Of course, you do. You’ve been married to Viktor for too long.”

“Do you want me to slap you again?” Gemma asks.

Francesca joins us. “I also think a fight is a good idea. It gives Theo a chance. And as Emilia said, if Theo loses, make him leave New York. But don’t kill him. Look at Cecilia. If you kill Theo, you’ll crush her heart.”

“I kind of hate how you’re not afraid to speak up now,” Antonio mutters.

Francesca cracks a smile. “I learned how to be brave. I saved you from Franco, remember?”

“I do,” he admits.

“We’re your family,” she continues, nodding at all of us. “We stick together. What you’re doing right now is the opposite of that.”

“Yes,” Emilia says. “Francesca is right. If you kill Theo, you’ll hurt Cecilia, which means you’ll be hurting all of us.” She tightens her arms around me, silently letting me know she has my back. It warms my heart to see my sisters having my back.

“I get you’re boss now,” Gemma says. “But we’re your older sisters.” She motions at herself, Emilia, and Francesca. “We always made sure you knew right from wrong. And we’re

letting you know right now that what you're doing is wrong. It doesn't matter if you're the boss. You're still our little brother, and you should listen to us."

Antonio snorts. "I don't have to listen to you."

"Then how about your mother?" Mom's voice rings out loud and clear.

Antonio snaps to attention. "Mom? You're not on my side? You're a stickler for the rules."

"I know," she says, coming over to stand on my other side. Two generations of women standing side by side, showing strength. I have to fight back the urge to cry. "I kept quiet when I saw what was happening to Cecilia. I saw how miserable she was whenever Salvatore was around. I knew she'd be miserable being married to him. I kept silent because I knew it was her duty to this family. But I'm starting to learn that duty to this family means nothing if this family doesn't stand together. We stood together against Franco. You killed him, Antonio, to save all of us. You fought tooth and nail to do so." Antonio flinches at her words, but that doesn't stop Mom. She continues. "So, be here for this family. Spare Theo's life. I might not agree with Theo and Cecilia being together, but it's done now. They've made their decision. I've made some mistakes as a mother, but one thing I'm sure of is that I'm proud of all of my children. So, Antonio, don't make me take back what I just said. Make me proud."

Antonio stares at our mom as if the rest of us have disappeared. "Ma, I ..."

"I know," she says in a soft voice as she places her hand on her cheek. "I understand you're facing insurmountable pressure. Your father felt it, too. But he kept this family together."

"He died," Antonio says.

"Which wasn't his fault. Franco fractured us. He made you go into hiding for five years because he wanted you dead. You have the power to change things for the better. You don't need to expand at the moment. You don't need loads of money. You

didn't have any money when you were in hiding, but that didn't stop you from growing strong. Be a strong leader now. Show your men you can inspire loyalty in them by showing mercy. You're not weak, Antonio. Far from it. But I do think you've lost your way."

Antonio lets out a rough breath. "So, what do you suggest I do?"

"What Emilia said. Fight Theo. If he wins, let him stay. He'll become a part of this family, and anyone who tries to take you down because of it will learn what it's like to go up against a Moretti. You will put anyone in their place for speaking out against you. But if you win, you can banish Theo. Cecilia and he will never be together, but he'll be alive, at least." Mom looks at me as she says this. "It will hurt, but it's the best decision."

I nod through the tears streaming down my face.

"So, what do you say?" Mom asks Antonio. "Have the fight, Antonio. Show your men you're a leader they can respect, not one to fear. Don't be like Franco." She touches the pendant around his neck. "Be like your father."

Antonio sucks in a quick breath. His eyes are wide, and his cheeks are flushed. He looks shocked by the power the women in his family are exhibiting.

"I'm not sure," he says after a beat.

Before my heart can break, Emilia stands up straighter and says, "We're here for Cecilia. Remember that."

"Me, too," Gemma says.

"I'm here, too," Francesca adds.

Mia walks forward and grabs my hand. "I'm here, too."

The twins, who probably don't have a full understanding of the situation, walk in front of me, their heads held high.

"We're here for our sister," Lucia says in her clear voice.

"Always," Luca adds. I'm sure the talk of Franco hurts him, but he's standing strong, and I've never been prouder of

my baby brother.

Antonio looks at every one of us. His entire family.

“You can call Nina,” I say. “Ask her what she thinks about it.”

Antonio shakes his head. “I know what Nina would say. She’d tell me to listen to my mom and siblings. She’d tell me I was being stubborn and ... stupid.” His lips curl slightly. “She’d agree with all of you.”

“Marco would, too,” Emilia says.

“So would Leo,” Francesca adds.

Gemma chuckles. “You all know Viktor loves a good rebel. So, go against the grain, Antonio. Don’t take the easy route by killing Theo. Stay strong and fight him, man to man.”

Antonio meets my eyes and stares at me for a few seconds. I don’t dare move. All I can do is plead with Antonio through my eyes.

“We were best friends,” I tell him. “Still are. Please.”

He finally breaks.

Antonio leans against the car with a heavy sigh. “Okay. I’ll agree to the fight.”

All the strength in my body leaves me. Emilia is the only reason I don’t fall to the ground. I turn to Theo with a smile. He’s watching my family with awe.

“I’m an only child,” Theo says. “The support your family exhibits is ... astounding.” He looks at Antonio. “Know you’re lucky.”

“I do,” he says. “We’ll fight. But it will be to the death.”

My entire family gasps.

“What?” Emilia snaps. “Why?”

“Because I’m not weak,” Antonio spits out. “I agreed to the fight. But it’s either Theo or me. One of us will live and the other will die. That’s final.” He walks around to the

driver's side of the door. "I know all of you will want to be there. So, I suggest you follow."

"I can't take the twins to see that," Mom says. "I can't see my son die."

Francesca places her hand on Mom's arm. "I understand. You take the twins and go. I'll drive you home. Emilia and Gemma will follow Antonio and be there for Cecilia."

"I want to go," Luca says, but Mom shushes him. She grabs the twins' hands and, with a final look at her son, walks over to her car.

Francesca gives my hand a squeeze. "Good luck."

"I'm not lucky," I say. "I either lose the man I love or my brother."

Francesca's eyes mist over. "I know." She follows Mom and the twins to the other car.

Mia remains standing there.

"What are you going to do, Mia?" Gemma asks her. "Come with us or go with Mom?"

Mia meets my gaze and gives a firm nod. "I'll go with."

So, with Emilia, Gemma, and Mia, I get into Antonio's car. We all crowd into the back seat with Theo. No one sits up front with Antonio.

He makes a phone call. "Killian? Have my men meet me at the club. Theo and I'll be fighting." He pauses. "To the death."

I can't hear Killian's response on the other end, but judging by the hardening of Antonio's mouth, Killian doesn't agree with Antonio's plan.

"Just get everyone there," Antonio snaps, before putting his phone away.

We're silent as Antonio drives to wherever the fight will be held. I sit next to Theo and hold his hand, feeling conflicted thoughts the entire way there.

THE CLUB ANTONIO takes us to is a nondescript building, but the inside is another matter. A large fight ring rests in the middle of the room. The place is empty except for twenty or so of Antonio's men.

Killian, Antonio's second-in-command walks over. "Are you sure about this? A fight to the death?"

Antonio remains standing tall. "I'm sure."

Killian turns to the rest of us. "How are you all feeling?"

"Not great," Mia mutters. "I don't want my brother to die, but he's making this stupid decision."

"Nice seeing you again, Mia," Killian says to her. She eyes him warily before scooting closer to Emilia. Killian just smiles and shakes his head.

"Antonio," Emilia says. "Don't do this."

"I have to." He turns to the rest of his men. "All right, men. As Killian probably informed you, this will be a fight to the death between Theo and me."

"Who will take over if you die?" one man asks.

"I don't plan on dying," Antonio replies. "Theo? Let's go." He walks into the ring.

Theo squeezes my hand. "I have to do this."

"No," I say. "You can just walk away."

"If there's any chance for me to live so we can be together, I'll take it." He grabs my face and plants a passionate kiss on my lips. "I love you."

"I love you," I whimper.

He walks into the ring.

My sisters stand beside me, holding me up as Theo and Antonio face off.

Antonio takes the first swing, but Theo ducks out of the way. I hold my breath. Emilia grips my left hand tightly while Gemma holds onto the other.

Theo strikes out with his fist and manages to clip Antonio on the shoulder, but Antonio jumps back before Theo can fully get him. I'm not even sure who I want to win. I know I don't want Theo to die, but ... Antonio is still my brother. He's the one who made sure I was always taken care of when we were kids.

But he's also the one doing this to me. He made the choice to have a fight to the death. No one forced him.

Antonio lunges at Theo and grabs his shoulders. They grapple with each other. Theo headbutts Antonio. A squelching, cracking sound fills the air. Antonio's nose looks broken. His men murmur among each other. Theo drew first blood. With a snarl, Antonio grabs Theo and forces him to the ground.

He gets on top of Theo and starts pounding into his face.

I scream.

"Don't watch," Emilia says but I can't look away.

When Antonio reaches his hand back to hit Theo again, Theo bucks up and manages to roll Antonio onto his back. Now Theo is the on top, and he punches straight into Antonio's face, over and over and over again.

Both Theo and Antonio are covered in blood. Their own and each other's.

Antonio shoves Theo off and kicks up, landing a hit to Theo's stomach. Theo doubles over, coughing. I watch in horror as Antonio grabs Theo's face and slams it into the cord around the ring. Theo slumps to the ground.

"Oh my god." I grip my cross. Is this it? Is Antonio really going to kill Theo?

Antonio lumbers over to Theo and raises his hand like he's about to deliver the killing blow.

Theo lifts his head.

As if in slow motion, Theo rushes straight into Antonio and knocks him to the ground. I can sense the discomfort in the air. What do Antonio's men think of their boss right now?

Theo gets back on top of Antonio and starts raining down punches. But Antonio isn't out of the fight yet. He hits back. He even bites Theo on the arm, making Theo jerk back.

They're like feral animals going at each other. Where one ends, the other begins. I don't know how much longer this will last, but I can't stand another second of it.

If I want Antonio to take me seriously, I need to do something brave. I've been standing around, waiting for Theo to save me from Salvatore. I waited for Antonio to save me from Franco.

I'm tired of waiting.

The two men are on their sides, punching and kicking each other.

I've had enough.

I wrench away from Emilia and run toward the ring.

"Cecilia!" Emilia shouts, running after me, but I ignore her.

The men in the room are starting to get rowdy, especially as I climb into the ring. Neither Antonio nor Theo notices me.

"Be careful!" Gemma shouts. It's rare to hear her sound so worried.

I don't slow down. Antonio is back on top of Theo. He raises his fist.

I run over to Theo and Antonio, and without hesitation, I throw myself on top of Antonio. "Stop!"

But Antonio doesn't stop. He's in the zone and without warning, he throws me off him. I slam into the floor, all the air leaving my body.

"Cecilia!" Theo shouts, shoving Antonio away and running over to me. Antonio is breathing hard, and when he recognizes it's me on the floor, all the fight leaves him.

"Cecilia?" he whispers, slowly coming over to me.

“Don’t,” Theo growls, scooping me up into his arms. Despite how badly injured he is, he still manages to be so strong for me.

“I’m okay,” I whisper, sitting up. “Just winded.”

“What the fuck were you thinking?” Antonio demands. “You could have been hurt!”

“Just stop,” I plead. “Both of you are going to kill each other if you don’t stop. Please. Antonio, your men know how powerful you are. They can see it. Show mercy. Let Theo and me be, please.”

“Cecilia,” Antonio says, “this fight is between Theo and me.”

“No.” I stand up. “This fight is between you and me. If you want to kill Theo, you’ll have to kill me, too.”

Antonio scoffs. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I’m not.” I position myself in front of Theo. “You kill him? You have to kill me first.”

Theo grips my shoulders. “Cecilia, don’t.”

I turn to Theo. “I’m doing this. Neither of you will stop me. It’s something I should have done sooner. Stand up for what I want. So, Antonio, what’s it going to be? Kill Theo and me? Or let us go?”

Antonio looks between his men and me.

“It’s okay, boss,” Killian says from the ground. “You don’t need to keep proving yourself. You’ve done that already.”

A murmur of agreement sounds off from his men.

Antonio stands up taller. “Okay,” he finally says. “Enough fighting.”

I cry as I slump against Theo. “You mean it? No more fighting? Theo can live?”

“Theo can live,” he says. “But we’re coming to an arrangement. Theo will no longer be our family’s bodyguard.

He'll work for me as one of my men. Pay off his dues for killing Salvatore."

Theo holds out his hand. "That's fine by me. But Cecilia and I get to be together."

Antonio sighs. "Deal." He shakes on it.

I hug Theo and press gentle kisses against his hurt face until he winces. "Sorry," I say.

The love in Theo's eyes tells me everything will be okay. "I love you," he whispers so only I can hear.

"I love you, too." Everything will be all right.

... until it isn't.

"What about Salvatore's men?" Theo asks.

Antonio rubs a hand down his face. "We'll deal with them. I'll find a way to appease them and stop making them come after you." His phone rings just then, and he answers it. "Hello?"

Whatever is said on the other end make Antonio stiffen.

He listens to whoever it is for a moment before saying, "You don't have to do this." He pulls the phone from his ear. "Dammit!"

"What is it?" I ask.

Antonio stares at the ground for a moment. "I just got a call from one of Salvatore's men. His cousin to be exact. He wants revenge for what Theo did." Antonio lifts his head up. "Theo, they have your mom."

CHAPTER 19

Theo

Antonio's words shock me to my core. "What do you mean they have my mom?"

"That was Lorenzo Fontana, Salvatore's cousin. He's taken over now that Salvatore is dead," Antonio explains. "He wants revenge for you killing his cousin. He has your mom. He's willing to do a trade. You for your mom."

"Let's go," I growl.

Cecilia grabs my arm. "Theo, wait. Salvatore's cousin will surely want to kill you. I thought you were going to die today, and now, you're free. But if you go after Lorenzo, he'll kill you."

"It's my mom," I say to her. "I have to save my mom." I kiss Cecilia hard on the lips. "I love you. You know that. I want to spend my life with you. But I have to save my mom."

"I understand," she whispers, blinking back tears.

"Do you know where she is?" I ask Antonio.

"I do. Lorenzo told me if you wanted your mom to live, meet him in Central Park. He didn't specify anything else."

"Then let's go," I say, walking out of the ring, even though my entire body is exhausted from my fight with Antonio. Glancing over, I can tell Antonio is struggling to move as well. But I can't stop. Not for my mom.

"You're going alone?" Cecilia asks. "You can't. I'll go with you."

“No,” both Antonio and I say at once.

Cecilia blanches. “Like hell,” she snaps. “I’m going. I’m a part of this, too, now. If Theo is going to die, I want to be there for him.”

Antonio turns to me. “It’s your choice. I’ll go with you to make sure Lorenzo honors the deal and doesn’t kill your mom. I don’t want Cecilia there, but ...” He sighs deeply. “I’ve learned recently that it’s not a good idea to boss my sisters around.”

“Cecilia,” I say. “I can’t worry about both you and my mom.”

Emilia walks over and grabs Cecilia’s hand. “We’ll make sure she’s okay.”

Cecilia looks like she wants to object, then shuts her mouth before hugging me. “Okay. I get it. It’s just hard to lose you when I just got you.”

“Me, too,” I say into her ear. “I’ll try to make it out alive. For you. But I can’t sit back and let my mom die because of me.”

“I know. And that’s why I love you. You’re such a good man.” She pulls back, kisses me, and turns to her brother. “Try to save Theo. Please, Antonio.”

“I’ll do what I can,” he says. “But I’m making a huge exception for you and Theo. I’m not sure how I can convince Lorenzo Fontana to forgive Theo for killing his cousin.”

“Try,” she says.

Antonio squeezes Cecilia’s arm. “I’ll try. Now, go with Emilia. Theo and I have this.”

Emilia guides Cecilia over to their other sisters. I give Cecilia one last lingering look before following Antonio and some of his men out of the club.

“What’s the plan?” Killian asks, coming with us.

“Save Theo’s mom,” Antonio explains. “Theo, you’ll have to face the consequences for your actions.”

I stand up taller. “I know. And I’m prepared to.”

With Antonio and Killian, we head to Central Park. Once we get there, I have no clue who I’m looking for, but Antonio points Lorenzo out as we reach the Bethesda Fountain.

Civilians are all around us. They don’t seem to notice the group of intimidating men standing near the fountain.

At the front and center of it is Lorenzo Fontana. He’s younger than Salvatore but not by much. His hair is turning gray, and wrinkles crease his forehead and eyes as he smiles.

“Theo Williams, I presume?” he asks, approaching me.

“I am. Where’s my mom?”

Lorenzo holds up a hand. “She’s safe. For now. But if you want her to live, you’re coming with us.” His eyes flick to Antonio. “Alone.”

“Wait for a second,” Antonio says, stepping forward. “Can’t we strike a deal, Lorenzo? You and me? Think about it, Theo did you a favor. He killed your cousin, which made room for you to take over. We can make a deal.”

Lorenzo rubs his chin. “Mmm, I’m intrigued. What could you offer me? Another one of your sisters?”

“No,” Antonio says immediately. “That’s off the table. I’ve learned my lesson. But I could offer you a seat at my table. You could have more power and influence in this city because of me. That’s something no man would ever pass up.”

“You’re right,” Lorenzo says. “It’s not something I want to pass up. I’ll make a deal with you, Antonio. I won’t come after you because we all know *you’re* the one who messed up by letting your family’s bodyguard kill my cousin. So, I’ll leave you be. We can work together.”

“Great.” Antonio holds out his hand. “Do we have a deal?”

Lorenzo holds up a finger. “Not quite. I still want Theo dead for killing my cousin. Theo dies, and you and I can make a deal. The rest of your family will be safe from me. Even your sister who scorned my cousin by running off with another man.”

Antonio tenses at this. “Don’t threaten my sister. Any of them.”

“Give me Theo, and I won’t have to.”

“I’ll go,” I say, stepping forward. “But you have to let my mom go.”

Lorenzo shrugs. “Deal.”

Antonio grabs my arm. “Theo, are you sure about this? You’ll die, and Cecilia will be miserable.”

“She knows I love her. She knows I’m doing the right thing.”

Antonio nods and steps back. Killian gives me a nod as well as I follow Lorenzo out of the park.

He leads me to his car and takes me to a rundown warehouse on the opposite side of the city. “Go on,” he says, motioning me inside with his gun.

I do. I refuse to be afraid. I faced death more times than I could count in the military. But back then, I didn’t have anything to live for. Now, I do.

And yet, I still won’t be afraid. I won’t do that for Cecilia. She needs me to be strong, even in the face of death.

Inside the warehouse, my mom is tied to a chair, her mouth duct taped. She sees me and starts struggling with her ties. I rush over to her. “Release her,” I demand.

Lorenzo takes his time walking over to my mom. “Okay. A deal’s a deal.” He nods at one of his men to untie her ...

But then he holds up his hand. “You know what? On second thought, might as well kill her, too.”

“What?” I growl, lunging for Lorenzo. His men grab me and pin my arms down at my sides.

“You see, Theo. You killed my cousin. You have to be punished for it. And what better way to be punished than by killing your mother right before your eyes.”

“Don’t! No!” I try to pull myself free but there are too many men holding me down.

My mom begins to cry as she watches me. Lorenzo walks over to her, puts his gun to her head, and pauses.

“This is what punishment is like, Theo,” Lorenzo says.

The door to the warehouse bursts open, and Lorenzo jerks back, turning to see who it is.

It’s Antonio with Killian and a few of other men.

“Antonio?” Lorenzo asks. “What are you doing here? We made a deal. I get Theo.”

“I know.” Antonio stalks forward. “And I changed my mind. I’ve spent the past few months striving to be a good leader, and I fucked up, I’ll admit that. I didn’t see what was most important. My family. And I can safely say my sister doesn’t want Theo dead. And I don’t want to do that to her again.” He nods at his men, who all raise their guns at Lorenzo and his men.

“Let Mrs. Williams go,” Antonio says. “We don’t need any innocents killed today.”

“Innocent?” Lorenzo asks. “Theo isn’t innocent. He killed Salvatore!”

“And trust me,” Antonio says. “Salvatore was no innocent man. But that woman you have tied up is. She doesn’t deserve to die for something her son did. What’s it going to be, Lorenzo? Let Theo and his mom go or get blasted with bullets? Your choice.”

Lorenzo looks back and forth between Antonio and me. It’s a tense moment before he drops his gun. “Fine,” he spits out.

“Untie her,” Antonio orders Killian, nodding at my mom. Killian rushes over and frees my mother, who runs over to me. Lorenzo’s men let me go.

“Oh my god,” my mom says as I hug her. “Oh my god.”

“You’re safe,” I comfort her. “You’re safe.”

Lorenzo tries lunging at Antonio, but Antonio punches him in the jaw. “Don’t threaten me,” Antonio says.

“I’ll come after you, Antonio,” Lorenzo says. “You really just want to throw away a good deal over some bodyguard?”

“I’m not throwing away a deal,” Antonio explains. “I’m showing what kind of leader I can be. I refuse to let anyone else be collateral in my efforts to gain power. I’ve been making over people do that for me, and it’s done. It’s my turn to step up and offer something.” He removes his father’s pendant from around his neck. “This belonged to my father. It’s the most important item I own. It’s gotten me through the worst of times in my life.” He sighs deeply. “And now, it’s yours.”

Lorenzo’s eyes widen. “What?”

“This,” he says, nodding at the pendant, “is my symbol of trust with you, Lorenzo. We can make a deal. You take over where your cousin left off. You get the power he had. We become allies. But not through a marriage deal with one of my sisters. Not through the death of a good family friend.” He nods at me before turning back to Lorenzo. “A good leader is willing to make sacrifices himself. By giving you my father’s pendant, it speaks volumes. We put the past behind us, and we move forward. If you don’t take this, Lorenzo, and become my ally, I will rain hell down on you. But I’d rather make an alliance than start a war. What do you say?” He holds the pendant out to Lorenzo.

Lorenzo looks at the pendant for a moment before nodding. “Deal.” He takes it and puts it into his pocket. I can see Antonio’s jaw tense, but he doesn’t say anything. “An alliance between us. I’m holding you to it, Antonio.”

“You have my word. And my pendant. This is not to be taken lightly.”

“It’s not,” Lorenzo agrees.

“Theo,” Antonio calls over to me. “We’re going home.”

ANTONIO and I enter the Moretti household an hour later. My mom is okay at safehouse for now. She wasn't happy about it, but she agreed to it. Hopefully, she'll only have to remain there for a couple of weeks until all the shit with the Fontana's is settled. I know she's antsy to be back home with the memory of my father in the air.

The house is quiet when we step inside.

"Hello?" Antonio calls out.

Cecilia appears at the top of the stairs, stopping short when she sees me. "Theo?" She cries as she runs down the stairs and jumps into my arms. "You're okay. You're alive."

"I'm alive." I hug her so tightly even I can barely breathe.

Giulia walks into the foyer, looking between Antonio and me. "So, is everything dealt with?"

"Everything is," Antonio says. "Where is everybody?"

"Mia and the twins are out with their sisters. Cecilia and I needed some alone time."

"I thought you were dead," Cecilia says.

"I'm not." I kiss her like my life depends on it. And it sort of did.

Giulia walks over to Antonio. "I was worried for you, too, young man."

"Ma," he says, shaking his head.

"No, I was. I know how hard it's been taking over. I can still worry for you. You're my son. I will always worry about you." Her eyes flit down to his chest. "Where's your father's pendant?"

Antonio clears his throat. "I had to give it Lorenzo to strike a deal. It was the only way."

"But it was your father's."

"I know." Antonio turns to Cecilia. "But it was my turn to give something. To do my duty to this family."

Cecilia leans over and hugs Antonio. “Thank you. You saved Theo.”

“I should have been saving you from the beginning,” he tells her. “I never should have given you to Salvatore.”

“I know,” she says, not letting her brother off the hook. “But as long as Theo and I can be together, I’ll forgive you.”

Antonio pulls back from their hug. “You and Theo can be together. You have my permission.” Antonio’s words are what I’ve waited to hear for a while now.

Cecilia throws her arms around me, jumping up and down, and I smile down at her. “We did it,” she says. “We can finally be together.”

“I’ve calmed Lorenzo down for now,” Antonio says. “I don’t think we’ll have any more problems from him. But we need to make your marriage official to squash rumors.”

Giulia sighs. “I guess I have another wedding to plan.”

I’M HEADING home for the night, Cecilia at my side. There’s no point pretending we’re not in love or didn’t have sex before legally marrying in the US. So, even though Giulia was uncomfortable with it, she agreed to let Cecilia come with me to my apartment.

Once I park in the parking garage, Cecilia turns to me, grabs my face, and kisses me.

I kiss her back with everything left in me. I’m bruised and torn up, but nothing will keep me away from Cecilia.

“I need you,” she says, sliding over the console and settling onto my lap. “Twice today I thought you were going to die. I never want to lose you again.”

“You’re not going to.”

Our kiss is frantic as we bite and nip at each other’s lips. We were almost completely torn apart today. Nothing will ever break us apart again.

I push Cecilia's dress up and rip her panties off. She moans when my fingers slide through her folds and brush her clit. I rub her while she undoes my pants and pulls my cock out.

Our breath steams up the car windows.

Cecilia lowers herself onto my cock, clinging to my shoulders. I hold her tightly, not ready to let her go. I groan into her ear as her inner walls clench down around my cock.

Then she starts to move.

At first, Cecilia is tentative. We haven't done this position yet. But she's a natural learner, and it doesn't take her long to find the right rhythm. I hold onto her hips to help guide her.

"Theo," she moans, dropping her head back. I kiss along her neck, my lips brushing her cross. We're living in sin in the eyes of God, yet, neither of us gives a fuck.

Her hips rock against mine. My breath comes out in pants as I bring my hips up to reach hers. Cecilia grinds down, her inner walls squeezing my cock, and I gasp into her neck.

She shudders. "Theo, I need ..."

"Come for me." I bring her hips down hard and with that, she comes. Cecilia burrows her head into my neck, her body racking with her release. I follow soon after.

"Cecilia," I call out her name as I come. We cling to each other the whole way through.

She pulls back once we're done. Her head is sweaty, and her cheeks are flushed, but she's never looked more beautiful.

"Let's get out of this car," I say. "So, I can have my way with you all over our apartment."

"Our apartment?"

"Absolutely. You're mine."

She places her hand on my cheek. "And I'm yours."

We get out of the car and head for our apartment, ready to start our lives together.

CHAPTER 20

Cecilia

“I do,” I say, holding Theo’s gaze. His big, strong hands are solid around mine. “I do,” I repeat.

Father Enzo turns to Theo. “And do you, Theo Williams, take Cecilia Moretti to be your lawfully wedded wife?”

“I do.” Theo’s strong voice rings out throughout the church.

“I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

Theo sweeps me into his arms and kisses me. The kiss says everything without having to say anything at all.

We turn to our guests—just my family and Theo’s mom—and they cheer us on as we walk down the aisle. The wedding reception is being held back at my family’s home because we didn’t want anything major. I’m done with weddings for a while. I’m ready to just be married to the man I love.

Everyone meets at my mom’s house, where she has a large feast waiting for us.

“I might have got carried away,” she says, showing us to the dining room. Plates upon plates of food sit on the table.

“This is perfect,” I say to her, kissing her on the cheek.

Everyone crowds around the table to dig in. Emilia, Gemma, and Francesca all with their husbands. Mia and the twins. Antonio and Nina. And lastly, Theo’s mom, Sarah.

We've gotten to know each other over the past few weeks now that Theo and I are together. Things were a little tense at first because she knew I was the reason Theo was in trouble in the first place, but she's coming around.

I hand her a plate of food. "I'm happy you could be here for our wedding."

She gives me a soft smile and accepts the plate. "I'm glad, too." She takes her seat. "I've never been surrounded by such a large family before."

"Get used to," Gemma mutters.

"Hear, hear," Emilia says, raising her glass. Her daughter, Essie, sits next to her, being a polite little girl. Compared to how the twins acted when they were Essie's age, Essie is an angel in comparison. Honestly, the way Antonio and I acted when we were kids was pretty embarrassing, too.

Francesca is finally starting to show in her belly, and Mom can't stop fussing over her. Once Mom's attention is drawn to Luca (after he makes a mess, predictably), Francesca leans into me and says, "Mom never showed me this much attention before. You get pregnant once, and she won't leave you alone. Remember that when you and Theo try for a baby."

I smile widely as Theo clears his throat.

"I imagine," he says, "we'll wait a little before having kids."

I shrug. "I'm ready now." Everyone around the table laughs.

"I'm seriously never having kids," Gemma says, taking a large gulp of her wine. "I don't think I could give up alcohol."

"Neither could I," Viktor teases.

I look at Antonio, down at the end of the table. "Antonio, thank you."

"It was the least I could do after everything I put you through," he says.

“He regrets it terribly,” Nina adds, placing a hand on her husband’s arm.

“I really do.” Antonio raises his glass. “To Theo and Cecilia. May my sister be happy for the rest of her life.”

I still can’t get over how Antonio gave up his pendant to Lorenzo to save Theo’s life. I know how much that must have hurt him. But he did it for me. We still have a way to go before we’re fully mended, but things are heading in the right direction.

Killian walks into the dining room, ready to join the festivities, when Mom kicks him out. “I won’t have Irishmen in my house,” she says, shooing him away.

“Ma,” Antonio calls out. “You really need to start respecting Killian. He’s my second-in-command after all.”

“It’s all right,” Killian says. “I just wanted to say congratulations to the happy couple. Mia,” he adds. “Nice seeing you again.”

Mia rolls her eyes but doesn’t say anything.

Killian chuckles on his way out as Mom makes him leave.

She sits down with a huff. “Great. Now that that man is gone, we can focus on our family. To Cecilia and Theo.” Everyone cheers. “Now, we just need to get Mia married.”

Mia spits out her water. “What?”

“You didn’t think just because Cecilia bent the rules, you could, too?” Mom asks. “You’re nineteen now. I’m thinking in a year or so, we’ll find you a suitable partner.”

“It’s not going to be easy after what Theo and I did,” I say. “Will any man want to be associated with this family if they think Moretti girls just run off with their bodyguards?”

“That’s what I was worried about,” Antonio says. “But we’ll figure it out if it comes to that. In the meantime, let’s just focus on the here and now and be a family.”

It’s wonderful to be surrounded by my entire family and married to the man I love. We’ve been through a lot. Franco is

gone, and everything is so much better.

My eyes land on the twins. I know Luca is still struggling with Franco's loss. He doesn't even know Franco is his real father. I'm not sure he or Lucia will ever find out.

But today, they're smiling, and that's all that matters. I hope they end up having a great future for themselves just like I've found.

Because my future with Theo will be like a fairytale. He was my prince charming for years. And now, he's my husband.

We share a smile.

Dreams really do come true.

The End.

**Check out the sixth book in the Moretti Mafia series,
Innocent Union, starring Mia and Killian!**

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the first book in a 4 book mafia series, each on focusing on
a different sister!**

He despised me but claimed me anyway.

Gabriel Moretti is a monster.

A man who bought me from auction.

I'm supposed to care for my new husband.

But how can I when he hates my father for what he did to
him?

Now I'm trapped in a marriage filled with deceit.

My mind is filled with loathing.

While my body yearns for his touch,

I'm not sure what the outcome will be.

All I know...

Gabriel has me ensnared.

And I'm not sure I'll make it out alive.

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SNEAK PEEK

Chapter One:

EVA

I'm fully invested in the book I'm reading—a modern-day fairytale about a woman trapped in a beast's dungeon—when I hear my youngest sister running down the hall, giggling. Sienna probably getting into trouble as usual. She enjoys using her status as the baby of the family to get whatever she wants from our father since he always indulges her.

I glance up from my book to see Sienna run past the library door, where I'm sitting, with her long hair flowing behind her. The library—a room filled with dark, sturdy bookcases and all the books one could ever ask for—is my favorite room in our house. It's the only place where I ever truly feel at peace.

Returning to my book, I drown out the world around me. Witches, goblins, and utter fantasy captivate me until I hear footsteps entering the room. I don't need to look up to know who it is when the person sighs and slumps into a seat next to me. My sister Greta is just a year behind me and the second oldest in our family.

“What do you want?” I ask, keeping my eyes glued to the page in front of me.

Greta huffs. From the corner of my eye, I see her tilt her head back over the edge of the cozy chair she settled into. “I'm bored.”

“You're always bored,” I remind her, flipping a page.

“Yes, but that's because father won't let me outside.”

I glance up and out the window. It's pouring rain, droplets hitting the glass. “Probably because it's raining.”

“So what?” Greta asks, pushing her light brown hair over the back of the chair. My hair is a few shades darker, closer to black. In some lighting, Greta’s hair almost looks like a dairy blonde. She always complains about how much she hates her hair and wishes she had my hair color. Honestly, I can’t blame her. I love my dark hair and wouldn’t trade it for anything.

“So what?” I repeat, setting my book down. Knowing Greta, she wants to talk, which means no more reading for me. “Greta, it’s a downpour out there.”

Greta shrugs. “I’m not a helpless flower. I won’t wilt or drown or anything. I just want some fresh air.”

Greta is always the most tomboy out of the four of us. Whereas I like to read, Imelda—the third oldest—likes to make her own clothes, and Sienna just likes to watch TV. Greta loves going outside and experiencing things our father disapproves of. Greta’s favorite hobby, though, is horseback riding. Father is terrified she’ll get hurt, but Greta insists, and at nineteen years old, she’s become seriously good. But there’s no way he’d let her go riding in the rain. Even he has his limits.

Even though Greta and I are over eighteen, we have to remain home until we’re married. It’s just the way our family is. It probably has to do with the fact that our family is part of a long line of Italian mobsters. Mafia ways have always limited women. And our family is no exception. And that includes our father dictating what we can do with our time.

“No,” I say, “You just want to ride Emilia.”

Greta lifts and finger and points it at me. “True. But who cares? Can’t I do what I want?”

“You know that’s not true.”

Greta folds her arms across her chest. “This is so unfair.”

“What’s unfair?” a young voice asks. I look over and see Sienna standing in the doorway. Her hair, as dark as mine, is tousled from running around the house.

“Nothing,” I reply.

“Don’t you have any shows to watch?” Greta asks.

Sienna flops down next to Greta. “There’s nothing good on at the moment.”

“Not even on Netflix?” Greta asks. “There’s always something on!”

“I’d rather hang out with you,” she says to both of us. “Besides, Dad said I could. So, you two have to do as he says, which means you have to listen to me.”

Greta shoots me a quick look. Sienna has always been the brattiest out of the four of us.

“Ok, Sienna,” I say. “What do you want to do?”

Greta rolls her eyes as Sienna eagerly claps her hands. “I want you to do my makeup.”

I nod. Sienna so desperately wants to fit in with us older girls. I don’t want her to feel left out, even though I know Greta wouldn’t mind. “I’ll go get my kit,” I tell her.

“You’re leaving me alone in here?” Greta asks.

“Hey!” Sienna says. “I’m here.”

Greta pauses. “Exactly.”

I chuckle, shaking my head. “I’ll be right back.”

I venture out of the library and into the large foyer of our house. I should actually call it a mansion, considering its cold white marble flooring and wide steps leading to the second story. On my way up the staircase, I spot the small crumbling bits of the banister. It takes away from the grandeur of our home. A mixture of elegance and disrepair.

Once I’m upstairs, I pass by Imelda’s room. Her door is open, and I can hear her sewing machine whirring. I poke my head in and knock on her door. Imelda looks up, her golden blonde locks falling around her shoulders. At only seventeen, she’s the most strikingly beautiful out of all of us. She receives the most attention from my father’s men during the holidays. It always grosses Greta, Imelda, and me out. Sienna is too young to notice the attention her sister receives. All the attention has

made Imelda grow quieter over the years, more reclusive. Now, she spends most of her time in her room, making clothes for all of us. I have a lot of her pieces hanging in my closet. It always makes me sad how this world is already making her feel self-conscious about her looks. As women, we shouldn't be made into objects.

“Whatcha working on?” I ask.

Imelda lifts her foot from the pedal, the whirring sound puttering out. Her room is eerily quiet. Pink and gold fabric is lined up underneath the needle. “A dress I'm making for Sienna. She asked.”

“Of course, she did.”

Sienna is also the most demanding.

“She asked me to do her makeup for her,” I tell Imelda.

Imelda raises one perfectly shaped eyebrow. “Did she now?”

“Of course. You know Sienna.”

“Well, as long as she's happy, I guess.”

I laugh a little. “Sure. At least it stops her from throwing a tantrum.” I nod at her machine. “I'll leave you to it.”

Imelda nods and returns to her sewing.

I grab the makeup kit from my room and head back to the library. I can hear Sienna talking to Greta. Well, rambling on and on is more like it.

“Did you know more human twins are being born nowadays than ever before?” Sienna asks Greta. “Just think, you and Eva could have been twins. Imagine that.” My sister loves to pick up random knowledge from all the TV she watches.

“Sure,” Greta drawls out.

I can't help but find Greta's annoyance amusing, but I put her out of her misery by walking back into the library. “Twins, huh?” I ask. “Well, Greta and I are technically Irish Twins. We're exactly a year apart.”

Sienna snaps her fingers. “That’s true. I didn’t even think of that.”

“Uh-huh,” Greta mumbles, sitting up from her chair. “With that in mind, this Irish twin is going to take a bath.”

“I figured you were going to try sneaking out,” I say, winking at her. Father has guards stationed at every door. He claims it’s for our protection, but I think he’s just way too overprotective. As a single father, he can’t keep an eye on all of us, so he hires an abundance of guards. Our mother passed away in childbirth, having Sienna. Maybe that’s why our father dotes on her so much. She’s the last piece of his wife.

“When I said bath, it’s really code for sneaking past the guards and riding Emilia.”

“That sounds more like it,” I say.

“Dad will be furious if you do that,” Sienna says. “He won’t like it.”

Greta makes a face at her. “Then don’t tell him.”

“I will tell him,” Sienna snaps back.

“Then Eva won’t do your makeup,” Greta snaps in return.

I place the makeup kit on a table, holding my hands up. “Whoa, don’t bring me into this.” I cross my arms. “But you know, Greta, it probably is dangerous to go riding in this rain.”

Greta slumps a little. “Yeah, I know.”

Sienna shoots Greta a smug expression.

“But I’m not going just because you said you’d tell dad,” Greta says to Sienna. “It was all Eva. She’s the one who talked some sense into me.”

“Damn straight,” I say, sitting down next to Sienna, who pouts. She’s the only person in the world I’ve seen actually do that.

“Oh, don’t give me that look,” Greta says, waving a hand towards Sienna’s face.

I laugh and pick up the makeup kit, placing it in my lap. “Here, Sienna, let me do your makeup.”

That perks her up in an instant. “Ok, I want pink eyeshadow and pink blush and the reddest lipstick you have.”

Greta shakes her head as she leaves the room. I look back at Sienna. “Whatever you want.”

But just as I reach into the kit to grab the eyeshadow, our father arrives, striding into the library.

“Greta,” he says. “Come back in here.”

Sienna jumps up and runs to hug our father. With a lean build and dark brown hair that he always slicks back with grease, my father looks younger than he is. He’s nearing sixty but doesn’t look a day over forty-five.

Father pats Sienna on the back and leads her back to her seat as Greta trudges back into the room.

“You know I don’t like the shuffling,” he says. “Walk with proper form.”

Greta rolls her eyes behind Father’s back, but she stands up straighter as she comes to sit beside me. Imelda enters the room as well. She looks at her feet as she finds a seat.

“What’s going on?” Greta demands.

Father sighs, sitting down across from us. He stretches out his long legs and places his hands on the back of the couch like he has no care in the world. He’s always one for taking up a lot of space. It’s his way of showing dominance.

“I have some news I need to share with you girls.”

We remain silent, waiting for him to continue.

“So, you need to understand. I’ve recently fallen into some ... money troubles.”

“Money troubles?” Greta asks. “What does that mean?”

Father scratches the back of his neck. “It means that I made some deals with people I shouldn’t have, and now, our family is in debt. And I need a way to pay it back.”

This is big news. Father never shares about business, so the fact that he's telling us about it now means that something big happened.

"How much do you need to pay back?" I ask, fiddling with an eyebrow brush.

Father waves a hand. "The price doesn't concern you. All you need to know is that I have to pay it back."

"Will something bad happen if you don't?" Imelda asks, her voice quiet but steady.

"Well ..." Father steeples his fingers together. "You see, we could possibly lose ... the house."

"What?" Greta asks, her eyes popping. We exchange a look.

"How do we make that not happen?" I ask. "There must be a way for you to pay this money back."

Father nods. "There is a way." He looks directly at me in such a way that I become uncomfortable. Something tells me I'm not going to like what he has to say. "You can marry."

I grow still while Greta sucks in a breath. Sienna looks between Father and me while Imelda stares into her lap.

"Marry?" Greta asks for me.

"Eva," he says to me, "You knew this day would happen. It shouldn't surprise any of you girls that you will marry someday. That day has just arrived sooner than expected."

"Who will I marry?" I whisper.

Father presses a hand behind his ear. "What was that?"

"Who will I marry?" I repeat louder.

"Well, that will be determined."

Greta sputters. "Wait, so you don't even know who Eva will marry? Then why bring this up?"

"And how does my marrying help you with your money troubles?" I ask.

“When you marry, that man will pay for your hand,” he said. “The money I receive will help our family.”

“Why would a man pay for my hand in marriage? Who would do that?” I ask. The brush is still clenched between my fingers while as I hold onto the edge of the couch.

“You’re marrying Eva off like she’s an animal,” Greta snaps.

Sienna has miraculously not said a word during the conversation so far. Her normally bratty expression has shifted to worry as she looks back and forth between our father and me.

“I know the families have arranged marriages, but I’ve never heard of a husband buying his wife,” I say.

“It’s a business deal like any other,” Father says.

“Except it isn’t,” Greta says, almost yelling. “It’s Eva. She’s the one some random man will be putting his hands on. She’s not just a business deal, *Dad*.” Other than Sienna, he hated us calling him “Dad.” He preferred the formal “Father.”

Imelda holds up a hand. “I don’t understand something.” Her quiet voice cuts through the room. “How will you find a husband for Eva. You said that would be determined. How?”

Father looks at me with no shame, like he hasn’t done anything wrong, even though he got us into this in the first place. And now I’m the one suffering the consequences of his actions.

“There will be an auction.”

All of us go silent. After a moment, it’s Sienna who speaks. “An auction?”

“You mean men will bid on Eva for her hand in marriage?” Greta asks. “Like she’s a prized horse?” The horror is quite definite in Greta’s tone.

“Yes,” Father says simply. “They will bid on her, and whoever offers the most will win her hand.”

“And you get the money,” I say, blinking back tears.

Father opens his hand in an expression of “what would you have me do?”

“That’s how I’ll pay off my debts,” he said. “This way, we get to keep the house.”

“But what if the man who wins me doesn’t offer enough money to pay back your debts?” I ask.

Father looks at Greta, then Imelda, and finally Sienna. “Then, each one of you will be offered at the auction after you turn twenty.”

I wrap my arms around Sienna’s shoulders. She looks like she’s about to cry.

“How can you call yourself our father?” Greta asks.

“Both you and Eva are over eighteen. Eva’s already twenty, the right age to marry. I’m not doing anything wrong.”

“It’s definitely wrong!” Greta screams. “And illegal. You can’t sell us off.”

“But I can arrange a marriage for you, and this is what I’m doing. Any arranged marriage is a deal. In this instance, money will be exchanged. Whether it be power or land, there’s always something at play. It’s just a fact.”

“What happens if I say no?” I ask.

“Then your sisters will pay the price.”

“But if the man who pays for me doesn’t offer enough money, you’ll just put them up for auction next.”

“If you don’t go through with this, then they will definitely be next after they turn twenty. And by then, my debts will have grown much larger. If you follow through, there’s a chance I won’t need to offer them up in an auction.”

And with those words, I know my father has me.

I could never willingly put my sisters in a position of danger.

Greta looks at me. Her expression says she knows what I’m about to do. “Eva, no ...”

“All right,” I say, dropping my head. “I’ll do it.”
And with those words, I seal my fate.

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I was meant to protect her... instead I consumed her.

Sofia Di Luca is spoiled and innocent.

A mafia princess I was chosen to keep safe.

I wasn't supposed to desire her.

To press my mouth against her soft, plump lips.

To show her pleasure she's never known before.

Her body was off limits.

Until evil men threatened to take her away.

So I made a choice.

I claimed her instead...

Even if it means my death.

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